

VINCENT CHRISTOPHER

MOUNT
HIDEAWAY
— *Mysteries* —

BREAKING AND ENTERING



FREILING
PUBLISHING



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———— CHAPTER 1 ————

A QUIET ENTRANCE

Bethany

“Remember. First, nobody gets hurt. Second, nobody gets caught!”

The words were probably unnecessary, but Bethany Shanholtz whispered them all the same. Her crew nodded, signaling they’d heard. The four teenagers were all crouched in the bushes outside the cast-iron gate that led to the back-garden entrance to the old limestone house.

There had been a thunderstorm earlier that evening, like most August nights in the Shenandoah Valley. The ground was damp, and the air smelled steamy. Bethany studied the ground they needed to traverse. They wouldn’t leave any footprints as long as they stayed on grass or gravel, and out of the mud.

The house was supposed to be vacant, but Bethany wasn’t one to take anything for granted. Her dad had taught her that you should always treat a gun as if it were loaded, even if you thought it was empty.

What was it he’d said? “Empty guns can be deadly.”

Empty gun. Empty house. The concept still applied. Use caution. Keep your crew safe.

Her crew.

She sized up each member of the team as they took a final check before entry.

Amy Bradford hovered at Bethany’s left shoulder. Calm, cool, and collected, she was ready for the job, probably more so than Bethany herself. Bethany hid a

smile. She knew she could always count on Amy. Scary-smart and fiercely loyal, she made for a perfect partner in crime.

Bethany took a deep breath and tried to mirror her friend.

Right. She had this.

Bethany supposed Amy's calm had something to do with how she was the oldest of the group. Not that she looked it. Amy Bradford's delicate features and small frame gave her a childlike look, which, among other things, tended to make people underestimate her. That was something Bethany had learned not to do... ever. All the same, Bethany always felt better having Amy around.

Rose though...

Her gaze shifted to the dark-haired girl who hung back behind the rest of the group. Restless and impatient, she wasn't good at waiting. Much as she hated to admit it, Bethany knew Rose could be a bit of a wildcard.

I'm probably not being fair. Rose was just...Rose. With different skills and talents than the rest. God made each of them unique, a fact Bethany had to remind herself of often. Looking at the world differently didn't make Rose any more right or wrong in her approach. She was just...Rose.

Right now, Rose was hovering on the balls of her feet, ready for action but just as likely to head home than to carry out the mission. Rose was tough, athletic, and was really brilliant with computers and electronics. She also had a strong attention to detail, a quality that Bethany appreciated because she knew it wasn't one of her strengths. Of course, Rose's tendency to get lost in the details slowed them down sometimes, but sometimes that too could be beneficial. Bethany didn't like getting slowed down, but she knew it was important to have all the bases covered. Rose picked up what Bethany was just as likely to miss.

Besides, Rose and Jamie were like family.

Jamie.

This was no time for distractions. Bethany was supposed to have her mind on the house. She was supposed to be counting, waiting out the five minutes she'd set for them to make sure the house was empty before they proceeded.

Definitely not the time to be mooning about over some boy.

Still...

A Quiet Entrance

Bethany's eyes turned to Rose's younger brother Jamie, who was the same age as herself. Strong. Courageous. What wasn't to like? That he was willing to get mixed up in a situation like this said a lot for his character. There was no way he was going to let his sister or his...well...he wasn't about to let his sister get in over her head.

He stood to her right, close enough that she could feel the warmth of him there without looking. The

very fact he was there left her feeling safe. Stronger, as though his own strength somehow lent itself to her. He reached out, giving her hand a squeeze, letting her know he was there, that he had her back.

And he did. With his mechanical aptitude, he could build or fix or disarm just about anything. They'd need that tonight.

He was also charming and likable... really likable. If they were caught, she was counting on him to talk their way out of this. Seriously, that blonde hair, blue eyes just screamed, 'I am trustworthy.'

Distracting.

Bethany bit back a moan. She was going to get them all killed if she didn't shape up.

Okay, stop! No more distractions. I've got this.

Bethany collected herself and refocused on the job at hand. Where was she? Oh yes. The countdown.

Five minutes had come and gone. The house lay still and dark, as though waiting for them.

"Rose and Jamie, how does the perimeter look?" Bethany whispered.

Jamie craned his neck to see clearly around the tree they'd bunched behind to the road just beyond the hedge. "All clear. Nobody in sight."

"From the maps we made earlier, I'm sure we've avoided the cameras," Rose added, and Bethany nodded.

"If we hadn't, they'd be on us by now. Anything else?"

Rose shook her head. “So far, I’m not detecting any other alarms or traps.” Rose waved her iPad, where she had a map of the property laid out in excruciating detail.

Bethany straightened and reminded herself to breathe.

Right. This was it—the moment of truth.

“Let’s do this!”

