

## Blame

"Josiah!" Ezra shouted when he saw one of the armed thugs take aim at the big man. But Josiah was too far away and didn't hear the warning. Glancing to his left, Ezra saw that Buck was busy firing at a man who was shooting at JD. Nathan was covering Chris, while Vin was firing at the men who were attempting to escape out the back door. Gritting his teeth, he moved away from his position behind some packing crates and darted into the open, firing at the man targeting Josiah. The man went down and Ezra quickly rolled back toward his former position and took up where he had left off. The gunfire lasted only a few more minutes, slowly petering out as the rest of the armed criminals were subdued.

Breathing a sigh of relief, Ezra stepped forward to help round up the bad guys. After two months undercover, he was glad to see this case finally finished. The ATF had been after Harold Archer for more than two years without success, unable to penetrate his arms dealing organization, until a tip from one of Ezra's snitches had given them the break they needed. Posing as Roger Steadman, owner of a successful import/export business, Ezra had attended a party where Archer was a guest and gradually worked his way into the gunrunner's confidence, convincing him that he was a major player in the arms market. Today's bust was the culmination of his efforts and he felt the warm sense of satisfaction that always accompanied the successful conclusion of a case.

A smile playing across his features, Ezra handed off the last of the cuffed gunrunners to some members of Team Two, who were assisting with the raid, and sauntered toward the rest of his team. Chris Larabee saw his approach and moved to intercept him.

"What the hell were you thinking?!" he snarled.

Bewildered, Ezra stopped and gazed at him in confusion. "Excuse me?"

"You were supposed to be covering JD, not jumping out into the crossfire and playing Lone Ranger!"

"The man had Mr. Sanchez in his sights," Ezra retorted angrily. "Nobody else was close enough to take appropriate action."

"Nathan and Vin had him covered," Chris growled, pushing himself to within inches of Ezra's face. "You could have gotten JD killed." He pointed to the bullet-riddled crate behind which JD had taken cover.

"Mr. Wilmington was covering him," Ezra stated icily, "and I was only away for a few moments." He looked to the rest of his team for support, but found none. JD had returned to the van, Nathan and Buck were nodding their heads in agreement with Chris, Josiah looked thoughtful, and Vin was smirking with obvious amusement. Ezra noted with some discomfort that most of the members of Team Two were watching the exchange as well.

"I told you to cover JD," Chris said, his tone as hard as the glare he was giving Ezra. "When I give an order, I expect it to be followed."

"I'll take it under advisement," Ezra said tightly, not wanting to escalate the argument in front of an audience.

The vein on Chris's temple began to throb harder as he clenched his fists tightly at his sides. For a moment, Ezra thought his boss was going to hit him -- it wouldn't be the first time -- but Chris instead favored him with a scathing glare before turning abruptly and stalking away.

Ezra sighed as he watched Larabee's retreating figure. The rest of the team turned to follow their leader while Team Two dispersed to continue cataloguing the confiscated weapons, seemingly disappointed that there had been no violence. With an unreadable expression on his face, Ezra slowly left the building.

As he drove back to the office, Ezra pondered the scene at the raid once again. Larabee had been on his case for the past two weeks, constantly criticizing him and giving him a hard time about nearly everything. He expected a certain amount of grief from his boss, their relationship being somewhat less than tranquil at the best of times, but lately it seemed that nothing he did satisfied the man. Berating him in front of others, especially those outside of his team, was not something that he would normally do, and Ezra found himself wondering what he had done to deserve such abuse. That question had been plaguing him since Chris's foul mood had begun, and he was still no closer to finding an answer.

The five months he had been with the team had been difficult for Ezra. After the fiasco of his first assignment as a member of Team Seven, neither Chris nor the others trusted him, always expecting him to shirk his duty again. He didn't blame them; how could he? He hardly dared place his own trust in them, especially since the near-ruination of his career and his self-confidence by the FBI, so it was ridiculous to expect them to reciprocate what he himself was unable to give. All of his life he had been taught not to trust others, and on the few occasions he had taken a chance and done so, he had had that lesson painfully driven home.

But Ezra had recently begun to feel that he was at least accepted within the group, even if he wasn't trusted or liked by their leader. He had even begun taking them up on the occasional invitation for drinks at their favorite bar after work. Yet, none of the others had backed him when Larabee had begun using him as target practice for his wrath,

leaving him to defend himself. Though it was something he was used to, Ezra felt oddly disappointed at the lack of support from the rest of his team. At the same time, he chastised himself for feeling that way, hating the fact that he actually cared what these men thought of him.

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"Little hard on 'im, weren't ya?" Vin commented as he sidled up to Chris in the parking garage of the federal building. He had initially found Chris and Ezra's confrontation amusing, but the humor had slipped away when he noticed the other ATF team watching in the background.

The blond leader turned his glare on the younger man beside him. "Not your concern."

"Hell, Chris, he didn't do anythin' different than the rest of us woulda done in his shoes."

Chris sent him another frosty glance before turning away and striding determinedly into the stairwell.

The sharpshooter frowned in consternation as he watched his friend leave, debating whether or not he should follow him and continue the conversation. He turned sharply as a hand grasped his shoulder.

"Leave him be, Vin," Buck said. "He ain't in no mood for talkin'."

"It weren't right, him chewin' Ez out in front of everybody like that," Vin said intently. "It ain't like he done anythin' wrong anyway."

Buck was about to disagree, when he remembered that Team Two had also been present during the altercation. "Yeah, he should have saved it for the office."

"What the hell's with him lately?" Vin asked as they stepped into the elevator. "He's been on Ez like a bad habit for the last coupla weeks. An' he ain't been none too pleasant to the rest of us, neither."

Thoughtfully, Buck smoothed his hand over his mustache. "It ain't a good time for him right now," the big man said quietly. "Today's his anniversary."

"Shit," Vin muttered.

"Yeah," Buck agreed. "It's always tough on him."

"Why's he takin' it out on Ezra?" asked Vin. "He ain't done nothin' worse than usual."

Buck shrugged. "Don't know. Convenient target, maybe."

"Don't make it right."

"No, it don't," Buck agreed.

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Ezra had taken his time driving back to the ATF headquarters, reluctant to face any more of Larabee's anger, and arrived at the office nearly fifteen minutes behind the others. As he walked down the hall toward the Team Seven offices, he wondered if his boss was going to pick up where they left off at the warehouse. He quietly entered the bullpen and made his way to his desk, noting with some relief that Larabee's door was closed and the others were engrossed in their own activities. Rubbing a hand tiredly over his face, Ezra switched on his computer and began working on his report.

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"Ezra!"

Ezra's looked up with a start at the sound of JD's voice. "Yes, Mr. Dunne?"

The young agent bounded across the bullpen with an energy that Ezra wished he could summon at the end of a long day. "It's five o'clock, Ez. Time to go to the Saloon."

"Yeah, come on, Ez," Vin said persuasively, parking himself on a corner of Ezra's desk. "We have a lot to celebrate tonight."

Ezra cast a furtive glance in the direction of Larabee's office, then slowly shook his head. "Ah, I don't think I'll be joining you this evening. I'm rather tired."

Vin had caught the look and understood the undercover agent's hesitancy. "Don't worry 'bout Chris none," he said encouragingly. "He's just in a pissy mood."

"Yeah," JD agreed, nodding his head vigorously. "Heck, you're the one who did the most work on this case, Ezra. I'll even buy you a beer."

"So will I," Josiah intoned as he joined the other two in front of Ezra's desk. "I owe you one, brother."

"Please?" JD added.

Ezra looked into JD's pleading eyes and sighed in resignation. "I suppose I could do with a drink," he said finally.

"Good," Josiah said cheerfully. "Let's go."

"I'll join you in a bit," Ezra replied. "I would like to finish my report first so as not to incur any more of Mr. Larabee's infamous wrath."

"You promise?" JD asked doubtfully.

"Yes, Mr. Dunne," Ezra said with a smile. "I will be there."

Vin nodded at him and slid off of his desk to follow the others. Buck and Nathan joined the other three and the group left as one, their cheerful banter echoing down the hallway. Ezra hadn't missed the fact that Larabee had not yet left the office and turned back to his report, trying to ignore the uneasy feeling this gave him.

Ten minutes later, Chris emerged from his office, locking the door behind him. He stopped short upon seeing Ezra still diligently working at his desk. He had heard the others leave and had assumed that Ezra had gone with them to celebrate the successful bust.

"Aren't you going to the Saloon with the others?" Chris asked.

Ezra jumped slightly, startled at hearing his superior's voice. "I intend to join them as soon as I finish writing my report," he replied.

Chris studied his undercover agent for a moment, noting the darkening circles under his eyes and the faint lines of strain on his face. It had been a difficult assignment, with meetings at odd hours and late-night parties that Ezra had been forced to attend in order to keep his cover intact. The man was tired, deservedly so, and Chris found himself feeling a hint of sympathy for him.

"The report will still be there Monday," Chris said with a sigh.

"Yes, well..." Ezra shrugged. "I'd much prefer to complete this while it is still fresh in my mind, so that I can relax this weekend."

Chris felt his frustration rising again and fought to control it. "I'd better see you there," he warned. He had promised Buck that he would go to the saloon with the others, and if \*he\* was going to be forced to endure the drunken celebration, then so was Ezra.

"Not to worry, Mr. Larabee," Ezra assured him. "I will be finished shortly."

Chris nodded at his agent then left without another word.

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The noise and the smoke assaulted his senses the moment Ezra stepped through the door of the bar named, appropriately, 'The Saloon'. It was a comfortable place, decorated in an Old West theme and, due to its location several blocks from the federal building, was

frequented primarily by federal agents and government employees. Ezra made his way through the crowd toward Team Seven's regular table. It had been a little more than an hour and a half since Chris had left the office, and Ezra quickly discovered that his teammates had spent that entire time 'celebrating'.

"Hey Ez!" JD shouted happily at his approach. "You made it!"

"Indeed, Mr. Dunne," Ezra said, grinning at the boy's exuberant welcome.

"Have a seat," Nathan said, pushing a chair out for him.

Ezra took the offered seat, draping his coat over the back of the chair. He gazed around the table, observing that most of his teammates were well on their way to being drunk. Josiah was loudly regaling Vin with tales of some of his travels in the Far East, while Chris focused solely on the amber liquid in his glass, trying vainly to ignore Buck's graphic description of yet another of his sexual escapades. JD sat in the middle, his head bobbing between the two vociferous conversations. Nathan caught Ezra's eye and nodded, an amused smile playing on his lips.

Ezra glanced at the coffee mug sitting in front of the dark man and lifted an eyebrow curiously. "You are not partaking of any libations this evening?"

Nathan snorted. "Somebody's got to drive these yahoos home later." Giving Ezra an appraising look, he asked tentatively, "Don't suppose you'd consider givin' me a hand?"

Ezra considered it for a moment. While a drink or two would have gone down nicely at that point, he was feeling somewhat tired and felt a headache brewing behind his eyes. Knowing that alcohol would only make him feel worse, he gave Nathan a nod. "I believe I could be persuaded," he said eventually.

"Good," Nathan said, visibly relieved. "I was afraid I was goin' to have to deal with the bunch of ya by myself."

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The evening gave way to early morning as Ezra sat, half-doing, while his teammates gradually succumbed to their drinking. JD had passed out an hour ago, and Chris lay with his head on the table, his hand still wrapped around his whiskey glass. Vin sat across from Chris in virtually the same position, though his hand lay in the remnants of a plate of onion rings. Josiah and Buck were still conscious, laughing uproariously at something only they understood.

Nathan sighed and slowly got to his feet, nudging Ezra's shoulder to wake him. "Time to get these guys home, Ez."

Ezra sat up and yawned, stretching languidly until his back realigned itself with a satisfying pop. "Which of them do you wish to chauffeur, Mr. Jackson?"

"Well, Buck, JD, and Josiah all live on the way to my place," Nathan said with a shrug. "You think you can handle Vin and Chris?"

"I believe I can," Ezra agreed.

"Vin was planning to go out to Chris's place this weekend anyway, so you might as well take them both out there," Nathan suggested. "In fact, why don't you stop at your own apartment and pack a bag so you don't have to drive back tonight."

"I doubt Mr. Larabee would appreciate my presence in his home for any longer than necessary," Ezra said with a faint smile. "I shall return to my own residence after I have delivered them safely."

Nathan frowned but didn't argue. "Can you give me a hand with Josiah and Buck? They ain't exactly lightweights."

"Certainly." Ezra pushed his chair aside and moved to assist Nathan.

With much pushing and shoving, they had finally gotten the men loaded into Nathan's Explorer. As they leaned against the car catching their breath, Nathan asked, "Do you need any help with Chris and Vin?"

"No." Ezra shook his head. "I believe I can manage."

"All right, then," Nathan said with a weary sigh as he climbed into the vehicle. "You drive carefully, ya hear?"

Ezra nodded. "I shall endeavor to do so." He turned and headed back into the bar to retrieve his charges. Both Vin and Chris were still passed out at the table, their heads down on their arms. Ezra chuckled, knowing that they would be feeling the ill effects of this binge in the morning. Reaching for his coat, he remembered that it was a long drive to Larabee's ranch and that he had not visited the restroom all evening. Rifling through their coat pockets, Ezra retrieved both sets of car keys, in case they awakened before he returned.

"Do you need a taxi, Señor?" asked Inez, the dark-haired proprietress of The Saloon.

"No, my dear," Ezra replied with a smile. "I shall be driving my compatriots home as soon as I return from using the facilities."

Inez smiled, then began clearing the empty glasses and plates from the table. Ezra hurried to the restroom, eager to deliver his associates so that he might return home for some much-needed rest.

Five minutes later, Ezra returned to the table and found both of his teammates missing. Muttering a curse, he grabbed his coat from the back of his chair and raced out the door, emerging outside in time to see the taillights of Vin's jeep disappearing around the corner. He should have known that Vin could hotwire his own vehicle.

"Dammit!" he shouted, whirling quickly and running toward his own car. Ezra frantically unlocked the door and was about to jump inside when he noticed that his car was listing slightly to one side. He ran around to the other side and discovered that his right rear tire was flat. "Shit!" he cursed loudly. Chris's truck was parked next to his Jaguar, but it, too, had a flat tire. Muttering a string of epithets, he reached for the trunk of his car.

Ezra didn't think he had ever changed a tire so quickly in his life. Normally it would have taken him fifteen minutes to replace the tire, but he managed it in less than ten. After stowing the deflated tire and the jack in his trunk, he jumped into the car and tore out of the parking lot. There was no telling what kind of trouble his drunken friends might get into. He only hoped he could find them before anything happened. Since Vin's apartment was in the same direction as Chris's ranch, Ezra made the slight detour required to drive by the place, hoping that the men had had the common sense not to attempt such a long drive in their inebriated state.

Purgatorio was not the most attractive neighborhood during the daytime, but in the darkness, it appeared almost sinister. Ezra slowed his car as he drove past Vin's apartment building, scanning the streets hopefully. Unfortunately, the jeep was nowhere to be found, and he began to feel sense of dread building in the pit of his stomach.

