

- Face to Face -

Martin killed the engine of his copper Jeep Liberty after pulling into the tiny gravel parking lot off of Back Mountain Road. Just like last time, he was here by himself, now mentally preparing to tackle the mountain trail that had gotten the best of him before. One other vehicle sat next to his, an empty Ford Explorer, whose occupants must have already been on the trail. He listened to the radio for a few more minutes before it died, like the engine before it, in the middle of The Mamas & the Papas' "California Dreamin'." Martin had always liked that song, but it was funny, he thought, for the California sunshine was the furthest thing from his mind at the moment, and he was quite literally on the other side of the country.

He was not a stranger to New England, but would have a hard time qualifying himself as anything more than an acquaintance. He'd been to Boston once a couple years ago on a business trip, more or less driving through. On that occasion, he'd stopped at a small pizza place, the name of which escaped him presently, that sat across the street from the Museum of Fine Arts. His only other encounter with the historical region had been his last trip here, to Windsor, Vermont, about a year ago. He'd stayed in a rustic cabin by his lonesome that he'd rented from a local grey-bearded outdoorsman named Mike. It had been his trip away from the city, away from his dull, listless coworkers and his confining cubicle at Ernst & Young, one of the largest accounting firms on the globe.

That first trip to the Green Mountain State had been mostly a success. Martin had visited the historic sites he'd wanted to, like the Old Constitution House where the Republic of Vermont had declared itself an independent state in 1777, and the homestead of former president Calvin Coolidge in Plymouth. He'd taken the unexpectedly brief tour of Ben Cohen and Jerry Greenfield's very first ice cream factory in Waterbury and toured the campus of the University of Vermont in Burlington. He'd checked off everything on

his list, except for one item that had eluded him. It was the very reason he found himself sitting in the Windsor Trail parking lot at that moment.

The only thing he had not managed to do successfully on his first trip was climb to the summit of a mountain trail. He'd attempted to climb the very one he sat at the bottom of now, but fate had had other plans for him. Only half a mile's hike from the top, Martin had failed to notice the slight depression in the trail and had brought his snowshoe-clad right foot down in a very abrupt, awkward angle with such force that his anklebone had snapped upon impact. He was quite positive his "FUCKKKKK!!!" had reached all the way over to the ears of hikers on the adjacent mountainside, if there had been any. And he was not a man that particularly cared for profanity or noisy outbursts.

There certainly had not been anyone else around on the Windsor Trail that afternoon, and so Martin, with a dead cellphone battery (that had been of little use when it was powered on because of the poor signal anyway) and a bag of limited supplies, had crawled along the snow covered trail a little further where there sat an old loggers' cabin that visitors would rough it out in from time to time. More of a lean-to up against the mountainside than an actual cabin, inside were a couple of metal sleeping bunks along the right wall and a stonework fireplace on the left. The fourth wall, made up entirely of blue tarps, was where one entered. It had taken him a good twenty minutes just to scrape his way up the embankment and then over to the cabin, and as a result, his hands had reached a state of near-total numbness before he'd made it securely inside (though "inside" was a loose term in this case). Too bad, he had thought at the time, that he wasn't able to enjoy the picturesque view outside those logs. Being so short a distance from the trail's summit, there was a breathtaking panorama of the valley below.

His warmth, of course, had been more important, so he holed up inside, pinning the tarps closed as best he could, which hadn't been easy with his unfeeling extremities

handicapping him. From there, he'd taken inventory of the contents of his backpack. He had had half a box of granola bars, a small book of matches, a canteen three-fourths full of water, a tiny yellow flashlight, and the used hand warmers he'd employed earlier in the day. After some unsuccessful tries at starting a fire, he had made a point of tending to his ankle, which had been *seriously* killing him, even though the pain had defused some due to its going numb like his hands. He'd made sure it wasn't directly exposed to the chilly air and then laid his head back against the wall for just a moment, before attempting to get a flame going again, trying to think warm thoughts.

From that point on, the memory was more of a blur than anything. Martin faintly recalled the tarps being pulled apart at what must have been the dawn of the following morning, and then the bright light had assaulted his eyes as some kind stranger – who happened to be Mike, the man he'd rented the vacation cabin from, he'd found out later – had lifted him from the cold floor of the cabin and carried him all the way back down the mountain where an ambulance waited to greet both of them. In short, it had not been a good day.

But today was a different day, a new day, and Martin was back, determined to face his demons. He would climb the Windsor Trail and reach the top of Mount Ascutney as he had been unable to do before. He took a quick glance at himself in the rear-view mirror. His short, brown hair was a little ruffled and he noticed some white powder hanging around his upper lip – the last bit of evidence of the donut he'd scarfed down that morning. He wiped the powdery residue from his mouth with the sleeve of his jacket, but didn't bother with his messy hair. In the office everyone had to be tidy and presentable, but out here he could let loose a little.