———— CHAPTER 2 ————

WELL BEGUN IS HALF DONE

Rose

The foursome slipped into the house one at a time. Bethany went in first. Bethany always went in first. She had her tactical flashlight set at a low level... just enough to see, but not bright enough to attract any unnecessary attention.

The black tactical flashlight was one of Bethany's most treasured possessions. Rose knew it had been one of the last gifts her dad ever gave her. She loved everything about it. She'd practically waxed rhapsodic about how the precision roughened grip of the military-grade titanium felt solid in her hand. Rose suspected the flashlight somehow boosted her confidence whenever she held it. Maybe it did. It was small enough to be concealed and carried easily, but very powerful in more ways than one. A good flashlight that left her slightly envious. Her own flashlight wasn't exactly special or even interesting, just an ordinary one she'd picked up at Lowe's.

Rose liked interesting devices. While mechanical things were more Jamie's world than hers, she still admired an object well-crafted and put to good use. Rose just liked her objects to do a little...more than most. If you could computerize a flashlight somehow, she'd be there.

On the other hand, would it be half as useful?

In addition to being a light source, a flashlight could double as a martial arts weapon. It was helpful in blocking an attack, and if you landed a solid punch

with Bethany's prized little toy in your clenched fist, the other guy was going down hard! Besides, the light had several settings, including the ability to flash out "S.O.S." in Morse Code bright enough for a passing airplane to see.

As usual, Bethany had preset the light so that its current setting, "Low Glow," would be immediately followed by "Strobe Mode." One click of the button and the chip-activated LED would transform the light from a sleepy little moonbeam to a blinding disco blaze that could disable an opponent just long enough for Bethany to escape...or attack.

Okay, Bethany's flashlight was cool. No question. Forget the circuits.

Not that they'd be using any of those settings tonight or fighting off any attacks.

Hopefully.

Rose shuddered. Subterfuge really wasn't her thing.

Bethany gave the signal. Just like that, they were in motion, sneakers whispering across the gravel.

She would have preferred bringing up the rear. She didn't like this, not any part of it. It was the challenge she liked, not the mission itself. Of course, when it came down to it, breaking and entering was just another puzzle, which made it intriguing.

They made it to the house and stopped. Jamie signaled that the way was still clear, Bethany giving a short nod as she studied the rocks lining the walk. In the end, it took but a moment to spot the fake, finding the extra house key hidden underneath.

Rose snorted. Pathetic. Hardly a challenge at all.

Amy gave her a look. Right. Noise.

Rose rolled her eyes and hoped the expression wasn't too noisy for her.

Not that they noticed. The door was open, the way clear. Rose swallowed hard. The room beyond was black, darker than it was outside, without the benefit of the moon or the streetlights to give them light to see.

The others didn't hesitate. Amy entered right behind Bethany. The two of them had practiced entering and clearing rooms for several years, and the procedure had become second nature for both of them. Bethany would go in, scan high and to the right, sweeping the room quickly with her light for potential prob-

Well Begun is Half Done

lems. Amy followed a split-second later, sweeping in the opposite direction and just a little more thoroughly. Lots of teen girls watch videos from apps on their cell phones and practice hip hop moves.

This was Bethany and Amy's dance, and they rocked it.

Rose blinked back the hot feeling at the back of her eyes she'd been feeling more and more lately. Amy and Bethany had always been close. It was only lately Rose had been feeling left out. What did it matter, their dance, their perfect synchronicity? It had never caused jealousy before.

Bethany wasn't dating my brother before.

There. That was it. The thought she'd been trying to ignore for far too long.

God, what am I supposed to do with these feelings? The prayer formed itself naturally, surprising her. Rose hadn't been strong on talking to God, but lately, He'd seemed like the only thing she had to cling to, especially as she faced her own future with college just around the corner.

Which is why I shouldn't be wasting my time playing these silly games.

All the same, Rose followed the others, entering next, knowing Jamie was waiting for her to move and she was holding things up. Besides, she had a job to do. As she came in, it was up to her to check the room thoroughly for unforeseen alarms or for clues and information that would aid in their mission. She paused to inspect a fascinating collection of antique armaments mounted on the wall just to the left as they entered. She recognized a "Pennsylvania Rifle", used by snipers and light infantry in the Revolutionary War. German gunsmiths in Pennsylvania had developed the technique of creating twisting grooves or "rifling" on the inside of the barrel, which increased the range and accuracy by spinning the snugly fitted projectile. She'd wanted to examine one up close for a long time, and this was a recent addition to this particular collection. Rose also eyed a display of two crossed cavalry sabers from the Civil War, one Union, and one Confederate. It looked to Rose like they were authentic, not replicas. Probably very valuable. *Nice.*

She would have liked to pause and look further, but Jamie was already pressing in behind her. At six foot two and a hundred and ninety pounds, he was the least stealthy of the group, but that didn't matter so much. Having him in the rear ensured that the female group members would never have to worry about anybody sneaking up on them from behind while they were on a mission. He

was constantly scanning their six and would always be ready with an escape route if necessary.