He had only been there once, but he remembered that the route to Chris's house was fairly straightforward, and Ezra drove as fast as he could while still searching for the elusive jeep. His hopes of finding them were gradually diminishing as he turned onto the lonely road that wound its way through the countryside toward Larabee's home. It was a narrow, two-lane road with no lights and very little traffic, sporting many ruts and cracks from the harsh weather it endured each winter. As his car bounced along the asphalt, Ezra peered out of his side windows into the thick forest on either side of road, praying that he wouldn't find a crumpled vehicle there. There were several stretches further ahead on this road where the sides dropped away steeply and he knew just how easy it would be for a car to slip over the side.

He was still several miles from the last turnoff that led to the ranch, when his headlights illuminated something on the side of the road ahead. As he drew closer, he recognized the outline of the jeep and heaved a huge sigh of relief. "Thank God!" he whispered to himself.

The trees on the sides of the road left very little shoulder, and Ezra was loath to leave his car parked in the driving lane. Instead, he carefully turned the Jaguar around and drove a short distance back down the road to a small area he had seen earlier, where the shoulder

widened enough to park his vehicle safely and out of the way of traffic. Climbing out of his car, Ezra jogged toward the jeep holding the flashlight he had retrieved from his glove box, hoping his friends were uninjured.

As he neared the jeep, he could make out the back of Chris's blond head slumped over the steering wheel, and Vin's inert form leaning against the passenger side window, his long hair obscuring his face. Ezra's heart skipped a beat and he quickened his pace, concerned that his friends might be hurt. He couldn't see their faces yet, but when he was about twenty-five feet away, he saw something that nearly made his heart stop altogether. Lining the dashboard of the jeep were several rectangular objects with what appeared to be wires curling out of them.

"Good lord," Ezra breathed in dismay. If those were what he thought they were, his two friends were in grave danger. He started to run, but had only taken two steps when the jeep exploded, sending a massive fireball skyward. Ezra was lifted off his feet and thrown backwards across the road, his long coat billowing out around him like a sail while the heat from the blast singed his hair, skin, and clothing. His flight through the air ended abruptly when he slammed into a large tree. The impact knocked him out and he slid bonelessly to the ground, lying facedown in the dirt.

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The air crackled and hissed around him as Ezra slowly returned to consciousness. He opened his eyes and winced at the brightness that was sending sharp knives of pain into his head. Rolling himself into a seated position, Ezra stared numbly at the inferno that had once been Vin's jeep. White flames roared, devouring what was left of the vehicle and nearly blinding him with their intensity; blue fire danced around the edges of the blaze, giving it a strange, otherworldly glow.

"Oh God," Ezra cried hoarsely, remembering what had transpired. "Vin! Chris!" On his hands and knees, he crawled toward the flaming wreckage, but had to stop when the heat became too extreme. He retreated across the road, pulling himself up onto a large boulder, his eyes never leaving the devastating scene.

They were dead. Ezra didn't want to believe it, but he knew there was no way anyone could have survived that blast or the resulting fire. Dazedly, he looked at his watch, surprised to note that he had only been unconscious for ten minutes. Shivering in the chill autumn air, he pulled his coat tighter around himself, fastening the buttons and wrapping his arms around his chest. It suddenly occurred to him that he should call someone and without conscious thought, he pulled his cell phone out of his pocket and mechanically dialed 911. He relayed the details of what had happened in a flat, toneless voice, then hung up and dialed Nathan's home number.

The phone rang several times before Nathan answered in a sleepy voice, "Yeah?"

Ezra hesitated, suddenly unable to find any words.

"Who's there?" Nathan inquired, irritation creeping into his voice.

"It's Ezra," he finally replied.

"Ezra?" Nathan sounded confused. "What's wrong?"

"It's... it's Chris and Vin," he stuttered hoarsely. "They're dead."

"What?!" Nathan shouted, instantly wide-awake. "What happened? Where are you?"

"They blew up," Ezra stated quietly, suddenly feeling the urge to giggle. "Big ball of fire." This time he did laugh nervously.

"Ezra!" Nathan growled. "Where are you?"

"On... on the road to Chris's place," Ezra replied, attempting to stifle his hysteria.

"Did you call 911?"

"They're dead, Nathan," Ezra said in a small voice.

"We're on our way," Nathan said.

"Okay," he answered, but Nathan had already hung up.

Ezra wrapped his arms tighter around himself, rocking slowly as he sat on the boulder. He could hear sirens approaching and struggled to regain control of his emotions. It wouldn't do any good for him to lose it now.

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It took the rest of the team nearly an hour to arrive at the scene. Ezra sat on his rock, blankly watching the police and fire department activity. He had given his statement when they had arrived, explaining to them about the plastic explosives he thought he had seen inside the jeep. They had been doubtful at first, until he had shown them his badge and assured them that he knew what he was talking about.

The paramedics had arrived along with the other emergency vehicles, but nothing could be done for Chris and Vin. Hell, nothing was left of them, Ezra thought morosely. He himself had refused medical treatment, as he honestly felt no pain despite the burned patches on his face and hands. When he saw Nathan's Explorer arrive, Ezra was relieved. He didn't want to be here by himself, staring at the now-smoldering wreckage and wondering why it had happened.

The rest of his teammates piled out of the truck and raced toward the center of activity, slowing as they approached the foot-deep crater and the small pile of debris in its center of that didn't seem large enough to have once been Vin's jeep. Buck noticed Ezra first and changed direction mid-step, storming angrily toward him.

"What the fuck happened?!" Buck roared as he pulled Ezra up off of the rock by the lapels of his coat.

"Somebody blew them up," Ezra replied simply, turning his face away from the alcoholic fumes that Buck was blowing in his face. Just his luck that the man was still drunk. Buck was normally a boisterous and good-tempered man, but alcohol tended to amplify his emotions, both good and bad, leading to occasional violence that he would never contemplate in his sober state.

"You were supposed to be driving them home! Why the hell were they driving in the first place?" He shook Ezra hard for emphasis.

"They got away from me at the Saloon," Ezra replied hoarsely. "I was only in the restroom for a couple of minutes... I took their keys, but... the tire was flat..."

"You goddamned selfish son of a bitch!" Buck let go of Ezra's lapel with his right hand and used it to punch him in the face. Enraged, he punched him again in the face and then several times in the stomach, holding him up in the air like a rag doll as he vented his rage. None of the others moved to stop him.

"Hey! What's going on here?" One of the police officers had seen the altercation and came running toward them.

"Ask this asshole," Buck spat heatedly, throwing Ezra to the ground and kicking dirt in his face. "If the worthless bastard had driven our friends home like he was s'posed to, they'd still be alive and not that..." His voice broke. "...that pile of smoking ash over there."

The cop looked at Buck and then down at Ezra before nodding and turning away, a disgusted look on his face. "Just take it easy, okay," the officer warned as he walked away.

Ezra looked up at Buck and the others, finding no sympathy or understanding in any of their faces. Buck was furious, his teeth clenched and his face a bright shade of red. Nathan looked outraged and disdainful, glowering down at him as if he were nothing more than a piece of trash on the side of the road. Josiah's stony expression showed nothing but shock and disappointment and Ezra felt the big man's bloodshot eyes staring right through him, like he no longer existed. JD, looking crushed and betrayed and with tears streaming down his face, quickly turned away and refused to look at him. None of them took notice of the fact that Ezra was as stunned and distraught by the events as they were themselves.

Ezra lowered his head, wiping the blood from his face, and made his way slowly to his feet. He swayed slightly and unconsciously reached toward Nathan for support. The other man reacted as though he had been burned, shoving him away forcefully. Ezra toppled over into the dirt once again.

"You know," Nathan said icily. "I was actually starting to think that you might have the makings of a decent human being under them fancy suits." He glared at the prone man before him, his fists clenching and unclenching at his sides. "Looks like I was wrong." He and the others turned their backs on him and walked away.

Devastated, Ezra watched them go. They were right. He was a no good, self-centered, useless son of a bitch, just as he had been told by the endless parade of family friends and relatives with whom he had stayed as a child. They had all told him that he would never amount to anything, and he had spent his entire life trying to prove them wrong. But the truth was out. They had been right all along, and now two good men were dead because of him. Ezra climbed slowly to his feet, ignoring the pains that were beginning to make themselves known throughout his body, and trudged down the road to his car.

Ezra drove automatically, barely paying attention to the road in front of him, and was startled when he found himself close to home; he didn't even remember reaching the city limits. The car hit a particularly large pothole, sending a shooting pain through his lower back accompanied by a wave of dizziness. Reaching a hand behind him, he rubbed the spot carefully and was surprised at the wetness he found there. The sight of blood on his hand shocked him even more, and he realized that he had been feeling lightheaded for some time. Ezra thought briefly about ignoring it and going home -- after all, he deserved whatever injuries he got -- but then decided that he needed to take care of himself so that he could find out who was responsible for the explosion. He owed that much, at least, to Vin and Chris. At the next intersection, he turned his car in the direction of the hospital.

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The four men sat dejectedly on the ground next to one of the police cars, watching in silence as the forensic experts scoured the scene. JD cried unashamedly while the others fought to keep their own grief under control as the realization set in that their friends were truly gone.

One of the female detectives investigating the scene saw them sitting there and came over to speak to them. "You guys really should go home," she suggested. "It's going to take hours to finish here and there's nothing much you can do."

"Have you found anything..." Nathan paused, looking at her identification. "Detective Bennett?" asked Nathan.

"Barbara, please," she said with a smile. It was against procedure, but these men were federal agents and, if nothing else, Barbara thought she might be able to ease the desperation etched on all of their faces. "There isn't a whole lot to find," she began. "From what the fire department guys are telling me, that entire vehicle must have been packed with explosives, probably plastique. We also think that there was some type of accelerant used. Probably rocket fuel or the like, from the description of the fire your friend gave us." She was surprised at the frowns that crossed their faces at the mention of their friend, but decided to ignore it. "The fire burned so hot that it vaporized nearly everything. It even destroyed the pavement." The men's faces fell at that statement, and the youngest paled significantly.

"Is there any... evidence? Anything at all?" Buck asked.

Barbara sighed and reluctantly drew a plastic bag from her pocket. "We found this about fifty feet away. It looks like part of a badge."

JD jumped up and came toward her to take a closer look. "It's... Vin's," he said sadly. "I recognize the numbers on the bottom."

"I'm sorry," Barbara said sympathetically, unsure if she should continue. "Um, we also found a tooth that looks like it was thrown clear of the blast. It was a little charred, but we should be able to identify it."

"Jesus." Buck's shoulders slumped and he leaned his head on his hands.

"It's already been sent to the lab," she offered. "We'll contact you once we know anything definitive. You guys should really go home and get some rest."

"She's right," Josiah said stoically as he turned to face his companions. "We can't do anything more here. What we need is to get some sleep so that we can start fresh in the morning." The big man slowly rose from his position on the ground. "I don't know about you, brothers, but I want to get the bastards who did this."

The other three nodded their heads in agreement and climbed to their feet, striding determinedly to their vehicle without looking back.

"They're finally leaving?" Detective Paul Ruiz asked his partner as he joined her at the fringe of the crime scene.

"Yes," Barbara answered sadly. "They're wiped out and they know it." She turned around and started walking back toward the crime scene. "I'll tell you, though," she said with certainty. "I wouldn't want to be in the shoes of whoever did this when they get hold of him."

"No kidding," Paul agreed. "I've heard of those guys, and I sure wouldn't want to mess with them." "The Magnificent Seven" were already a legend in the law enforcement community, despite the fact that the team had been in existence for less than a year.

"Well, I hope they find them," Barbara stated. "Nobody deserves to die like this."

Paul nodded silently as the two detectives returned to their sad task.

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Ezra limped through the doors of the emergency room, having left his car in the hospital parking garage. The waiting room was full, typical of an early Saturday morning after the bars had closed, as he made his way toward the registration desk. He waited patiently until the gray-haired nurse noticed him standing there.

"Agent Standish! I didn't see you," the nurse commented, familiar with all of the members of Team Seven, who seemed to grace their doors with great frequency. "Who are we treating tonight?" She took a closer look at his face, noticing the black eye, fat lip and burns, and frowned. "Besides you, that is."

"It's just myself this evening, Mrs. Baker," Ezra replied quietly. "I'm afraid I ventured a bit too close to an exploding vehicle."

Nurse Baker frowned at him with a shake of her head. "You boys sure do seem to have a knack for finding trouble."

"I have a special request," Ezra said seriously. "I need to be registered under another name, for safety reasons." In truth, he didn't want his teammates or anyone else to find him. He was in enough pain already and wasn't up to dodging any more punches. He was also afraid that they might just ignore him completely, leaving him here alone, and he didn't know which possibility saddened him the most.

She frowned. "That's not standard procedure, Agent Standish. I don't know if I can do that."

"It's important," Ezra said persuasively. "Two of my... associates were killed this evening in the explosion I mentioned, and there could be great danger to the rest of us. No one must know that I am here... for the hospital's safety as well as my own."

"What about the others?" she asked pensively. "Shouldn't they be here with you?"

"My other teammates are already hidden away in a safe house," Ezra lied. "It's much too dangerous to contact them at this point in time."

"I'm sure we can do what you ask." Nurse Baker placed a motherly hand on his arm in sympathy. "I'll take you into a room right away." She stepped around the desk to escort

him to an examination room. Ezra took several steps, then was assaulted by a sudden wave of vertigo. The world began to spin violently, ultimately fading to black as his consciousness fled.

"Get a doctor!" she called to one of the other nurses as she struggled to lower the unconscious agent to the floor.

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The other four members of Team Seven were somber as they drove to the federal building Saturday morning. They had spent the night at Chris's house, since they were exhausted and none of them wanted to be alone. The ranch was closest to where the explosion had taken place, and simply being in their friend's home gave the men some comfort, however slight. It was noon when they finally arrived at the office and none of them were surprised to find Ezra's desk vacant.

JD slumped miserably into his chair and stared forlornly at the door to Chris's office. "I can't believe they're gone," he whispered, gazing up at Buck with red-rimmed eyes.

"I know, kid," Buck said, squeezing his shoulder supportively.

"We'd best get started," Josiah said, slipping into the leadership role automatically. "JD, why don't you start with all of our past cases, especially the ones where Chris or Vin played a large role. Buck, can you look into Chris's past cases with the PD? You'll have a better handle on that than the rest of us."

Buck nodded and headed for his desk and Josiah turned his attention to Nathan.

"Nate, I think you should look into the forensics. Once we have a better idea of the methods used, I can get started on a profile."

"I'll see what I can find out about the explosives and start tracing them from this end," Nathan offered. "I don't think the police department is going to give us any trouble about it this time."

Josiah nodded. "I'm going to look into Vin's record with the Marshals and start checking to see if there's any word on the streets. Somebody has to know something."

The men went about their tasks, working the phones, computers, and fax machines in melancholy silence. Their furious efforts were as much to keep the grief at bay as to find their friends' killers. That was how Assistant Director Travis found them two hours later. So intent on their work were they that they never even noticed his arrival.

Travis smiled sadly at their quiet resolve. He was proud of 'his boys'. They were a motley crew of misfits who had found a place together and created a formidable team, despite the odds against them. Now, though, that team had been torn apart and he didn't

know if anything could ever pull them together again. He shared their grief and anger, as well as their desire for justice. The perpetrators of this vile act would get no quarter from any of them.