He stepped from the Jeep down onto the damp gravel, taking a brief moment to look over his right ankle that had healed up nicely months ago. It was the same time of year – late February – as the incident, and so the snow covered the hillside leading up to the trail's head there by the edge of the woods. Martin was on his own once more. He knew it was not the best idea in any sense to try and climb the mountain all by himself again, but something on the inside told him he had to do it alone. Some part of him knew that he would not feel accomplished if he couldn't manage the journey by himself. He was capable enough; he worked out a couple times a week when he could get to the gym nearest his apartment in the city. And anyway, what kind of a man would he be if he couldn't hike up a three-mile trail without having his hand held?

He opened the back driver's side door and plopped the snowshoes down onto the ground, then retrieved his army green backpack from the trunk. This time, it was fully stocked, with a surplus of items so that he would be prepared for any kind of situation. He had extra hand warmers, extra flashlight batteries, an extra box of granola bars and a bag of trail mix, extra matches, and even some kindling wood should he need to start a fire. To be sure, his pants pocket was also harboring a blue Bic lighter.

At 1 o'clock in the afternoon, with the sun fighting clouds for real estate in the sky, Martin strapped his Merrells into the snowshoes, secured his backpack's straps around his shoulders, wrapped his face in his red and black plaid scarf, pulled on his big grey, insulated gloves, and finally, locking his vehicle and storing his keys in his inside coat pocket, took the first step onto the snowy field that led up to the beginning marker of his nemesis: the unforgiving Windsor Trail.

He made the jaunt from the parking lot across the upward-slanting field and paused only a moment before stepping beyond the threshold of the first tree painted with the trail's white marker. The initial stretch was covered by a canopy of tree branches,

some of whose leaves and twigs littered the snowshoe-imprinted path, which had the effect of making things look messier more than anything else. Lots of the tracks in the snow looked fairly fresh, providing Martin with more evidence that he may run into some fellow hikers later on, perhaps the owners of the Explorer parked next to him.

However, for the moment, the woods seemed eerily quiet. More than once, Martin found himself looking over his shoulder to see if someone was following him. There was something a bit unsettling about being on the trail by himself; he was surprised he'd forgotten the feeling from last time.

Nevertheless, he pressed on, coming to the first of the steeper inclines on the path. As he trekked up this particular part of the trail, the ground along the left side gave way to a sharp drop. Although he could not see it, down below somewhere the rustling of a small stream could be heard. On his right, the hill rose up, painted with trees of all kinds, pine being foremost among them. Here and there good-sized rocks adorned the trail, ideal for sitting down and taking a break. Martin was thankful for that, for besides his failure to remember the strange feeling of aloneness that accompanied him, he'd also neglected to recall how tiring the act of hiking was. By the time he reached what he surmised to be about the quarter mark, he was breaking such a sweat that he decided to take a layer off and stuff it into his backpack. He took a seat on a somewhat uncomfortable rock to catch his breath, hydrating himself with a mouthful from his water bottle in the process.

As he waited for his heart rate to calm down a bit, he took a look around. Though the trail and the woods were somewhat creepy, they sure were peaceful, Martin thought. They provided a wholly different setting than the one he encountered in his office everyday. Everyone always had somewhere to be, some report to type up, some account to check on, or any number of tedious tasks to tend to. Out here in the woods, Martin was actually able to hear himself think and didn't have to worry about any of that. Thinking

of the office, though, also inevitably made him think about Janine, the girl he'd dated for almost three years. She'd broken up with him shortly before he'd had his accident out here a year ago. After a lunch with some of her girl friends, she'd barged into Martin's office, demanded that he propose to her that instant or she would leave him. She said they'd been dating for a long time and she wasn't getting any younger, didn't want to waste any more time on him if he wasn't serious and committed. And Martin, being awful with difficult decisions and unsure about a future with her, had told her he couldn't do it; he didn't want to get married. So of course that resulted in her storming off and out of his life, but not before she'd shouted, in front of everybody present, that Martin would never have been "man enough" to take care of her anyway.

He cringed just thinking about all of it, so he willed the thoughts out of his head and came back into the present moment on the trail. A little white rabbit had appeared from behind one of the trees positioned where the trail met the hill. Astonishingly, it was only a few feet from Martin's right foot, and was inching closer. Eventually the white furry ball with the little beady eyes was mere inches from him, as if it wasn't afraid at all, as if he wasn't even there. He knew he should be cautious around wild animals, they might carry some kind of disease or something, but he had the strongest urge to reach out and pet the rabbit. It didn't look ravenous or dangerous in the slightest. He reached his arm out from his side and slowly moved it towards the little guy. The animal didn't show any signs of retreat, so he kept moving his hand closer until he made contact, cupping his palm around the rabbit's head and successfully petting it. At this, though, the rabbit jerked back violently and scurried away so fast that it didn't appear to know which way it was going. Martin thought the whole thing kind of odd. Shrugging his shoulders, he stood up from the rock and began walking again.