The problem was, Jamie knew her too well. He could see Rose was spending a little too long admiring the weapons on the wall. His nudge was almost a shove, steering her back toward the center of the room and back into the mission. Rose shot him a perturbed glare and moved along.

The house they had entered was over two hundred years old. It had originally been an inn during the Revolutionary War but had long since been converted to a private residence. The blue-gray limestone structure had been renovated dozens of times over the years, but the dynasty of owners had always been careful to keep its original style intact. Honestly, she would have liked to look around more. While computers were her thing, history fascinated her. Rose liked knowing where things came from. There were stories that it was used as a hospital during the Civil War and that the ghosts of both Union and Confederate soldiers still roamed the halls.

They moved through a colonial-style formal dining room with an antique hickory dining table and chairs. As her eyes adjusted to the semi-darkness, Rose could just make out the floral print curtains on the windows which were gathered with ornate cast iron holders in the shape of a fleur-de-lis. It was her turn to nudge Bethany. With the drapes still drawn back, the dancing beams from the flashlights would be clearly visible from outside. Bethany nodded and directed her light away, the beam dancing momentarily across the wall as she clicked the setting to dim it further.

In that flash, Rose had caught sight of the paintings on the walls were from local Virginia artists. In her mind's eye, she recreated them, having seen them recently in an article in the local paper. The collection was quite famous. Rose mentally cataloged each in her mind.

The first had depicted a boy at a grand piano. For some reason, the gangly child had made her think of Jamie, earnestly trying, always striving to be the best. Best at sports. Best son. Best of them all. His wild ambition was what brought them here tonight. If Jamie weren't challenging himself, he wasn't happy.

The next painting. She saw it now dimly between the other two—a pair of children sitting at a snowy window. Had Jamie and she ever shared such a moment of quiet comradery? She couldn't remember quiet playtimes where they hadn't been competing with one another. The picture left her feeling unsettled, unhappy. Clearly not the intent of the artist. She drew toward the final paint-

Well Begun is Half Done

ing. Moonlight played against the canvas where children ice skated in what looked like a game of crack the whip on a frozen cow pond with a yellow stone farmhouse in the background. Rose stepped closer to this particular painting, wondering how it felt to be the anchor, the child in the pink coat in the middle. Too often of late, she'd felt like the one careening across the ice, loose and unrestrained, out of control and whirling away in what was someone else's mad adventure.

She shot a glance back toward the others.

Had they even noticed she'd fallen back, away from the others?

I don't belong here.

Bethany approached the door at the other end of the room. A giant grandfather clock stood just to the right of the door, like some kind of palace guard. Its steady tick was like a blacksmith's hammer on an anvil, echoing throughout the otherwise silent room. How bad was it that Rose felt like the old grandfather was impatiently urging her to keep the mission moving, as though even this towering antique had only censure for her?

She shook off the feeling, hurrying to catch up with the rest. The room was clear. She was dawdling now, dragging her feet. She'd committed to seeing this through. It was time she remembered that.

There were three steps leading up to the door, probably the result of this section of the house being from a different renovation than the next. Bethany bent over to examine the door, which had an antique cast-iron lock plate. She silently rocked the glossy knob back and forth using the glove, which should have been on her hand to keep the knob clean.

"It's locked," she whispered.

Well, duh. It wouldn't exactly have been left unlocked. Not with what was on the other side.

"I've got my pick set!" Amy replied, eager as ever as she pulled an oiled leather pouch out of her kit. The picks were fairly new, but the pouch looked as old as this lock. Amy loved the smell of the old leather pouch and couldn't help but bring it to her nose as though to reassure herself with its scent. To Rose, she looked like Bilbo Baggins, the heroic Hobbit thief, while she went to work. Amy would probably agree if she knew. She often saw herself as a character from

literature when she was in situations like this. She said the images boosted her courage and gave her inspiration.

Rose peered over Amy's shoulder curiously. The strategy for these antique locks was different than the modern locks she worked on most of the time. A tension wrench would be useless since there was no rotating cylinder of pins like in most modern residential locks. Defeating this puzzle would just be a matter of pushing tumblers around until it was released.

The tumblers inside the old lock were stiff, and Amy had to use an unusually large, L-shaped tool to get enough leverage to move them. She couldn't get a firm enough grip on the tool with her leather gloves, so she stuck the pick between her teeth, slipped her right glove off, and put it into its designated pocket in her kit.

"Hurry up!" Bethany urged. She knew she didn't need to rush Amy, but maybe she felt what Rose did, that the clock seemed to be getting impatient with all of them.