He cleared his throat and alerted them to his presence. "Boys," he greeted them, sadness evident in his voice. "I got the call a few hours ago. How are you holding up?"

"As well as we can," Josiah answered. "It's still so hard to believe."

"I know," Travis replied understandingly. "I called three other people just to verify what I was told before I could accept it. I still have to tell Mary...." He sighed and shook his head, knowing how badly she and Billy would react to the news.

"Lord, what about Miss Nettie?" Nathan gasped. "Someone should tell her before she sees it in the paper."

JD looked up at him guiltily. "Sorry, I should have remembered." The older woman worked as the office manager for the ATF's secretarial pool, and had developed a fondness for the men of Team Seven, especially Vin, who had known her since his high school days. JD had been spending time with Nettie's niece Casey, having met her at a barbecue her aunt had thrown for Vin after he had joined Team 7. He knew how hard it was going to be on the woman to hear that Vin and Chris had been killed.

"It's all right, JD," Travis consoled the distraught young man. "It's been a terrible time for all of us."

"I'll head over there right now," JD said disconsolately. "I want to tell her and Casey in person."

"I'll go with you, son," Josiah offered, knowing how difficult it was going to be for the younger man.

"Thanks, Josiah." JD's shoulders sagged with relief. He really didn't want to have to do this alone.

Travis watched the two men leave, not envying them their mission, since he would be facing the same situation shortly. "Do you have any idea who might be responsible for this?" Travis directed his question to Nathan.

"Not yet," Nathan replied.

"But we're on it, sir," Buck told him determinedly. "Nobody does this to our team and gets away with it." Nathan murmured in agreement, sharing the same purposeful look in his eyes.

"Where's Agent Standish?" Travis asked, nodding his head toward Ezra's empty desk.

"Don't know and don't care," Buck replied acidly.

Travis looked at him in surprise. "Why is that?"

"He was supposed to drive them home from the Saloon last night," Nathan said flatly. "If he had, they'd still be here."

"He doesn't even care enough to show up and help us find the bastards who did it," Buck added.

Travis frowned, looking again at Ezra's desk. He knew the undercover agent was standoffish at best, but he hadn't expected him to be such a coldhearted bastard in the face of such a tragedy. "We'll just see about that," he said finally, his stern tone of voice boding ill for the undercover agent.

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A horribly annoying beeping sound intruded upon his consciousness and Ezra swiped his arm out, searching for the non-existent alarm clock. It was Saturday, after all, and he wanted to sleep in. Something was tugging on his arm and he cracked an eye open to see what it was. What he saw in the dim light didn't make much sense at first, until he recognized the IV that was attached to his wrist and realized that he was in the hospital again.

"Aw hell," he mumbled to himself hoarsely, his throat dry and scratchy. He gazed blearily around the room, trying to remember why he was here. None of the others were here, which surprised him, since they had been quite obstinate about not leaving him alone the last time he had been hospitalized. Ezra looked down at his hand again, noticing the red, blistered patches on his skin. With a blinding flash of clarity, it all came back to him. He closed his eyes, reliving the explosion that killed Chris and Vin, and his friends' wrath afterward. "What have I done?" he asked himself in a pained whisper. Tears filled his eyes as Ezra let the anguish pour from him, quiet sobs wracking his body until he fell into an exhausted sleep.

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JD shuffled his feet nervously on the front porch of the small house. Only Josiah's comforting presence behind him kept him from bolting. The door finally opened, and Casey greeted him with a smile.

"Hi, JD," she said cheerily. "I wasn't expecting you today."

"Hi, Casey," he said, attempting a smile. "Can we come in?"

She glanced behind him at Josiah and nodded. "Sure. Is something wrong?" She noticed the unusually sober looks on their faces.

"Yeah," JD answered quietly. "Is Miz Nettie here?"

"Sure," Casey said, a worried look on her face. "I'll go get her."

"I hate this, Josiah," JD said despondently.

"I know, son." Josiah placed a comforting hand on the young agent's shoulder.

Casey returned, followed by Nettie, who eyed them curiously as she wiped her hands on her apron.

"What can I do for you boys?" Nettie asked.

"Um, I have something to tell you, ma'am," JD said uneasily.

Nettie looked from him to Josiah, a worried frown creasing her brow. "What happened?"

"It's Chris and Vin..." JD began. "They... they were killed last night in an explosion."

"No!" Casey exclaimed, covering her mouth with her hands, tears flooding her eyes.

"I'm afraid so," Josiah said soothingly.

"My boys..." Nettie murmured. "Oh my lord." She eased herself into a chair and looked at them sorrowfully. "How did it happen?"

"Someone put a bomb in Vin's car," JD explained. "We're trying to figure out who did it now."

"They didn't feel any pain," Josiah offered.

Casey sat down and began to cry. JD sat next to her and wrapped an arm around her shoulder.

"We wanted to tell you in person, before you heard about it on the news," Josiah said quietly.

"Thank you," Nettie said softly, wiping her eyes with the corner of her apron.

They sat in silence for a few minutes while Nettie and Casey absorbed the news.

"We need to get back," JD said finally. "We're gonna get the assholes who did this, don't you worry."

"I know you will, JD," Casey said confidently, smiling bravely through her tears.

It was a testimony to Nettie's grief that she didn't reprimand JD for his use of colorful language. "You do that, boys." She stood to usher them out the door. "You let me know if you need anything, you hear?"

"Yes, ma'am," JD said.

"Ma'am," Josiah nodded as she shut the door behind them.

As they walked to the car, Josiah said, "They'll be all right, JD. They're strong women."

"I know," JD said with a sigh. "I just wish they didn't have to be."

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At eight o'clock that evening, the four weary members of Team Seven filed slowly into the conference room carrying their armloads of research. The men unconsciously took their usual seats, painfully aware of the two empty seats near the head of the table and tossing disdainful glances at the empty chair at the other end.

Josiah rubbed his temples and took a deep breath. "So, what do we have?"

"I have a list of names of all of the people Chris has put behind bars since joining the ATF," JD began. "And, I also got a list of people that Vin brought in when he was a bounty hunter. I don't know how complete it is, since those bail bondsman guys don't keep the greatest records."

"Good job, JD," Nathan said approvingly. "We didn't even consider Vin's earlier history."

JD gave a faint smile, accepting the praise wordlessly.

"I got a list of most of the guys Chris put away when he worked for the PD," Buck offered. "Lt. Hawthorne is givin' me full access. Me and Chris were good friends with him when we were on the force." Buck looked at the rest of the group. "He's already runnin' down the names for me, to see which ones might be out of prison."

"I'm doin' the same thing with my list," JD said.

"Great," Josiah said appreciatively. "We need to get that narrowed down as soon as possible so we can have a place to start."

"Well, I've been checking into the explosives," Nathan said. "So far, the plastique can't be traced to any known suppliers."

"Home-grown?" asked Buck.

Nathan nodded. "Looks that way. People usually get it from military channels, but there's a few small players out there who brew up small batches of the stuff and sell it to any lowlife who can pay." Nathan's disgust was mirrored by the rest of the group.

"What about the rocket fuel?" asked JD.

"That one was easier. The forensics guys traced it to a company in Texas," Nathan explained. "Unfortunately, they have thousands of legitimate customers, since lots of manufacturers, universities, and fire departments use it for flammability and high-temperature testing." He sighed in frustration. "It could've been stolen from any one of those places, or ordered legally by someone masquerading as a legitimate customer."

"Damn!" Buck exclaimed, slamming his hand on the table. "Bastards covered their tracks pretty well, didn't they?"

"Yeah," Nathan admitted. He toyed with the manila folder in front of him for a moment before continuing. "I did get something else... the badge did belong to Vin, and... the blood type on the tooth matches Chris's. They're doing the dental records check now, but...."

The men all dropped their heads defeatedly. Finally, Josiah asked gently, "Anything else, Nate?"

"One other thing," he said quietly. "The explosives were apparently triggered by remote control. The cops found a few pieces of a remote circuit that were thrown clear of the fire -- enough to confirm it."

"Assholes probably wanted to get far enough away so they could watch without getting caught in the explosion," Buck growled.

"Probably," Josiah agreed. "Explosives are often used by those who don't like to get their hands dirty, but they often like to admire their own work."

"Cowards," Nathan stated with disgust.

"Precisely." Josiah nodded. "The violence of an explosion signifies great anger and hatred, possibly building gradually over time until it demands violent release."

"Sounds like someone who's been stewin' in prison for awhile, waiting for revenge," JD pondered aloud.

Josiah nodded again. "They've taken the time to plan this thoroughly, so we're dealing with someone intelligent and meticulous... and very dangerous. Which is why we need to pare down that list, in case they decide to target the rest of us."

The others looked up abruptly in stunned silence. They hadn't considered that they themselves might be in danger. "Damn," Nathan muttered, rubbing his brow in consternation.

Buck jumped up from the table. "Well, let's get to it. I want these fuckers."

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"Mr. Standish?" The voice sounded far away, barely penetrating the swirling fog in his brain. "Mr. Standish, can you hear me?" Ezra groaned and rolled his head toward the voice. He tried to pry his eyes open, but they felt as if they were made of lead. "That's it," the voice encouraged. "Open your eyes." After several more attempts, Ezra finally opened his eyes slowly, blinking against the brightness of the room.

The blurry form in front of him finally resolved itself into the attractive features of Dr. Beth Landry, who had attended him during his last visit to the hospital. "Wha'..." Ezra attempted to speak, but his throat felt like sandpaper.

"Here," the doctor said, bringing a straw to his lips.

Ezra sipped greedily at the cool water, enjoying the soothing feel of it on his throat.

She pulled the cup away and asked, "How are you feeling?"

"Like I have been trampled by a herd of cattle," Ezra replied hoarsely.

Dr. Landry chuckled. "Well, you have taken quite a beating. The explosion that caught you yesterday morning managed to break several of your ribs as well as give you some quite spectacular bruises."

"Lovely," Ezra muttered.

"You've also got some minor burns on your hands and face, and we removed several pieces of shrapnel from your chest and legs."

Ezra arched a brow in surprise. "Shrapnel?"

The doctor regarded him somberly. "Yes. Several pieces of the vehicle that exploded lodged themselves in your body."

"Oh."

"Those were the least of your problems, though," Dr. Landry continued. "Apparently, you had a rather violent impact with a tree -- presumably the one that broke your ribs -- and suffered a puncture wound to your lower back."

Ezra nodded knowingly, remembering the pain he had felt after hitting a pothole during his drive. "How bad?"

"Bad enough," she said with a wry smile. "It went deep enough to nick the renal artery." She gave him a stern look. "You almost bled to death in my waiting room. You're very lucky it was a small puncture or you wouldn't have made it here in time."

Ezra paled, realizing how close he had come to dying. "I didn't think it was that serious."

"Shock will do that, Agent Standish. Traumatic events can leave one numb to pain." Her gaze softened and she regarded him sympathetically. "The explosion made the papers today. I'm sorry about your friends."

He turned away, not wanting her to witness the grief that he was too weak to hide. "When am I allowed to depart?"

She frowned at him, but understood his desire to leave. "You need to stay for at least a week. We cleaned a lot of dirt, bark, and wood splinters out of your wound, and we need to make sure it stays clear of infection and that your kidney function isn't impaired."

Ezra turned to face her, prepared to argue, but the look on her face told him that it was futile. With a resigned sigh, he nodded his head slowly. "I suppose that would be best."

"Do you want me to call anyone for you?" She was concerned by his easy capitulation to her directives, since he hadn't been nearly so cooperative the last time he had been under her care.

"No!" he said determinedly. "It's too dangerous."

"Very well," Dr. Landry agreed reluctantly. "We have you registered as William Fredericks, so no one should be able to find you here."

"Thank you," Ezra said sincerely.

She smiled. "Try to get some rest... and don't give my nurses a hard time."

"I shall be on my best behavior," he replied with a halfhearted smile. The doctor left and Ezra closed his eyes, trying to ignore the horror movie that was playing in an endless loop inside his head.

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JD lifted his head and blinked owlishly, looking around the strangely quiet office. Josiah, Nathan, and Buck were all sprawled in various positions at their desks, sound asleep. They had been working virtually nonstop for three days, only returning home to shower and change clothes. After their immediate and vehement refusal to let another team handle the investigation, AD Travis had relented and redistributed their current cases among the other teams, who were more than happy to do their part. Other teams were still working on the case, but no one had found any solid leads yet. They had eliminated all of the criminals still in prison or dead, but were left with more than forty names to track down. The investigation was going nowhere fast and all four of them were feeling the frustration.

It didn't help that Ezra had seemingly disappeared; no one had seen him and he had not returned any phone calls. Travis was furious at his wayward agent's behavior and had put an APB out on him, threatening to have him arrested the moment he showed his face. JD found he had little sympathy for his fellow agent, despite the fact that he had always before given him the benefit of the doubt. Ezra's seemingly callous behavior in this case left little room for compassion.

JD stood slowly and stretched, making his way over to Vin's desk. Morosely, he stared at the various knickknacks that adorned the sharpshooter's workstation. Reaching out his hand, he picked up a tiny plastic dinosaur that stood watch over Vin's computer monitor. It was one of several that he had collected over the past weeks, once he had discovered that they were being given away with the kiddie meals at his favorite burger joint. JD smiled, remembering Vin's childlike excitement over the little toys. Tears suddenly clouded his vision, and he set the purple reptile back in its position on the desk as the deep ache of grief overwhelmed him. He heard sounds of one of the others stirring and quickly moved back to his own desk, swiping angrily at the tears that streaked his face.

Josiah opened his eyes in time to see JD's hasty retreat and he felt a pang in his chest at the expression on the young man's face. Losing Chris and Vin had been hard on all of them, but especially on JD, who practically worshiped the two men. He was surprised that the young agent had held up so well.

Stretching his weary bones, Josiah stood and approached JD. "How are you doing, JD?"

"Okay, I guess," JD said with a shrug. "I really miss them, ya know?"

"I know, son," Josiah said soothingly. "So do I."

"An' I'm really pissed at Ezra," JD sniffed angrily. "Why isn't he here? What's the matter with him, anyway? I mean, first he lets Chris and Vin drive drunk, then he acts like he doesn't give a damn."

"I don't know, son," Josiah said. "I think maybe he just can't handle the situation. Running is the only way he knows how to deal with something like this. He may even be afraid to face us after what happened at the scene."

"Well, I think it sucks," JD stated firmly. "He should be here with the rest of us, not off hiding somewhere."

Josiah sighed. "I agree with you, JD, but there isn't much we can do until he decides to come back."

"\*If\* he comes back," Nathan added darkly as he woke from his fitful slumber. "I doubt he has the guts to show his face around here again."

"We'll see," Josiah said quietly.

Buck awoke with a start, nearly falling out of his chair. "Huh?" he said dazedly.

"Nothing, Buck," JD assured him. "We're just talking."

"Oh." Buck ran a hand through his already-mussed hair. "Anything new?"

"No," JD said dejectedly. "Nothing but dead ends so far."

"We'll get them," Nathan said quietly. "No matter how many rocks we have to turn over."