A series of twists and turns, as well as climbs and dips, ensued as Martin continued along his way. At some point, he noticed one of his snowshoes was a little cockeyed. When his left foot faced forward, the snowshoe was directed inward, making his stance look somewhat pigeon-toed. While it bothered him, his boot still seemed to be securely attached by the straps, so he let it be.

As the hike carried on, the density of the trees and their branches increased, and Martin found himself ducking from time to time so that he wouldn't be rewarded with a mouthful of pine needles. He came to a point in the trail where a dead tree lay across the path. The snow on either side was high enough that he didn't see going around it to be a suitable option, and thus he chose to attempt climbing over the fallen mountainside ornament. He was successful in getting his right leg over the obstacle, but as he endeavored to bring his other snowshoe over the log, one of the straps caught on a protruding branch and he hung suspended in air for a fraction of a second, before falling flat on his face into the snow. He didn't even have time to think about his poor face being subjected to the cold stuff, however, as he felt a searing pain shoot through his left leg. He rolled over as best he was able and before looking at the damage, unhooked the strap from the perpetrator. It wasn't until he took the time to crawl a few feet away that he glanced at the source of the pain. Amidst a tear in his pants between the knee and shin, a gash the length of a playing card peered at him, oozing blood. He'd left a short crimson trail in the snow.

He let the backpack's straps fall from his shoulders and set it down in front of him as he rose to a sitting position. Fortunately, he'd packed some bandages in case something like this happened. After a moment of digging around in the bag, he located them. Then he wiped up the blood with an additional scarf he'd packed, and, pulling his

pant leg up past the wound, wrapped one of the bandages all the way around. That was easy enough, he thought.

Martin stood, wincing a little, and placed the backpack back on his shoulders. But instead of going on, he remained standing where he was. Was this really worth it? he wondered. There was indeed the possibility of things ending up just as bad as last time, or worse. He'd gotten lucky just now by only scraping his leg. Maybe it was a sign that he shouldn't test that luck any further. He continued contemplating whether getting to the summit was really all that important or not. But he had already come this far, right? He had to be halfway there, if not more than that. He decided to press on; he would see this journey through.

Before continuing, he adjusted his left snowshoe, making sure his boot was tightly secured. Each step that came after was cautiously taken, for Martin was certain that any other hiccup along the way would leave him with no option but to cut this mission short. He couldn't let that happen; he owed it to himself to make it the top.

It wasn't long before he caught sight of some people on the trail ahead of him. There was a couple, a man and a woman. Martin could see that the path split up ahead and the two of them were heading in the direction of the left fork. A tiny bit desperate for some companionship, he called after them.

"Hello! Can you wait up a minute?" he shouted with his hands cupped around his mouth. They didn't seem to hear him. He tried once more.

"Hello! Do you mind if I join you?"

Still they took no notice of his shouts and soon disappeared into the trees, around a bend. Martin picked up his pace a little, while still being mindful of his footfalls, hoping he might catch up to them. Every step made sure to remind him of the wound incurred on his left leg. He grimaced, but kept going. He came to the split in the path and



took immediate notice of the wooden sign posted on the tree standing at the divide. It read,

**← BLOOD ROCK TRAIL  
LOGGERS' CABIN →**

Seeing the words sent a little bit of a chill through his body. The crossroads kept him held in place. He wasn't exactly sure if he wanted to see the cabin again, but he also wasn't sure if he could pass it up. Either route connected back to the main Windsor Trail – he remembered from looking at the map by the parking lot – so it didn't matter which one he took. Part of him told him he should go to the left and follow after the couple. He still might be able to catch up to them, after all. But another part of him was drawn to the loggers' cabin. That part was curious to see the weathered logs, and the metal bunk frames, and the stonework fireplace, and the spot on the floor where he'd lain against the back wall and struggled for warmth. He knew he shouldn't listen, that he should follow the man and the woman, but the cabin proved too tempting and his mind resolved that he must see it again. He went to the right.