"I got it!" Amy whispered as she felt the last tumbler give way. She turned the doorknob quietly and pulled the door open just a crack. Then she stepped back, deferring to Bethany, who would, of course, resume her position at point.

She could offer to give me a turn once in a while...

Bethany stepped forward, then turned around to address the team. "Okay, Amy and I go in quiet. Rose and Jamie, stay here and watch our backs until we're sure the next room is clear."

Watch their backs. "I still think Jamie and I should check outside again," Rose cut in, thinking that once she was safely outside, she could just as easily slip home without anyone noticing.

"No. We stick together. That way, there's less chance of getting caught."

Rose rolled her eyes. *Whatever.*

Bethany inched the door open slowly to keep it from creaking. She hated doing anything slowly. She mouthed words, speaking them half under her breath, which Rose wasn't sure she was supposed to hear. "Slow is smooth. Smooth is fast." No doubt one of her father's many mottos and sayings from his Special Forces experience.

Rose looked away, feeling more and more like a heel.

Well Begun is Half Done

I wish I knew what was the matter with me. God, you have to help me with this. I don't want to be the person I'm becoming.

Finally! The door opened.

Bethany and Amy couldn't use their clearing procedure as effectively in the next room, as they were confronted with a short, narrow hallway. Bethany's expression said she didn't like being boxed in, but they didn't have a choice, so she moved ahead.

The hallway quickly opened up into a large library. Two of the walls showcased the vast collection with floor to ceiling walnut bookshelves. In the darkness, loomed ladders on wheels to help the reader reach the higher books. From her studies of the place, Rose knew the shelves had a number of arched alcoves with statuettes on pedestals. Each was a bust of a famous Virginia author... Willa Cather... Thomas Jefferson... Edgar Allan Poe...

The paintings in the library also connected to the history of the area, but these images seemed darker, not so much in their color palette as in their subject matter. There were depictions of battles from the Revolutionary and Civil wars, and one of Lee surrendering to Grant at Appomattox. There was also a large portrait of George Washington, whose original surveyor's office was in nearby Winchester and who may actually have stayed at this very home back in the 1700s when it was an inn.

Here the heavy drapes were pulled. Bethany snapped her light on a higher setting, casting a beam directly across from the entrance, illuminating their target. It was almost too easy. The pewter chalice sat right in the middle of a bookshelf. It was highlighted by a small spotlight in the ceiling that made it almost look like it was glowing. The shine of the chalice was almost hypnotic, and Rose found herself drawn immediately to it, trailing far behind the other girls who seemed likewise entranced.

It was Amy who remembered their mission and plans first. She turned and waved for Rose and Jamie to join them. Rose hastened her steps, almost running to join them, leaving Jamie alone to take one last look in the room behind them before he joined the others.

Heart beating wildly in her chest, Rose pushed past the others, seeing only the chalice, the end goal. Her doubts and desire to leave had fled at the sight of it. She stretched out her hand, needing to hold it. Wanting it more than she could remember wanting anything.

MOUNT HIDEAWAY MYSTERIES

Bethany smacked her hand down.

“No, Rose! There could be an alarm!”

Rose jerked back, hand stinging, cheeks flushed. She shot a look at her brother, who only frowned at his sister’s impatience. Rose could feel the frustration coming off in waves.

Amy’s eyes lowered. Rose didn’t need to see them to know her friend was disappointed in them. Amy’s gentle soul rebelled against conflict, and she hated to see the others fighting.

Bethany seemed not to notice, her attention wholly on the chalice. She leaned in, letting the light play over the object’s surface. “Jamie, check it out.”

Rose backed away, and Jamie stepped up to the bookshelf. He turned his flashlight up one click brighter and spun the focus ring so that the beam of light narrowed from a broad flood to a tight spotlight. He carefully shone the light around the prize without touching anything. Nothing above but below...yep, there it was. Just like Bethany thought. A simple pressure switch that undoubtedly connected to an alarm.

Jamie pulled a multi-tool out of his kit and unfolded the scissors. He snipped the wire to deactivate the sensor, then he stepped back and bowed in a knightly fashion to Bethany. For just a second, her intensity softened, and there was a flash of a girlish giggle in her bright green eyes.

Rose sniffed. *Whatever.*

Bethany must have heard, for she stiffened slightly and turned hurriedly away. “See?” Her tone was a little bit smug as she reached forward to gently lift the chalice from the shelf. Rose bit back a soft sigh as the chalice came into sharper focus. The pewter was a little tarnished, but there was an elegance about it that gave a hint to the fine workmanship which had created it. Rose drew in with the others to admire the prize in the light of their flashlights.

They were congratulating each other and just starting to move to their exit strategy when they heard the sound.

Three loud bangs behind them, so sharp they split the silence of the room. To Rose, each sounded like a shotgun blast.

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