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Ezra was restless as he stared out the window at the waning daylight. He had been lying in this hospital bed for nearly four days, alone with his thoughts, which was not a place he particularly wanted to be right now. Guilt and grief combined to overwhelm him, and Ezra knew he had to leave and go somewhere, anywhere, to get away from these feelings and think. He wouldn't be able to investigate the bombing very effectively if his mind was clouded with emotions.

His remaining teammates were likely even more furious than they had been before, and Ezra didn't relish the thought of facing them. It was something that he would have to do eventually, but right now, he didn't have the strength -- physically or mentally -- to withstand their fury. They were probably working tirelessly to apprehend the scum who had taken their friends from them, but Ezra didn't think his help would be accepted, even if he had the courage to offer it. He would have to undertake his own investigation, if only for his own peace of mind.

His mind made up, Ezra pushed the call button, determined to effect his release from the hospital. The nurse finally responded to his call, and he quietly requested that the doctor be summoned. Dr. Landry arrived an hour later and stopped just inside the door, frowning and placing her hands on her hips.

"What do you think you're doing?" she demanded when she saw that he had removed his IV and was sitting fully-dressed on the edge of the bed.

Ezra pasted his most charming smile on his face. "I'm feeling much better and I would like to be discharged."

Dr. Landry favored him with a hard glare and Ezra smirked slightly, thinking that it didn't even come close to being as threatening as the infamous 'Larabee Glare'. But thinking of his late boss wiped the smile from his face and threatened to shatter his fragile self-control.

"Not four days ago, you had a hole punched in your back and nearly bled to death," she said firmly. "You need rest and care."

"I need to get out of here," Ezra said quietly. "The murderous cretins who killed Mr. Larabee and Mr. Tanner are still at large, and I must do as much as I can to bring them to justice." He looked at her beseechingly. "I cannot do that here."

His plea touched her heart, and Dr. Landry knew that he would leave with or without her sanction. "All right," she relented. "Let me get you some prescriptions before you go. There's still a high risk of infection, so you'll need to continue the antibiotics." She started to leave then paused at the door. "You still have to take care of yourself and get plenty of rest. That means you eat properly, no strenuous activity, no drinking, and no driving."

"Driving? But..."

"Driving will be too hard on your back," she interrupted. "You don't want to start bleeding again, do you?"

Ezra sighed reluctantly. "Very well, then. No driving."

"Good," Dr. Landry said with a smile. "I'll be back shortly with your prescriptions."

"Thank you," Ezra said, visibly relieved at his forthcoming emancipation.

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As he stared out the window of the taxi, Ezra's thoughts turned once again to his fallen comrades. The questions swirled through his mind. Who had killed them and for what reason? Was the rest of the team in danger, as he had implied to the medical staff at the hospital? Why had he been spared? Had the explosion occurred a few seconds later, he would have been killed along with Chris and Vin. Ezra shuddered at the thought, then turned his mind to the question that plagued him the most. What could he have done differently? If only... Ezra shook his head to drive those thoughts away. There would be

plenty of time to wallow in guilt and self-doubt later. Now, however, he had miscreants to find.

Ezra directed the cab to drop him off at the rear of his apartment building. He didn't want to be seen entering the building, in case his associates were watching for his arrival in order to inflict more abuse upon him. Instead, he slipped inside via the service entrance and made his way up to his own apartment. Once inside, he sank gratefully onto his overstuffed sofa, surprised at how tiring the ride home had been. The familiar surroundings were soothing, but Ezra knew he couldn't stay. There was too great a chance that his teammates would find him here, and he wasn't ready to deal with them just yet. Reluctantly, he stood and made his way to the bedroom to pack a bag.

In the hall, Ezra noticed the light on his answering machine blinking furiously. Though he knew what the messages would say, he pressed the button anyway and listened as, one after the other, Nathan, Buck, Josiah, and even JD, left repeated, scathing messages for him. He hung his head in dismay. Even though he had expected them to have this attitude, he had still carried some small hope that they might have forgiven him. Ezra gazed at the stack of moving boxes that stood in the corner of his living room. Maybe it was a good thing that he hadn't unpacked them yet.

He was about to resume his progress to the bedroom, when the final message halted him in his tracks. It was AD Travis, reprimanding him for his absence and demanding his appearance at the office in no uncertain terms. Ezra sadly switched off the machine. He couldn't bear to face the rest of his team, let alone the Assistant Director. Hell, he probably didn't even have a job anymore. Morosely, Ezra plodded the rest of the way to his bedroom and quietly packed his things as he decided what he was going to do.

Once his bag was packed, the weariness seemed to hit him full-force, and Ezra folded himself onto his soft mattress. "Just a few minutes," he mumbled to himself as he pulled the comforter around him. He would rest for a few minutes, then he would leave. With a sigh, he sank into a dreamless sleep.

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"Freeze! ATF!" Buck shouted at the fleeing figure as he chased him down the hallway of the decrepit apartment building. Trash littered the stained linoleum floor and the entire corridor reeked of cigarette smoke, stale food and urine. Buck ignored his surroundings, focused only on the suspect he was chasing.

Harold Stiles was an intelligent, squirrely man who Chris had arrested for bank robbery and murder while working with the Denver Police ten years earlier. The man was an electronics expert who had bypassed complex security systems in order to break himself and two accomplices into a bank in the early morning hours before it opened. The thieves hadn't counted on the security guard showing up early and had killed him while trying to escape.

Chris had been on his way to the station for his morning shift when he heard the call and responded. He had arrived in time to intercept the three robbers and had been able to stall their escape until backup arrived. Stiles had managed to slip away during the confusion of the other officers' arrival at the scene. He would have gotten away, but for Chris, who had seen him, followed him into an alley, and shot him when the smaller man had turned his gun on him.

Stiles had been vocal in his threats against Chris and also fit the profile Josiah had compiled. The men of Team Seven had felt a growing excitement when they had discovered that the paroled felon had missed his last two meetings with his parole officer. Finally, they had a solid suspect.

They had tracked him to the home of a girlfriend, who claimed he wasn't even there, but Buck and the others hadn't believed her. Instead, they pretended to leave, waiting out of sight for the man to sneak out of the apartment. Stiles didn't disappoint them and nearly ran into Buck as he tried to slip out the back entrance to the building.

Buck had begun chasing him up and down the stairs and hallways of the building, while the others blocked the exits. Stiles showed no signs of tiring as he turned down another corridor. As Buck rounded the corner after him, he spotted the fugitive at the end of the hall, frantically pushing on a window. But the window had been painted shut and Buck caught up with him, tackling him to the floor with a crash. Stiles struggled under his weight, but Buck wasn't about to let him go. Venting some of his anger, Buck sent his fist crashing into the man's face.

"Buck!" JD called as he rushed toward his partner. "That's enough! He can't tell us anything if he's unconscious!"

Buck stopped and looked up at the younger man, noting the near-panic in his eyes, and released the semi-conscious man from his grasp. "Sorry kid. Guess I lost it for a minute."

"S'okay Buck," JD said, relief apparent on his face. "Come on, let's get 'im out of here."

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The federal building seemed deserted as Ezra quietly entered the lobby at 2:00 AM. The guards allowed him to pass through the security station without any difficulty. He took the elevator to the eighth floor, which housed many of the administrative offices, including that of AD Travis. Verifying that no one was about, he made his way quietly to the Assistant Director's office, making short work of the lock on the door with the lockpicks he had concealed in his wallet. He let his eyes adjust to the darkness before approaching the large oak desk that sat in front of the windows. Giving them one last defeated look, Ezra dropped his badge and his service weapon on the desk before leaving as quietly as he had entered.

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Ezra drove the rental car along the mountain road. After packing several days' worth of clothing, toiletries, and cash, he had taken another cab to a rental agency, where, knowing that the doctor would disapprove, he had rented a sport-utility vehicle. Winter weather was only a few weeks away, and Ezra had learned to be prepared, especially when driving anywhere near the mountains. He didn't really have a destination mind. All he knew was that he needed to get away from Denver and find someplace unfamiliar, where he could clear his head and not be reminded of his late companions at every turn.

It was nearing dawn, and though he hadn't been driving for too long, Ezra began to feel an ache in his back as he guided his vehicle along the quiet highway. He passed a sign indicating a town ten miles further up the road and decided that it was as good a place as any to spend the day. As he reached the outskirts of town, he saw a sign for one of the better chain hotels and turned into the parking lot gratefully.

It took some persuasion, but Ezra finally convinced the desk clerk to allow him to pay in cash for several days in advance. He had been forced to use a backup credit card in another name -- an alias he maintained in case of emergencies -- to rent the car, but he wanted to minimize how much computerized information was available about his activities. He knew how good JD was with a computer and didn't want to chance having his credit card traced to this location. He didn't even bother to unpack when he reached his room, instead crawling into one of the two queen-size beds and falling asleep instantly.

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"So, are you enjoying your stay?" the man asked, an ugly sneer on his face.

Chris Larabee glared up at him through the one eye that wasn't swollen shut. "Fuck you, Jarvis!" he snarled.

Raymond Jarvis laughed. "You really must work on your social skills, Larabee," he said. "You won't win any points with that kind of attitude."

"I won't need any points when my men get their hands on you," Chris said icily.

Jarvis chuckled smugly. "What makes you think they're even looking for you?"

"I know my men," Chris said simply.

"Ah, but I know something you don't," Jarvis said, wagging his finger at Chris.

"And what would that be?" Chris demanded.

Jarvis looked at him for a moment, debating whether or not he should tell him. He had been enjoying Larabee's defiance, knowing that his men's continued absence must be gnawing at him. Still, the complete loss of hope when he heard the truth, should be well worth it. He broke into a broad grin.

"At this very moment, your men are running around like the proverbial chickens with their heads cut off, looking for your murderers." Jarvis waited for the information to register. At the shocked look on Chris's face, he laughed again. "That's right, Larabee. Your men think you and the hippie over there are dead -- blown up in that wreck of a jeep. Why else do you think I had my boys yank that tooth out of your head?"

Chris grimaced, remembering how the goons had tied him to the table in the outer room and pulled his rearmost right upper molar out with a pair of rubber-coated pliers. He was never going to complain about getting Novocain shots again.

"I even made sure there was a witness. Of course the bodies weren't yours -- just a couple of homeless guys with the right age, build, and blood types."

"You bastard!" Chris snarled.

"Oh, it gets better," Jarvis snickered. "The witness just happened to be your undercover man, Standish. I waited until he got close enough to see your bodies before I blew them up. Though, he never got close enough to see that it wasn't really you. And with the rocket fuel I added to the mix, there won't be anything else left to dispute that it wasn't the two of you in that jeep."

Chris lunged at him but was halted by a kick to his chest, imparted by one of Jarvis's two thugs. He fell backward, the shackles that encircled his wrists clanking on the cement floor.

"I've been keeping an eye on all of your men," Jarvis continued, as if Chris had never moved. "My men have had them under constant surveillance for the past few weeks. It was quite amusing to see the grief-stricken looks on their faces after your 'deaths'. All except Standish, that is." Jarvis shook his head in puzzlement. "We lost track of him right after the explosion last Saturday. He's a slippery son of a bitch, isn't he?" he said with a chuckle. "Of course, it's not surprising that he disappeared, considering the way the rest of your boys laid into him."

Jarvis walked over to where Vin lay motionless on the floor. Nudging him with his foot, he continued his monologue. "You see, the rest of your 'magnificent ones' blame Standish for what happened to you. Wilmington beat the crap out of him when he arrived at the scene. It was rather entertaining, I must say."

He paused and looked Chris in the eye. "I have to leave for a few days to attend to some business. When I return on Monday, we'll conclude our little game. I'll let you think

about the many ways that I might kill you. Oh, and in case you get any ideas about trying to leave this party early, Walter here has a small parting gift for you."

The large man to his right smiled evilly as he drew out a large handgun. Aiming carefully, he fired first at Vin and then at Chris, hitting each man in the thigh. "That should slow 'em down, Mr. Jarvis," Walter said with a laugh.

"I'm not completely heartless," Jarvis said, tossing them several packages of Twinkies and Ring-Dings. "I wouldn't want you to expire from hunger before I return."

Chris shot him the most evil glare he could manage.

As Jarvis left the room, he tossed over his shoulder, "There will be no cavalry coming to the rescue this time, Larabee."

Chris rolled on the floor, reaching for his wounded leg as best he could with his hands cuffed behind his back, finally giving up the futile effort. He clumsily tore a strip off the bottom of his shirt and, with much difficulty and cursing, crawled to Vin's side and tied it around the bullet wound in the other man's leg. His own wound would have to wait. It worried him greatly that Vin had not even reacted when he had been shot. Chris placed a hand on his friend's forehead then leaned against the wall helplessly. The news that Jarvis had imparted dashed any hopes he had of being rescued, leaving it up to them to escape on their own. Considering their current physical conditions, it was a daunting prospect.

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It was late afternoon when Ezra finally awoke. Sleepily, he turned over, then sucked in a breath as a bolt of pain shot through his back. "Damn." He was long overdue for one of his pain pills and his body was making sure he knew about it. Clenching his teeth against the pain, Ezra carefully pushed himself upright and eased off of the bed to his feet, making his way toward his luggage and the pain relief that resided within.

After a shower, Ezra felt somewhat refreshed and decided to visit the small cafe on the ground floor of the hotel. He hadn't eaten in more than twenty-four hours and, though he wasn't particularly hungry, he decided he should comply with at least one of the doctor's orders. The painkillers had begun to kick in, and Ezra was able to dress quickly, donning a faded pair of jeans and a soft cotton sweater.

As he sat sipping his cup of coffee, Ezra unfolded the newspaper he had picked up in the gift shop, freezing when he saw the pictures on the bottom half of the front page. Slowly, he lowered his mug to the table and stared at the images of his two late associates. The bombing was apparently still front-page news and Ezra forced himself to read the accompanying article despite his churning emotions.

The police had made little progress on the case and Ezra knew the frustration had to be weighing heavily upon his teammates, almost as heavily as the guilt that weighed upon his own head. He could almost picture them, hard at work and foregoing food and sleep in their pursuit of the perpetrators of this heinous crime against two of their own. His expression hardened and Ezra decided that it was time for him to join the pursuit in his own fashion. He had a few resources that not even the others knew about and figured it was time to call in a few favors.

\*\*\*

"Dammit!" Buck shouted, launching his fist at the wall. The plaster gave way under the blow, leaving a gaping hole in the wall once he removed his bloody hand.

"Shit, Buck!" Nathan said as he hurried toward his injured friend. "That ain't helping anything."

"I know," Buck said, blowing out a frustrated breath. "I really thought we had the right guy."

"So did we, brother." Josiah squeezed the other man's shoulder comfortingly. "But he has an airtight alibi."

They had spent hours that day interrogating Harold Stiles, the suspect they had apprehended the night before, until his lawyer had arrived, complete with alibi. They had been forced to release him and had even been threatened with false arrest and brutality charges.

"We're back to square one, and we've wasted all damn day on a dead end," Buck said angrily while Nathan dabbed antiseptic on his knuckles.

"We'll get 'em, Buck," JD said encouragingly. "We have to."