The trail curved up and around the mountainside and Martin was beginning to get a glimpse of that spectacular view into the valley on the mountain's north face. Last time, he'd had no time to appreciate the natural beauty of the Vermont countryside. He could hardly wait to reach the summit where the view just had to be breathtaking, but the cabin was first. Now on his right side a steep descent presented itself, forcing Martin to lean a bit to the left as the trail was not very wide and he had no intention of getting back down the mountain in an express manner such that a fall would afford him. He looked up ahead and saw it. Not the cabin, but the part of the trail that turned into a sharp upward embankment, the very embankment he had slowly, painstakingly inched his way up after

snapping his ankle somewhere right around here. It was odd, and he didn't know exactly why it should be happening, but his heart started to beat a little faster. He began the ascent, paying ever-close attention to every place he set his snowshoes down. He could not afford one misstep; the summit was only about a half mile from here.

He came to the top of the embankment, and about fifty feet away, there it was: the loggers' cabin. He kept his distance for a moment, examining its features. The shack-like structure protruded from the mountainside, the blue tarps swaying in the minimal breeze that was present. He couldn't see inside from this vantage point; it just looked black. The roof was entirely covered in snow, a good five feet or so of the stuff. The little stone chimney spouted up out of it, but no smoke billowed from it; it remained just as inanimate as everything around the site. The snow around the entrance to the cabin was dirty, like someone had been there recently.

"Hello!" Martin called out in a friendly yet timid voice, only half-expecting a response.

When no one said anything in reply, he felt a little silly. Still a bit apprehensive about the whole thing, he started towards the cabin. Even though there had been no reaction whatsoever to his voice, he couldn't shake the sense that something might be inside, concealed by the darkness. Surely a wild animal would have stirred or a person would have said something back, though. Continually reassuring himself that nothing was going to jump out at him and simultaneously convincing himself that something definitely would, he nonetheless crept closer and closer. Strangely, he became aware that the pain in his leg from the fall earlier had subsided. He paused briefly to look at it, and was amazed to see that the bandage had vanished and there was no sign whatsoever of a scrape. The bandage could have fallen off, Martin surmised, but he didn't know how to explain the wound completely disappearing. He was sure he hadn't imagined falling. It

had happened only a half hour before, hadn't it? Being unable to make heads or tails of it, the knot that had already been forming in his stomach tightened. Regardless, he took the final steps towards the cabin's entrance, his heart working overtime.

He reached out his right hand for the tarp, but upon making contact with the blue material withdrew it immediately. For God's sake, he thought, he was being ridiculous. Kneeling to set his backpack down on the ground by his feet, he reached out once more and pulled the tarp aside, revealing the interior of the cabin.

Waiting for his eyes to adjust to the darkness within, he noticed a pair of boots lying near the middle of the floor. He saw that they were Merrells and his eyes went wide as he realized it was not just a pair of boots lying there, but a pair of legs extended from them toward the back wall where they connected to the torso of a man who sat motionless. Martin, kneeling at the entrance but not quite inside, was frozen in place. He saw the man held a small box of matches in one hand and he noticed a green backpack set against the wall next to him, but he could not see the man's face, for it was obscured by a scarf with a plaid pattern. The man was clearly unconscious.

Breaking from his trance, Martin crawled inside and attempted to lift the man from his seated position. His body was incredibly cold, and he wouldn't budge. It was as if he was frozen to the cabin floor. Instead of trying to lift him, then, Martin grabbed onto his legs and began to pull. He still wouldn't move. Martin pulled some more, causing the man's body to shake a little, but he was not going anywhere. After a couple more attempts, Martin gave up temporarily before looking up at the man once again. He saw that the scarf that had been covering his face had fallen away. Martin's own face turned deathly pale as he inched away from the man lying on the floor. He thought he was going to throw up, but instead his head fell backwards into the snow and everything went dark.

Martin lay there unconscious, across from the man who sat propped against the wall; across from the man with the green backpack lying next to him; across from the man wearing the Merrell boots, the man who'd wrapped up in a red and black plaid scarf, who'd frozen to death with a small box of matches clutched in his right hand; the man with the face that was his own.

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Even though he had already shut the engine of his Jeep Liberty off, Martin let the music play a little longer before he opened the door. He had to do some mental preparation before attempting to hike the mountain trail, anyway. The last time he'd been here – a year ago now – things hadn't turned out so great. He'd broken his ankle and needed to be carried back down the mountain. But he'd come back ready to face his demons, though, and this time he was going to reach the summit; there was no doubt in his mind.

The Mamas and the Papas' "California Dreamin'" got cut off mid-song as the radio died, and Martin chuckled to himself, finding it funny that such a song should play when the California sunshine was the furthest thing from his mind. He opened the car door, exposing himself to the cool air of a late February afternoon, and looked over across the snow-covered field. There, at the edge of the woods, was the first trail marker of his nemesis: the unforgiving Windsor Trail. Oh yes, he thought, you won't get the best of me a second time around.