"Yes, you will. But not like that," the humorless voice of AD Travis said from across the bullpen. "You boys are just lucky that we could get Stiles on parole violations, otherwise we could be facing one hell of a lawsuit." He sighed, pinching the bridge of his nose. "I want the bastards who did this just as much as you do, but we have to do it by the book. You wouldn't want to catch up with them and then have to let them go due to a technicality, would you?"

"No sir," JD said.

"Putting your fist through the wall isn't going to help much either, Agent Wilmington," Travis said pointedly.

Buck looked up at the Assistant Director sheepishly. "Sorry sir. I guess I got carried away."

Travis studied the men before him. All of them had dark circles under their eyes and looked as though they hadn't slept or had a decent meal in days -- which they probably hadn't. He admired their determination, but even strong men like these had their limits.

"I want you boys to go home and get some rest. Get a decent meal while you're at it, too." He halted their protests with a raised hand. "You aren't going to do any good if you get sloppy and can't think straight. Don't forget, you still might be targets yourselves." He looked each of them in the eye intently. "I'd hate to lose any of you because you're simply too tired to watch your backs."

"He's right, guys," Nathan agreed. "We're running on fumes right now, and I, for one, really need to recharge."

The others nodded reluctantly in agreement.

Travis smiled. "I don't want to see any of you in here until tomorrow morning... \*late\*, tomorrow morning."

"That won't be a problem, sir," JD said. "I'm so tired I could sleep for a week."

"Good." Travis turned to leave.

"Sir," Josiah called after him. "Is there any word on Ezra?"

Travis looked down at his hands before turning to reply. "He was seen in the building at 2:00 AM. He left his badge and gun on my desk."

Nathan snorted derisively. "I always knew that southern bastard would run out on us again."

"The man don't care about anyone but himself," Buck muttered angrily.

Josiah shook his head sadly. He had hoped the cocky undercover agent would have returned by now, but it seemed unlikely now that he had turned in his badge and gun. He had watched the young man closely during his tenure with the team and had come to realize that the cool exterior that he presented the world protected a fragile soul that had been hurt before. Running away was simply his way of protecting himself from another painful confrontation. Josiah knew, too, that their treatment of him after the explosion hadn't helped matters any. He was still angry with the younger man, but finding the murderers was more important than placing blame, for the time being.

"I've still got people looking for him," Travis stated. "I'll let you know if I hear anything." He turned again to leave. "Oh, and if he happens to contact any of you, make sure you tell him that I want to see him... and that the funeral is on Saturday."

"We will," JD answered solemnly.

Nathan looked around the other three men, who were all staring silently at each other. "You guys want to go get some dinner?"

"Yeah, I'm starved," JD replied.

"Mario's?" Buck suggested. "I could really go for some veal Parmesan right now."

"Sounds good to me," Josiah agreed.

"Let's go," Nathan said as he pushed himself off the edge of Buck's desk. The four men gathered their coats and headed for the elevator.

\*\*\*

As he sat shivering in the damp room, Chris recalled what had happened after they left the Saloon that fateful evening.

*He and Vin were beyond drunk. They sat, unmoving, at the table while Ezra and Nathan half-carried their companions to Nathan's car. When he realized that Ezra was going to drive them home, Vin had grinned mischievously and whispered his plan to Chris. The moment Ezra disappeared into the bathroom, the two of them lurched their way outside, planning to hide behind the dapper man's Jaguar and jump him while he was searching frantically for them. It was a really lame joke, Chris realized once he was sober, but in their drunken state, they had found it hilarious.*

*Everything had gone wrong, though, the moment they stepped out the door. Strong hands had grabbed them, pressing sweet-smelling cloths over their faces. After that, they were apparently stuffed into a vehicle and driven to this miserable place. Jarvis had been there, a self-satisfied grin on his face, when they had awakened in chains. Chris hadn't recognized him at first, a fact that had irritated Jarvis to no end. The man had finally identified himself, and Chris realized then that they were in very big trouble.*

*Raymond Jarvis was the older brother of a man Chris had arrested when he was still a rookie with the Police Department, before being partnered with Buck. Reginald Jarvis had been convicted on multiple rape and murder charges. Some of his victims had been children, a fact that earned him a great deal of animosity in prison. Even the most hardened criminals took a dim view of those who molested children, and eventually, Reginald Jarvis's crimes caught up with him. He was dead, killed in a fight in the cafeteria by a fellow inmate who had himself been a victim of child molestation.*

*Chris remembered Raymond Jarvis from his brother's trial. The man had insisted that his brother was innocent, and had sent more than one threatening glance in Chris's direction during the trial. Reginald's death had occurred more than five years ago, and Chris had long since forgotten Raymond Jarvis... until now. His actions thus far*

*surprised Chris, because his initial impression of Raymond had been that of a wealthy, upstanding businessman. The man owned a very successful textiles business and spent most of his time overseas, and, despite the animosity he had shown at the trial, Chris had not envisioned the vengeful tyrant he appeared to have become.*

*Jarvis had made great sport of having his hired goons beat on Vin while forcing Chris to watch helplessly. That hadn't been enough to satisfy him, though, and his thugs had spent a great deal of time practicing their art on Chris as well. He and Vin both were suffering from broken ribs and bruises, and were growing weaker due to lack of food and exposure in the unheated room where they were imprisoned. Jarvis had only fed them once, two days ago, and that meal had been meager at best.*

Vin began to stir, rousing Chris from his reverie. "Vin? Can you hear me?"

In response, Vin groaned and tried to roll to his side. "Chris?"

"Don't try to move," Chris warned.

"Damn, my head hurts," Vin complained.

"Yeah, he walloped you good," Chris said with a slight chuckle.

Vin opened his eyes and met Chris' concerned gaze. "Ya look like hell, cowboy," he said hoarsely.

Chris smirked at him. "You ain't lookin' so hot yourself."

Vin gave him a pained smile, his perceptive eyes coming to rest on the large patch of blood soaking through his friend's jeans. "What happened?" he asked, his voice heavy with concern.

"Jarvis is going away for a few days and he didn't want us getting any ideas," Chris answered coldly. "You have a matching hole in your own leg, in case you haven't noticed." Chris nodded toward Vin's bandage.

"Aw hell. Like stealing our shoes wasn't bad enough," Vin moaned. "I'm really starting to hate that son of a bitch."

"Yeah, well, that's not the worst of it..." Chris related what Jarvis had told him about the rest of their team.

"Shit!" Vin said heatedly. "If I ever get my hands on him..."

"You'll have to get in line behind me," Chris said in a voice that promised retribution.

"We have to get out of here."

"Yeah," Chris agreed. "Any ideas?"

"One," Vin replied, flashing him a mischievous smile. "Help me get my belt off."

Chris raised an eyebrow curiously, but did as he was asked. It took a few minutes to remove the heavy leather belt, since his hands were cuffed behind his back, as were Vin's. He handed it to Vin, who had managed to raise himself to a seated position, leaning against the wall. "What now?"

"Gimme a minute," he said, concentrating on his task. A triumphant smile crossed his face and Vin then rolled to the side to show Chris what he had retrieved from the hidden pocket in his belt.

"Lockpick?" Chris said appreciatively, the corners of his mouth turning up in a smile. "You know what to do with that?"

"Course," Vin said as he began working on the heavy cuffs on his wrists.

Chris snorted. "You've been spending too much time with Ezra."

"Hey, I knew how to pick locks long 'fore I met Ezra," Vin said with mock indignation. "He's just helpin' me to 'hone mah skills'."

Chris chuckled at Vin's impression of the cocky southerner. "So why didn't you use your \*skills\* earlier?"

"Hell, Chris. There was always at least one of 'em out there all the time. Even if I let us loose, they woulda been on us 'fore we got too far."

"Good point," Chris agreed.

With a grunt, Vin released one of his wrists and slowly brought his arms around to the front. "Damn that feels good." He shook his arms out for a moment then moved behind Chris and began working on his shackles. Within minutes, Chris was free and stretching his arms carefully.

"Are you going to get that other one off?" Chris pointed to the shackle that still encircled Vin's right wrist.

"Nah, I can't do it left-handed," he said with a sheepish shrug. "I can get it off later, once we're outta this hell hole."

"Here," Chris tossed him some of the junk food Jarvis had left. "Jarvis was being 'generous'."

"Great, I'm starved," Vin said as he tore into the packages.

"It's a 'poor excuse for sustenance', as Ezra would say," Chris grumbled as he bit into the sugary cakes. "I'd much rather have a big, juicy steak."

"Shut up, Chris," Vin complained. "You're just makin' me hungrier."

"Yeah, well, dinner's on me when we get back home."

"You're on," Vin agreed. "So what're we waiting for?"

Anxious to leave himself, Chris nodded in agreement. "Any ideas on how we're going to get out of here?"

"I've been thinkin' on it, an' I only see one option." He grimaced and looked Chris in the eye. "You ain't gonna like it -- hell, I don't even like it."

"What?" Chris demanded.

Vin gave him an apologetic look and pointed upward.

Chris looked to where he indicated and snorted incredulously. "You've got to be kidding."

Vin lifted his hands in a helpless gesture. "I'm open to suggestions, cowboy."

Chris sighed and scanned the room hopefully. It was small, about ten foot square, with no windows and four walls of solid concrete, interrupted only by the entry door, which was locked from the outside, and the door to the tiny, windowless bathroom that was attached to it. He looked up once again and groaned at the thought of trying to squeeze their way out through the ventilation ducts. The opening appeared large enough, but it was going to be exceedingly painful to utilize it with cracked ribs and bullet wounds.

"You want to go first?" Chris asked.

"Be easier for you to boost me up, seein's how I'm lighter than you," Vin reasoned. "Gotta get that cover off first, though."

Chris pursed his lips in thought then reluctantly agreed. "Why don't you get up on my shoulders?"

"Kay."

Chris lowered himself gingerly to one knee, gritting his teeth against the pain in his ribs and leg. Moving stiffly, Vin eased his way onto Chris's shoulders. Taking a deep breath,

Chris slowly stood, allowing Vin to reach the ventilation grille. "Ya might wanna hurry, Vin," Chris urged, breathing shallowly.

"Almost got it," Vin said, working the screws furiously with the flat end of his lockpick. "Watch your head," he said as the grille dropped to the floor with a metallic clatter.

Chris grunted as the weight on his shoulders shifted and then blessedly disappeared. He raised his head in time to see Vin's legs disappearing into the narrow hole. There was some noisy shuffling as Vin inched his way backward in the shaft, and finally his head and arms appeared in the opening.

"Care to join me, cowboy?" Vin grinned down at his scowling friend.

"You sure you can pull me up?" Chris asked doubtfully.

"Got no choice," he said firmly. "Don't know if I can get the door open on the other side, and I sure as hell ain't leaving you here." He reached both of his arms down, grasping his blond friend's forearms tightly.

Chris reciprocated the gesture, feeling the trembling of Vin's muscles as he slowly hauled him upward. When he was close enough, he gripped the edge of the opening and pulled himself into the dark shaft. With a powerful and painful lunge, Chris drew his legs the rest of the way into the passage and inched his way forward to allow Vin some room to move.

"Y'okay up there, Chris?" Vin asked.

"Ow."

Vin chortled. "I'll take that as a yes."

"Vin?"

"Yeah?"

"Let's not do this again."

"Ya get no argument from me," Vin answered. "How's about we get out of here now?" He hated enclosed spaces, and this was about as enclosed as it got.

Chris didn't reply, but began crawling along the dusty ductwork as quickly as he could, knowing Vin's phobia of small spaces. Progress was slow, though, since there wasn't much room to move and they were forced to rely on the smaller movements of their hands and feet to propel themselves forward.

Vin sneezed at the dust being stirred up in Chris' wake. "Shit, I feel like a goddamn snake slitherin' through the dirt," Vin muttered, then sneezed again violently.

"Cheer up, we're almost out." Then, with obvious mirth in his voice, "I see light at the end of the tunnel."

Vin groaned. "Fuckin' smartass. Thinks he's a comedian," he grumbled sarcastically. Chris's forward progress halted abruptly and Vin suddenly found his nose pressed against the bottom of his foot. "Damn, Larabee. Ya gotta change your socks more often."

"You ain't exactly Mr. Sunshine Fresh yourself," Chris retorted.

"What'cha doin' up there, anyway?" Vin grouched. "Ain't no time to be taking a nap."

"I have to get these screws out," Chris said with a grunt. "Not easy doing it from this side."

Vin mumbled a reply and laid his head on his outstretched arms while he waited. A few minutes later, a clanging noise announced Chris's success and he wasted no time in continuing forward. Vin followed, stopping when his fingers encountered open space. He waited with barely-concealed impatience as his lanky friend squirmed his way quickly through the hole, landing with a muffled thump on the floor below.

"All yours, Vin," Chris called in a pained voice. "Watch that first step, though. It's a doozy."

Peering through the rectangular hole, Vin grimaced at the sight of his friend sprawled on the floor, clutching his injured leg. "Y'best move 'fore I land on you."

Chris rolled out of the way and Vin quickly wriggled his way out of the ductwork, landing in a heap next to him.

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While he waited for his laptop computer to start up, Ezra picked up the phone and dialed a number. "Mr. Morrison? It's Ezra Standish."

"Ezra! How good to hear from you," the other man returned his greeting amiably. "How is that lovely mother of yours?"

"Maude is... Maude, as you well know," Ezra replied noncommittally.

"Yes, I remember," Morrison said with a laugh. "So what have you been doing with yourself? I heard you transferred to the ATF?"

"Bruce, I wish this were a social call," Ezra said with a sigh. "... but I really need some information."

"Ah yes, the unpleasant incident with your fellow agents, I assume?" Bruce asked. "I read about it in the paper. I didn't know you were close to them."

"I'm afraid so. No one has made any progress in locating the miscreants who perpetrated this atrocity, and I was hoping you might ask a few discreet questions."

"For you, my friend, I'll do this," Bruce said sincerely.

"You know I wouldn't ask if it weren't important," Ezra explained.

"Yes, I know," Bruce answered with a chuckle. "I'm glad you called me. I would do the same if someone had done this to my friends."

"I believe you would do much worse," Ezra said slyly.

Bruce laughed. "You know me too well, especially for a federal agent." Then, on a more serious note, "I will do what I can."

"Call my cell phone," Ezra replied, reciting the number. "Again, I thank you for your assistance."

"You take care, my friend."

Ezra clicked off his phone, feeling a small ember of hope sparking in his weary soul. Bruce Morrison, a.k.a. Bruno Morelli, had dated his mother years earlier. He was one of a very few of Maude's paramours that he had actually liked, especially after Bruce had revealed his real name upon discovering that Ezra was an FBI agent. His father was Pasquale Morelli, a noted member of a New York organized crime family, and Bruce had not wanted Ezra to get into any trouble via association with him.

Bruce had changed his name and moved to California, determined to make his own way in the legitimate business world. His father had given him his blessing, since he had three other sons to take up the 'family business', and though he was no longer a part of that world, Bruce remained under their protection. Maude's relationship with the man hadn't lasted very long, but Ezra had kept in touch, admiring Bruce's determination to have his own life.

Bruce had occasionally called him with information regarding other crime family activities, though never his own. They were still his relatives after all. Ezra had only requested his help once, when his cover had been compromised on an important assignment and the FBI had accused him of blowing the bust on purpose. Bruce's information had saved his career... that time. Now, though, Ezra hoped that he might be able to get a lead on this case. Bruce still knew who all the players were, and if there was

any information to be had, he would have a better chance of finding it than anyone else Ezra knew.

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Vin scanned the room in which they had landed. "Didn't leave us much, did they?"

Chris looked around, finding nothing but empty beer cans and food wrappers. The room was as barren as their former prison. "Damn! I was hoping they might have left some food. I'm hungry enough to consider eating more of that plastic-wrapped shit you like so much."

"Hey!" Vin said, pretending to be insulted. "That stuff hasn't hurt me none."

Chris grinned at him and painfully crawled to his feet. "Give it time."

Still grumbling, Vin pushed himself up, balancing carefully on his uninjured leg. "A first aid kit would be nice right now."

"Sit down," Chris gestured to the three metal folding chairs that sat next to a folded card table that was leaning against the wall. "Drop your pants first."

Vin smirked at him. "Hell, I don't like ya that much."

Chris swatted him in the arm. "Shut up and park it, cowboy."

Vin stuck out his tongue at Chris, but did as he was directed. Chris pulled one of the other chairs closer and sat down, inspecting the new hole in Vin's leg. The wound was still bleeding and Vin grimaced as he pressed the bandage against it. Chris stood and went to the sink that was located on one side of the room. He washed out an empty plastic cup and filled it with water, then returned to Vin's side. He cleaned the injury as best he could, then checked for an exit wound.

"Damn, would you look at that!" Chris exclaimed.

"What?" Vin asked, craning his head for a look.

"That." Chris pointed to the side of Vin's thigh, where a small rounded piece of metal protruded from his skin.

"That what I think it is?"

"Yep," Chris replied. "The bullet almost went all the way through."

"Ain't never seen that before," Vin commented.

"Me neither."

"Ya just gonna look at it?" Vin growled impatiently.

"Nope." Chris reached down and grabbed the bullet firmly with his fingers, yanking it the rest of the way out of Vin's leg.

"Ow!"

"Sorry," Chris said sympathetically, tossing the bullet aside as he put the makeshift bandage back in place.

"Okay, cowboy. Your turn." Vin stood slowly and pulled his pants back on.

Chris glared at him, but complied silently.

Vin checked over the wound, cleaning it as Chris had done for his. "Bad news, Chris. The bullet's still in there."

"I figured as much," Chris said with a sigh.

"Ain't much we can do about it now," Vin said. "We'd best get the hell outta here, 'case they decide to come back early."

Chris limped toward the window by the front door. "It's almost dark. You up for this?"

"Hell yeah!" Vin hobbled over to join him, eagerly pushing his way out the door.

\*\*\*

Ezra rubbed his tired eyes, staring at the information that scrolled across the screen of his laptop computer. It was just past midnight on Wednesday -- Thursday morning now. After speaking with his friend Bruce, he had hacked into the ATF computer system to find out what information the rest of his team had gathered, unsurprised at finding that his teammates were offline at this time of night. He discovered, though, that they had been very busy, and it was taking him some time to sort through the large volume of information. Their investigations had been very thorough, but most of the leads they had turned up had not amounted to anything. "They must be exceedingly frustrated," he muttered to himself. Ezra hoped he would have better luck.

His cell phone rang, startling him momentarily. Hoping that it was Bruce, he picked up the phone and answered. "Standish."

"Ezra?" Josiah's voice came over the line.

Ezra cursed himself inwardly for not checking the calling number before answering. He didn't want to speak with any of his teammates right now. With a sigh, he said, "Yes, Mr. Sanchez."

"Where are you, son?" Josiah said evenly, surprised that he had reached the other man.

"Somewhere else," Ezra replied quietly.

"You've had us all worried."

"I highly doubt that," Ezra said with a sarcastic snort.

"Look, Ezra, I know this is difficult for you -- hell, it's been difficult for all of us," Josiah reasoned. "Running away isn't going to make it better."

"At least I don't have any more fists aiming for my face," Ezra said bitterly.

"I know how you feel, brother," Josiah said soothingly, hoping to placate the undercover agent. "We all do..."

"No!" Ezra interrupted hotly. "You \*don't\* know. You haven't the slightest idea how I feel. You weren't there. You didn't see them..." Ezra trailed off, unable to continue.

"Ezra..." Josiah intoned softly.

"I'm sorry, Josiah," said Ezra as he ran a shaking hand through his hair. "I have to go now."

He clicked off the phone, unsurprised when it rang again momentarily. It was Josiah's number, so he ignored it and went back to his computer. He was more determined than ever to solve this case. If he could bring the person responsible for Chris and Vin's deaths to justice, the others might just find it in their hearts to forgive him. It was the only thing that was keeping him going.

\*\*\*

Josiah hung up the phone with a sigh. After his calls had gone unanswered for an hour, he realized that Ezra was not going to talk to him anymore -- not yet, anyway. His anger with the younger man had abated somewhat the instant he heard the degree of anguish in his voice. Ezra was hurting, maybe even more than the rest of them. Josiah could tell from the tone of his voice that the missing agent was blaming himself for the tragedy.

He and the others at least had each other for support during this difficult time. Ezra had nobody, and Josiah was afraid that the aloof undercover agent wasn't dealing with situation, pushing it aside as he usually did with such feelings. With his continued isolation from the rest of the team, there was a real danger that he would have an

emotional breakdown and there would be no one there to help him. Josiah shook his head sadly. It was bad enough that they had already lost two members of the team; now they were at risk of losing another. "Hell of a week," Josiah muttered to himself.

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"Hold up, Chris," Vin said breathlessly. "I gotta rest for a minute."

Chris nodded, trying to catch his own breath. Upon exiting the structure in which they had been held captive, he and Vin had discovered that they were perched high on the side of a mountain. The air was thin and frigid, and in the fading daylight, Vin had seen the gathering clouds that signified an approaching storm. They had decided to make as much progress as possible before the storm hit, picking their way slowly along the dirt road that was cut into the dense forest on the side of the mountain.

It had started to snow an hour after they left, slowing their progress substantially. Jarvis had taken their shoes and their coats, so they had little protection against the rough ground or the weather. Now, wet and shivering, they plodded their way along the edge of the forest in the dark, stumbling frequently and aggravating their already-painful injuries.

"How much longer do you think it'll take us to get to the bottom?" Chris asked hoarsely.

"Don't know," Vin answered. "Hard to tell at night."

"Damn, I can't wait to get out of this shit and into a nice warm bed," Chris complained.

"Me too," Vin agreed. "Just don't tell Ez. It'll ruin my image."

Chris chuckled. "Don't worry."

Vin sighed and pushed himself away from the tree upon which he had been leaning. "We'd better keep moving before we freeze our asses off."

"Lead on." The two tired men leaned against each other as they limped along the road, hoping this ordeal would end soon.

\*\*\*

It was 10:00 AM when Josiah entered the bullpen. The others were already there, hard at work their desks. "Good morning, brothers," Josiah greeted them. "You all look rested."

"Wish I could say the same for you," Nathan said, indicating the dark circles under his big friend's eyes.

Josiah sighed. "I'm afraid my thoughts would not allow me much sleep." He looked up at all of the others. "I spoke with Brother Ezra last night."

"What? Where is he?" JD asked.

"I don't know," Josiah replied. "I called his cell phone. Frankly, I'm surprised he answered."

"Is he going to get his ass back here?" Buck asked frostily.

"I don't think so... not yet, anyhow," Josiah answered. "He's not doing well with all of this."

"And we are?" Nathan asked sarcastically.

"No," Josiah said sadly. "But I think we're dealing with it much better than he is. I'm worried about him."

Buck snorted and shook his head. "I'm not."

"Did you tell him about the funeral?" asked JD.

"No, I didn't get the chance," Josiah replied softly. "He got upset and hung up on me."

"Well, I hope he comes back in time for it," JD said. "It would really suck if he didn't show up to pay his respects."

"I know, son," Josiah said reassuringly.

The ringing of Nathan's phone interrupted their discussion. Nathan answered and spoke a few words before hanging up. With a grim look on his face, he turned to the others, who were watching him with trepidation. "The results of the dental records check came back." He paused and took a breath. "It's Chris's tooth. The match was definite."

"They sure?" JD asked hesitantly.

Nathan sighed. "Yeah. Chris had a filling replaced in that tooth last year. That, along with a very distinctive chip on one side, gave them a positive match."

Though they knew in their hearts that their friends were dead, having the evidence confirm it made it seem far more final. JD turned away, tears stinging his eyes as his gaze fell upon the closed door to Chris's office. Buck watched him, fighting his own tears. Josiah squeezed Nathan's shoulder in support, then squared his own shoulders to face the day ahead.

"Well, brothers," Josiah began. "We still have plenty of work to do."

The others nodded and gradually collected themselves, settling down to work in earnest.

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Ezra awoke suddenly to the sound of his cell phone chirping merrily. Yawning, he pushed his head up from the table and checked the number, wincing at the renewed pain in his back. He answered, as it was an unfamiliar number. Bruce always called him from a pay phone so his own number could not be traced to Ezra in any way. "Standish."

"Ezra? It's Bruce."

"That was quick," Ezra commented, noticing that it was only 11:30 AM. "I didn't expect to hear anything for another day or two."

"Yes, well it appears that I got lucky," Bruce said with a chuckle.

"What have you got?"

"I contacted a friend of the family in the Denver area and he remembered an incident that occurred about two months ago. One of his associates was looking to purchase some explosives -- I didn't ask why, of course -- and his usual supplier made him wait several extra days because someone had bought out his entire stock. The associate was quite put out, and 'requested' the name of the purchaser, in case it was a competitor." Bruce paused. "He was a bit nervous since the man had purchased enough to take out an entire building."

"Or turn a jeep into metal filings." Knowing how persuasive members of Bruce's family could be, Ezra said wryly, "I assume he got his answer."

"Does the name Jarvis ring any bells?"

"Not yet," Ezra replied thoughtfully. "Is there a first name?"

"The man never gave one to the supplier," Bruce replied. "The other buyer didn't recognize it either, so he didn't pursue it and waited, impatiently, for his delivery." Bruce chuckled. "Family members don't like it when they don't get their way."

"I can imagine," Ezra chuckled.

"I hope this helps," Bruce said sincerely. "I'll let you know if I find anything else."

"Thank you, my friend," Ezra said earnestly. "I truly appreciate it."

"That's what friends are for," Bruce replied before he ended the call.

"I wouldn't know," Ezra said softly to himself as he listened to the rain pattering on the window. Though he could count Bruce as a friend, he was still someone with whom Ezra

couldn't openly associate, due to his notorious genealogy. All the others he had ever entrusted with friendship had eventually turned on him at some point, despite their proclamations of loyalty. He had begun to think that things might just be different this time, that his teammates might actually \*want\* to associate with him. Before this tragedy, they had certainly behaved differently than to what he was accustomed.

When he had awakened in the hospital after having been shot during a bust three months earlier, he was stunned to find all of them in his hospital room, keeping vigil over him, even though they had only known him for two months. The only time that had ever happened in the past was when his fellow FBI agents were waiting for him to wake up so that they could get a statement, usually to determine how much of a reprimand to give him. The blame for any injuries or mishaps always seemed to land back in his own lap, no matter what had actually happened. Ezra had expected the same of his new teammates, but had been shocked into speechlessness when all they had shown him was concern. He kept waiting for the other shoe to drop, but it never did, leaving him with an unfamiliar, warm feeling inside. It also confused the hell out of him.

Until he joined Larabee's team, no one had ever shown up to visit him out of concern, not even his mother. Ezra snorted disgustedly. Maude never visited unless she wanted something from him. She was too ashamed of his 'pathetic little government job'. He could be on his deathbed and his mother would find some excuse to stay away. She might show up just to find out where he kept all of his money, but she would be disappointed in that, Ezra thought with a wicked grin. He had made sure that his will was ironclad. No money would make its way into her grasping fingers. Instead, he left her all of his commendations, just to show her that he had been a success at his chosen profession, despite her embarrassment at his career choices.

Ezra sighed and shook his head to chase away the gloomy thoughts. He knew where he stood now. What he had thought was friendship was, again, just a pretense. They were good, he had to admit. Almost as good as he was himself. Maybe even better. He had, after all, begun to fall for it. "Another lesson learned," he said quietly to himself as he reached for his painkillers.

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Something wet landed on his face, landing with a cold splat. Vin brushed the offending matter off of his nose and opened his eyes. It was daytime, but the clouds still hung heavy and gray in the sky, the snow falling more heavily than it had during the night. He and Chris had finally succumbed to their exhaustion and had taken shelter in the woods next to a large overhanging rock. They had covered themselves with branches and leaves, but their clothes were soaked through and the shelter had done little to warm them.

"Chris?" Vin called hoarsely, nudging his friend, who lay next to him.

"Mmph," Chris mumbled, snuggling closer to him as he searched for more warmth.

"Come on, pard," Vin said, shaking his shoulder.

"What?" Chris asked blearily.

"We gotta get going," Vin urged.

Chris rolled over, blinking at him sluggishly. "Oh, right," he muttered.

Vin frowned, noticing the glassy-eyed look Chris had given him. He placed his hand on his friend's forehead. "Damn," he cursed. Chris was burning up.

"What?" Chris asked, detecting the note of concern in Vin's face.

"You got a fever," Vin stated grimly.

"So do you," Chris said, pointing at Vin's flushed cheeks and brighter-than-usual gaze.

Vin was about to argue, but then realized that he was experiencing the same fuzzy, disconnected feeling that usually came with a fever. "All the more reason to get our asses back to civilization."

Chris grinned at him. "I should have taken a bet with Ezra. Never thought there would ever be a time that you'd be sick of the wilderness."

"Fuck you, Larabee," Vin grumbled. "Help me up."

The two men struggled to their feet, which were now numb with the cold, and staggered back to the edge of the road. They didn't dare walk in the middle for fear of leaving footprints that would alert Jarvis to their escape, so they instead trudged through the woods along the rough edge of the road, keeping the smooth pathway in sight. It wouldn't do to get lost in the trees in this weather.

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Ezra logged into the ATF computer system again, noticing immediately that his teammates were all online. Hoping that he wouldn't be detected right away, he began scanning the data they had compiled, looking for the name 'Jarvis'. He found it in one of the earliest files, one that contained a list of possible suspects that had been later whittled down. The others had apparently discounted this one for some reason. Ezra pondered on it for a moment before deciding that a direct route would be best in this case. Speed was more important than his pride. Or his fear. He still wasn't ready to speak with them, so instead, he quickly composed an email.

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"What the hell!" JD yelled, breaking the silence of the room. "Ezra's online!"

"What?!" Buck said incredulously. "What's he doing?"

"I'm not sure," JD answered as he typed frantically. "I just noticed that his account was active."

"Well, shut him off!" Buck demanded hotly.

"No, wait," Josiah interceded. "Maybe he's trying to help."

"Don't want *his* help," Buck growled.

"No, Buck," Nathan said slowly. "As much as I hate to admit it, we need all the help we can get."

"He *does* have a different way of looking at things," JD admitted. "I'd rather find out who killed Chris and Vin and worry about kicking his ass later."

"He's no slouch on the computer, either," Josiah added. "He has to know that we would notice his account being active eventually. If he's willing to risk pissing us off even further, his perspective on the situation might just be worth it."

Buck looked up at the others and finally nodded in defeat. "I ain't talkin' to him, though," he said stubbornly.

A beep sounded from JD's workstation, and he abruptly turned his attention back to his screen. "Hey, he sent me an email." JD opened the email and quickly scanned it as the others crowded around him.

*'Mr. Dunne,  
Can you illuminate me as to why the name "Jarvis" was eliminated  
from your list of suspects in the file PD.doc?*

*Ezra P. Standish'*

"Jarvis?" JD said, scratching his head curiously. "I don't remember that one."

"I think I do," Buck said as he returned to his desk and scanned through some of his faxes. "Here it is: Reginald Jarvis, died in prison."

"Wonder why he's askin' about him," JD said as he composed a reply. He sent the email off, then waited for a further response from Ezra. He didn't have to wait too long. Five minutes later, another email arrived.

*'Mr. Dunne,*

*I have received information from a very reliable source indicating that a man by the name of Jarvis purchased a substantial quantity of plastic explosives approximately two months ago. Might this deceased miscreant have a vengeful relation?*

*Ezra P. Standish'*

"Angry relative?" Nathan asked.

"It's possible," Josiah agreed. "That was to be my next step once we eliminated all of the direct threats."

"I'll check it out," Buck said as he picked up the phone. After speaking for a few minutes, he hung up the phone with a sigh. "Hawthorne said he'd get back to me. Their computers are down, so it may take awhile."

"I'll let Ezra know," JD said.

"What do you think of this lead, Josiah?" Nathan asked.

"I don't know," the big man replied. "Ezra does have some unusual sources. He's come through for us in the past."

"I ain't gonna forgive him just 'cause he knows more lowlifes than the rest of us," Nathan grumbled.

"Neither am I," Josiah said. "But I am glad to see that he's doing his part. It's something, at least."

Nathan shrugged and went back to his desk. They still had other information to follow up, and he wasn't about to put all his money on a lead that came from Ezra Standish.

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Tapping his fingers nervously on the table, Ezra waited, hoping that JD had been able to get more information. Finally, a beep indicated a new message, and he quickly opened it up.

*Ezra,*

*We don't know about any relatives yet. Lt. Hawthorne at the PD is checking but it might take a while, since their computers are down. Thanks for the info.*

*JD*

*p.s. AD Travis wants to see you ASAP (he's really pissed), and he said to tell you that the funeral is on Saturday.*

Ezra sighed. It couldn't be easy, could it. As for JD's postscript, Ezra already knew that Travis wanted to see him; he had made it plain enough in his phone message. But there was no way he was going to face the man until the murderers had been apprehended. Maybe not even then. He was trying not to think beyond the present, since his future was just too depressing to contemplate at the moment. Ezra figured he had enough on his plate already and didn't want to lose his focus. His future, if he indeed had any, would have to wait.

Since the police department was going to be delayed in providing information, Ezra decided to do some more searching on his own. He checked the time and discovered that it was past noon, and though he still wasn't hungry, he decided to go get a light lunch, since the painkillers tended to make him nauseous when he took them on an empty stomach. The work would still be waiting for him upon his return.

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"I c-can't f-f-feel my legs," Chris mumbled, teeth chattering violently.

"Me n-neither," Vin replied, his breath clouding the air in front of his face.

"'m tired," Chris said, slowing his pace.

"Gotta k-keep goin', c-cowboy." Vin urged his friend forward, though he, too, wanted nothing more than to lie down and go to sleep. He had lost track of the hours as they had tramped through the falling snow, which had since given way to sleet and icy rain as the altitude decreased. Now, instead of snow, they were slogging their way through mud and ice. Vin had seen small patches of frostbite beginning to form on their hands and faces, and fought to keep them warm.

It had grown dark a few hours earlier, and with no moon, they could hardly see where their feet were taking them. The footing became more slippery and treacherous until Chris stepped on a rock that moved under his foot.

"Shit!" Chris cried as his foot went out from under him and his knee buckled.

Vin reached for him, frantically trying to stop his fall, but he was only successful in losing his own purchase. With loud curses, he and Chris fell to the ground and began tumbling down the steep incline, bouncing off of rocks and trees along the way. Vin's descent ended abruptly when he collided with a tree, his left arm breaking with an audible snap, along with several of his ribs. His head met a similar fate, connecting with a small rock that rested at the base of the tree.

Chris's fall ended several yards beyond Vin's. He, too, suffered a painful collision with a tree, breaking several of his already-cracked ribs and bashing his knee against a fallen

log. The impact knocked the wind out of him and it was a few moments before he could move.

"Vin?" he gasped as soon as he could get enough air to speak. "Where are you? Vin?" He grew more concerned when he received no answer. "Dammit, don't do this to me, cowboy," he ranted as he attempted to stand.

"Ah shit!" he cried out as the pain in his knee made itself known. Bad enough that he already had a bullet in that leg; now his knee was wrecked as well. Gritting his teeth against the pain, he used the cursed tree that had halted his journey so abruptly for support, slowly pulling himself upright.

His pace was agonizingly slow as Chris hobbled painfully up the hill. He knew Vin had hit something. He had heard the familiar sound of cracking bone shortly before his own fall had ended so abruptly. "God, don't let it be his neck," he prayed silently as he groped through the darkness in search of his friend.

He finally located Vin when he tripped over his outstretched legs and landed on top of him. "Vin? Christ Vin, answer me!" Chris searched anxiously for his neck or wrist so he could check for a pulse, nearly crying with relief when he found the steady beat under his fingers on Vin's neck. "Thank God!"

Chris ran his hands along Vin's motionless body, wincing in sympathy when he encountered the broken arm. The lump he found on the back of his friend's head accounted for his silence and Chris hoped that he didn't have more than a mild concussion. Even so, he knew Vin wouldn't wake for at least a few minutes, so he used the time to perform some first aid.

Nathan had trained all of the team members in some fairly advanced first-aid techniques, in case he was unable to help them. Ezra had teased Nathan, claiming that he merely wanted to be sure that the rest of them wouldn't inadvertently hurt him with their ham-fisted attempts to help in the event that he himself became injured. Chris was now grateful for the extra training as he expertly set Vin's arm. He didn't have much to work with for splints, so he fumbled around until he found a few relatively straight sticks and stuffed them into the sleeve of Vin's shirt. Tearing a couple of strips off of his own shirt, he tied them around the arm, then undid one of the buttons on Vin's shirt and placed his hand inside to give it some support.

Vin had groaned when Chris straightened his arm, and had begun to show further signs of waking. While Chris waited for him to regain consciousness, he leaned against a tree and listened to the sounds of the rain tapping out its soft rhythm as it fell. The sound was soothing and Chris found himself drifting off until a sound that didn't belong suddenly intruded upon his senses. The echo of squealing brakes reverberated faintly in the relative quiet of the night, and Chris found himself grinning despite the gravity of the situation.

With some prodding, Vin finally returned to consciousness, groaning loudly as his awareness returned. "Chris?" he called out tentatively.

"Right here, Vin," Chris answered.

"Christ, what h-happened?" Vin said, shivering as he felt the new pains shooting through his body.

"You ran into an oncoming tree," Chris said. "So did I."

"No wonder I h-hurt s-so much," he muttered.

"Think you can walk?" Chris asked hopefully.

"Th-Think so," Vin mumbled. "Gotta g-get m-movin' s-s-so's I c-can warm up."

"Me too," Chris agreed, shuddering in the cold now that the panic-induced adrenaline had worn off. "The good news is, I think I heard some traffic."

"H-hope you're right," Vin said through clenched teeth. "I f-feel like sh-shit."

"Join the club," Chris said. "I'm gonna need your help too. I smashed my knee on s-somethin' and ain't walkin' too good."

Vin chuckled. "We're a c-coupla wrecks."

"Come on, let's git." Chris put his arm across his friend's shoulder, and with Vin's good arm wrapped around his waist, the two injured men struggled gamely to their feet and began a slow, lurching trek down the mountain.

It took them nearly two hours, but they finally reached the two-lane highway that had been the source of the sound Chris had heard. As they rested against a tree, Chris scanned the road for any signs of life. It was unlit, but Chris could see a faint glow in the distance that he hoped was an indication of civilization. Tightening his hold on Vin, he started in that direction, urging his half-aware companion to follow suit.

They were both on the verge of collapse when they reached the source of the light. Tucked away in the corner of a small rest area, was a single, lighted pay phone. Salvation in blue and white.

"Vin, look." Chris pointed to the phone as he slid to the ground next to it, his knee no longer able to support his weight.

"Cool," Vin said with a goofy grin. "We sh-should call B-Buck. H-he won't yell at us like N-Nathan."

Chris laughed through chattering teeth. "No, he'd p-probably belt us for s-scarin' the shit out of him."

Vin chuckled. "I think I g-got a quarter in my p-pocket. Want me to c-call 'im?"

Chris shook his head. "W-we better c-call Ezra," he said. "J-Jarvis s-said he didn't know wh-where he was. H-he m-might still be w-watchin' th-the others."

"Kay," Vin said, grabbing the phone and holding it in the crook of his neck. He deposited his quarter, then dialed Ezra's cell phone number, cursing as the operator's voice told him he needed more money. "Wh-where the f-f-fuck are we, anyway? Says I n-need more m-money."

"Sh-shit," Chris cursed. "Use m-my calling c-card." He gave Vin the number and watched as the younger man redialed as quickly as his frozen fingers would allow.

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Ezra's head jerked up from the pillow abruptly when he heard his phone ringing again. His computer searches had revealed no new information on the mysterious Jarvis, and he had received no further emails from the others that day, so he had finally given in to his body's fatigue and crawled into bed. Stifling a yawn, he switched on the light and answered the phone before the fact that the unfamiliar number had a Colorado area code registered in his brain.

"Standish," he answered sleepily, hoping it was not one of his other teammates wanting to harass him at the ridiculous hour of 1:13 AM.

"E-Ezra? It's V-Vin," the voice said.

Ezra clenched the phone tightly and hissed, "This is not amusing, you cruel bastard, whoever you are."

"I-it's r-really me, Ez," the voice, sounding much like Vin's, pleaded. "We n-need your h-help."

"This is not funny, Mr. Wilmington," Ezra raged. "I know you are all angry with me, but this is contemptible, even for you!"

There was a shuffling noise and some mumbling, then a voice barked, "Ezra, g-get your f-fuckin' lazy ass out here and h-help us!"

Ezra paled and gripped the phone so tightly that his knuckles turned white. Only one person used that particular tone with him: Chris Larabee. "Good lord," he whispered. "Mr. Larabee?"

"Yeah, it-it's us, Ez," Larabee sighed. "Ya g-gotta c-come get us. We're f-f-freezin' our asses off out h-here."

"Where are you?" Ezra asked, hardly believing he was really talking to Larabee.

"D-don't know," Chris said. "P-pay phone in a r-r-rest area. T-trace the ph-phone number."

"I'll be there as soon as possible," Ezra said as he scribbled the number on some hotel stationery.

"H-hurry, Ez." Ezra could hear Chris's teeth chattering over the phone. "W-we ain't d-doin' so g-good."

"Just hold on," Ezra said encouragingly. "I'll call the others on the way."

"N-no!" Chris said vehemently. "Th-they're bein' w-w-watched."

"I understand." Ezra forced himself to remain calm, despite the fact that his heart was racing. "I'll get there."

"Th-thanks," Chris stuttered as he hung up the phone.

Ezra clicked off his phone and stared at it for a moment before he threw off the blankets and jumped out of bed, hurrying to his computer. Rummaging quickly through his computer case, he retrieved the CD containing the reverse telephone directory and quickly loaded it into the computer. He liked to have that information on separate media in the event that he couldn't get an online connection anywhere.

The address came up, indicating a location near mile marker 347 on Route 119, a small, two-lane road in the northern part of the state. With that address in hand, Ezra pulled out his mapping software and plotted the location, noting that it was approximately one hundred and ten miles from his present location. The software claimed it would take him two hours to get there, but Ezra intended to complete the journey in far less time. Pulling the spare blankets out of the closet, he put his coat on and raced out of his room.

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Ezra drove as fast as he could in the wet weather, reaching the rest area in an hour and fifteen minutes. He slowed as he approached the pay phone, his headlights showing him nothing but trees. Keeping the engine running, he drew his gun out of the glove box and slowly exited the vehicle. "Chris? Vin?" he called out as he approached the telephone.

"H-here," a weak voice answered him.

He moved toward the voice, then saw the pale, mud-covered hand waving from behind a bush. With trepidation, Ezra stepped behind the bush, lowering his gun when he saw the two crumpled forms lying behind it. "Jesus," he said, pocketing his weapon as he rushed to their side. "Chris?"

The blond turned to him, attempting to smile. "Knew I-I c-could c-count on ya, Ez."

"Mr. Larabee, you look like hell," Ezra answered with a jubilant grin, sending a silent 'thank you' to whatever deities had seen fit to restore his friends to him.

"N-no sh-shit," Chris gasped.

"Hold on, I'll get the blankets." Ezra turned and hurried back to his car, retrieving the blankets from the passenger seat.

"Here," he said as he wrapped one of the blankets around Chris's shoulders.

"G-get V-Vin f-first," Chris said, pointing to the unconscious man next to him.

"Okay," Ezra nodded, wrapping the other man in a blanket. "I'll get him to the car. Can you walk?"

"N-not t-too well," Chris replied.

"Sit tight, and I'll be back to help you," Ezra said as he gently hauled Vin to his feet. Ignoring the pain in his back and ribs, he dragged Vin to the truck, laying him carefully across the back seat before returning to help Chris.

Chris was struggling to his feet when Ezra arrived at his side. Settling Chris's arm over his shoulder, he half-carried the other man to the car, easing him into the passenger seat. After buckling the seat belt, he hurried to the driver's side and was soon back on the road with his charges.

"You'd better have a good explanation for this, Mr. Larabee," Ezra warned teasingly as he turned the heat on full blast to warm the two shivering men.

"L-long s-story," Chris said wearily, slumping against the door.

"You'll have plenty of time to tell me after you are safely ensconced in the hospital," Ezra replied.

"No hospital!" Chris said, panic in his voice. "T-too p-public. He'll f-find us again."

"Mr. Larabee, you are in need of medical attention," Ezra argued.

"No hospital," Chris repeated. "You'll j-just have t-to do the b-best you can."

Ezra opened his mouth to protest, then closed it when he realized that Chris had a much better handle on the situation than he did at the moment, and if he said it was dangerous, it probably was.

"As you wish," Ezra capitulated. "We'll go to my hotel."

Chris looked at him, wondering why he was in a hotel, but was too exhausted to pursue it just then. He leaned against the door and promptly fell asleep.

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"Dammit, Buck," JD griped irritably. "How many of these motherfuckers are left, anyway?"

Buck lifted an eyebrow in surprise. It appeared that the stress of this case was starting to get to his young friend, since JD rarely used such profanity. "Take it easy, kid," Buck said soothingly as he gave his shoulder a squeeze. "We're all frustrated."

"I know," JD said apologetically. "But that was three suspects that we interrogated tonight, and not one of them is the right guy."

"Yeah, but it's also three less that we have to deal with in the morning," Buck said optimistically. "We'll get 'em, don't you worry about that."

JD nodded. "I was just hoping we'd catch 'em before the funeral, ya know? I want to be able to tell Chris and Vin that we caught the bastards."

Buck wrapped an arm around the smaller man's shoulders and hugged him briefly. "We can always tell them later, okay? I'm sure they know that we're doin' our best, and they'll appreciate it no matter when we catch 'em."

"I guess," JD said, stifling a yawn.

"Come on," Buck urged. "Let's get some shuteye so we can get us some bad guys tomorrow."

JD bobbed his head sleepily and followed his roommate out of the office. Buck looked back at the other two men and mouthed, 'Good night' to them over his shoulder.

Josiah lifted his hand in acknowledgement before turning to Nathan. "We ought to get some sleep ourselves," he suggested gently.

"Yeah," Nathan agreed. "I keep hopin' that the next suspect turns out to be the one, so we can put this case to rest."

"So do I," Josiah admitted.

"I can't help thinkin', though..." Nathan looked up at his friend with sad, dark eyes. "What's gonna happen after we do find the murderers?" He shook his head despondently. "We ain't the Magnificent Seven anymore, and 'Magnificent Five' just don't cut it. Hell, Ezra's probably out, too. Not like anybody else will want to work with him."

"Not just him," Josiah added. "We aren't known for playing by the rules, so there aren't many teams who would want any of us." He met Nathan's gaze. "And I doubt we could ever find any replacements with the right stuff to fill Chris and Vin's shoes."

"I don't think I would even want to try," Nathan said. "What we had here was unique. I don't think we could ever match it."

"What do you think you'll do?" Josiah asked, knowing it was a loaded question.

"I don't know, go to medical school maybe." Nathan shrugged. "I've been trying not to think about it."

"Me neither," Josiah admitted. "I expect I'll probably retire, maybe teach at the academy."

"What do you think the others will do?"

"JD's young, and with his computer skills, he could get a job with a computer company or maybe transfer into research or one of those cyber-crime task forces."

"What about Buck?" Nathan asked with a hint of a smile.

"I honestly don't know," Josiah said. "He might keep going, stick to being some kind of cop. He loves law enforcement, and I doubt he'll want to leave it."

"He'll probably stay with the kid, wherever he decides to go."

"I hope he does," Josiah said sincerely. "JD still needs guidance, and without the rest of us, he'll really need Buck."

Nathan nodded then gave a slight chuckle. "I figure Ezra'll end up in jail."

"How's that?"

"He's a con man," Nathan explained. "It's all he knows. I doubt he'd get another job in any kind of law enforcement, what with his reputation."

"I hope you're wrong, Nate," Josiah said sorrowfully. "I'd hate to see him end up like that."

"It's no one's fault but his own," Nathan said pointedly.

Josiah sighed, but didn't respond.

"I'm gonna miss all this," Nathan said after a long silence. "You guys really got to me."

"Even Ezra?" Josiah asked with a smile.

Nathan glared at him for a moment, then shrugged. "Yeah, even Ezra."

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The return drive to the hotel took slightly longer than his earlier, frantic trip to rescue his friends, but Ezra still made it in less than an hour-and-a-half. As he pulled into the parking lot, he turned away from the main entrance, heading instead for the back of the building. When he had first arrived, he had checked the layout of the place, making note of all the possible exits. It was a long-ingrained habit due to his years as an undercover agent, since a ready escape route was of paramount importance in the event that his cover was compromised.

Ezra checked the area, finding it deserted at this hour of the morning, before he gently woke the sleeping man in the passenger seat. "Mr. Larabee," he said quietly. "We have arrived."

"Hmm?" Chris mumbled dazedly as he opened his eyes.

"We have reached the hotel," Ezra explained.

"Oh, right," he rasped as he fumbled with the seatbelt.

"Let me get that," Ezra said as he deftly undid the buckle and eased Chris carefully out of the truck.

Chris wrapped the blanket tighter around himself to ward off the chill air and leaned heavily on Ezra as they walked slowly toward the back entrance. "What about Vin?" he asked, stopping abruptly.

"I'll come back for him after I get you upstairs," Ezra said patiently. "I am not strong enough to help you both at the same time. That's Mr. Sanchez's department."

"Right," Chris said with a faint smile as they resumed their progress.

Ezra ushered him into the service elevator and hit the button for his floor. "Not too much further," he said when he noticed Chris slumping in his grip.

Chris nodded, gritting his teeth as he fought to keep himself upright.

They finally reached the correct floor, and Ezra assisted Chris the rest of the way to his room, lowering him onto one of the beds once they arrived. "I'm going to retrieve Mr. Tanner now," he told Chris. "I shall return soon."

Chris mumbled an incoherent reply and snuggled deeper into the soft bed. Ezra smiled as he turned to leave. He had still not gotten over the miraculous 'resurrection' of his two friends.

Getting Vin into the hotel was a bit more of a challenge, since the young agent was semi-conscious at best. Ezra gripped him tightly, again ignoring the flare of pain in his ribs and back, and carried him into the building. He was out of breath by the time he had deposited Vin on the second bed in the room. He sat for a moment to rest while he popped another of his pain pills to mollify his protesting body.

Ezra took a good look at the two injured men in the brighter illumination of the room, frowning at the mixture of mud and blood that covered them. He was going to need some first aid supplies and cursed himself for not thinking to bring any along. Then again, he hadn't been thinking very clearly when he had left Denver, so he supposed it was excusable in this case. Since Chris wouldn't allow him to take them to the hospital, Ezra knew he would have to do a very thorough patch-up job.

Rummaging through the drawers of the small entertainment center that enclosed the television, he found the local directory and located a twenty-four hour pharmacy near the hotel. With a grimace, Ezra stood and left the room again, mentally making a list of the medical supplies he would need.

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Ezra returned twenty minutes later with a shopping bag bulging with bandages, antiseptic, and splints. It had surprised him that the bored sales clerk had not seemed to take undue notice of the quantity of his purchases. The area was known for hiking and camping, so he supposed it was not unusual for people to stock up on medical supplies there. He placed the bag on the table he had been using as a desk and studied his two companions. They were both completely caked in mud that would have to be cleaned off before he could even begin to treat their injuries.

Shrugging out of his coat, Ezra rolled up his sleeves and began the task of urging a sleepy Chris Larabee into the bathroom. Chris finally awakened enough to realize what Ezra was trying to do and, with the other man's assistance, peeled off his filthy clothes and stepped carefully into the tub.

"Can you handle this yourself?" Ezra asked, unsure as to how much assistance Chris would accept with such a personal matter.

"Think so," Chris said, holding onto the safety railing tightly to prevent himself from toppling over.

Ezra started the faucet, then turned on the shower when the water was a suitable temperature. "Call me if you require any assistance." He left the bathroom, but left the door open so he could better hear if Chris was in any distress.

Dropping the tattered clothing in a corner, Ezra moved toward Vin's bed, assessing the other man's condition critically. The sharpshooter was definitely going to require more aid than his boss, since he was still unconscious and had obviously broken his arm. Carefully, he removed Vin's clothing, tossing it into the same pile as the others. He frowned deeply, clenching his teeth in fury when he caught sight of the heavy shackle encumbering the man's wrist. Selecting a lockpick from his ever-present collection, he made short work of the lock and eased the cuff off of Vin's wrist. The skin beneath it was bruised and bloody from the additional stress that had been placed on it, and Ezra vowed silently that the miscreant who had caused this would pay dearly.

The clothing was a lost cause, he noted with a frown. It was torn and muddied beyond repair, so they would just have to do without until he could find suitable replacements. His own clothing would fit either of the men -- well, it might be a little too short for Chris -- but none of it was loose enough to accommodate their injuries.

"Ezra?" Chris called from the bathroom.

"Right here," Ezra replied as he hurried into the steamy room.

"I could use a hand getting out of here," Chris admitted, his knuckles white as he held the railing in a death grip.

Ezra took his arm firmly and assisted him in climbing out of the bathtub.

"Damn, that's a big step," Chris muttered as he lifted his injured leg over the side. He leaned against Ezra wearily, while the younger man reached for a towel and wrapped it around his waist. Limping badly, he allowed Ezra to escort him back to the bed.

"Why don't you rest for a bit while I assist Mr. Tanner," Ezra suggested.

Chris nodded, too weary and sore to do much besides sit there. "Can you handle him by yourself?"

"I will manage," Ezra replied confidently.

"Good," Chris said with a crooked smile. "Cause I don't think I could help you if I tried."

Ezra chuckled as he returned to the bathroom and began filling the tub. By the time he was able to get Vin into the room, the water had reached the appropriate level. Carefully, he eased the sharpshooter into the warm water, supporting his head with one hand to prevent him from slipping below the surface.

In a way, Ezra was glad that Vin was still unconscious, since the quiet man was modest to a fault and would be highly embarrassed by his current situation. Much to Ezra's relief, Vin remained unconscious until he was nearly finished. He awoke suddenly while Ezra was washing his hair and panicked at finding himself in the water.

"Easy, Mr. Tanner," Ezra said softly, hoping to calm the agitated man. "Vin, it's just me, Ezra."

"Ezra?" Vin said finally, ceasing his struggles. "What're you doin'?"

"Washing your hair," Ezra replied succinctly.

Vin turned his head and regarded him suspiciously.

Ezra laughed. "Relax, Mr. Tanner. I once spent two months undercover as a hairdresser. I know what I'm doing."

Vin's eyes narrowed and he gave Ezra a disbelieving look.

"Yes, I cut quite a fine figure in my purple leopard-skin pants and hot pink tank top," Ezra continued with a smirk.

A grin slowly spread across his face and Vin relaxed, allowing Ezra to continue. "Got any pictures of that?"

"Thankfully, no," Ezra answered. "Though I was tempted to take one and send it to my mother." Ezra chuckled. "I'm sure she would have fainted from sheer horror at what had become of 'her darlin' boy!'"

Vin laughed out loud, then winced as his ribs protested the movement. Having met Maude Standish, he could indeed picture the look on her face if she had seen such a photograph. "Damn, Ez. You sure got a mean streak."

Ezra smiled in agreement as he unhooked the flexible showerhead and proceeded to rinse Vin's hair. Then, he reached for his bottle of conditioner, smearing some over the tangled locks.

"What's that?"

"Conditioner," Ezra replied. "It will make combing out your hair much less painful."

"Oh," Vin answered. "Ain't that stuff just for women?"

"Not at all," Ezra answered, amused at Vin's reaction. "In fact, I use it myself."

"Oh great," Vin muttered sarcastically. "Like \*that's\* supposed to make me feel better."

"I take umbrage at that remark," Ezra replied, feigning offense. "I'll have you know that both Mr. Wilmington and Mr. Dunne use conditioner on their hair. Mr. Wilmington claims that the ladies like the way it makes his hair feel and encourages them to run their fingers through it with greater frequency."

"It does smell nice," Vin admitted.

"I promise you will be pleased with the results," Ezra assured him.

"If I ain't, I'm gonna kick your ass," Vin threatened.

"You'll have to catch me first," Ezra said with a devilish grin.

Vin splashed a handful of water in Ezra's face. "Smartass."

Ezra sputtered, then laughed. "Okay, that's finished. Do you think you can stand?"

"Yeah. I want to rinse all this soap off." He reached up with his good arm and slowly pulled himself to his feet, swaying momentarily as his head adjusted to the change in altitude.

"Would you like some help?" Ezra asked, worriedly watching his friend teeter on wobbly legs.

"Nah, I got it," Vin replied as he turned on the shower.

"All right, but I will be just outside if you need anything."

Ezra returned to the other room to find Chris reclining on the bed, a wide grin on his face.

"Purple leopard-skin pants?"

Rolling his eyes, Ezra gave a long-suffering sigh and place his hand melodramatically on his chest. "The indignities I suffer in the name of justice."

"Well, it got Vin calmed down," Chris admitted. "Good job."

Ezra shrugged. "All part of the service."

Chris smiled, then took a long look at his undercover agent, noticing for the first time the bruises and burns that adorned his face. "What happened to your face?"

Ezra's face fell, then reverted to his normal placid expression, as he rubbed a finger across his cheek gingerly. "I'm afraid I was a bit closer than recommended to Mr. Tanner's exploding vehicle."

"Shit," Chris said. "Jarvis said you had witnessed the explosion. I didn't think it was so up close and personal, though."

"Jarvis?" Ezra said sharply, picking up on the name immediately.

"Yeah," Chris replied, puzzled at Ezra's reaction. "You've heard of him?"

Ezra nodded. "I called in a few favors and received some information regarding someone by that name."

"Raymond Jarvis, brother of a guy I busted when I was with the cops."

"I'm relieved that my information was correct," Ezra replied with a faint smile.

Leaning on the doorjamb, Vin quietly called, "Ez?"

Ezra hurried to the weary sharpshooter, who looked like he was ready to fall over at any moment. "Take my arm."

Vin latched onto Ezra's arm gratefully. "Thanks. I'm a little dizzy."

Chris watched with concern as Ezra helped Vin over to his bed. He smiled at the sigh of pleasure Vin released when his head sank into the soft pillow. "You comfy over there, cowboy?"

"Oh yeah," Vin replied dreamily.

Ezra smiled, then lifted his bag of first-aid supplies from the table. "Now the fun part," he said teasingly.

Chris glared at him. He knew it needed to be done, but wasn't looking forward to it. With a reluctant frown, he pulled the blankets back and let Ezra tend his injuries.

"The bullet's still in there," Ezra said with a grimace. He had finished wrapping Chris's ribs and knee and bandaging the smaller cuts and scrapes, while Chris had distracted himself by relaying all that had happened while he and Vin were captives. All that remained now was the gunshot wound.

"I know. You're gonna have to take it out."

Ezra blanched. "Mr. Larabee, I have no idea how to remove a bullet," he protested. "You really must let me convey you to the nearest hospital for some proper medical care."

"It's too dangerous," Chris argued. "We can't take a chance that Jarvis will find out about our escape. It would be too easy for him to trace us to a hospital. The only way we'll be able to catch him is if we can keep the game going until he returns." He gave Ezra a pleading look. "I need you to do this, Ezra. I \*trust\* you to do this."

Ezra's eyes widened in shock and he studied Chris's face for any signs of deceit, but found nothing but an honest, trusting gaze looking back at him. He wondered what had happened to the angry cuss who had spent the past few weeks chewing him out at every opportunity. "Aw hell," he muttered, running a hand shakily through his hair. "I'll get my things."

Ezra took his time gathering what he would need to extract the bullet, knowing full well that he was procrastinating. The look Chris had given him had staggered him completely. Nobody had ever shown that much faith in him. Hell, he didn't think Larabee would have trusted him to shine his shoes, let alone slice into his body with a pocketknife. He must be losing his touch. Every time he thought he had these men figured out, they did something to befuddle him. Ezra pinched the bridge of his nose, praying that he wouldn't screw this up.

"You okay, Ez?" Chris asked, observing the nervous actions of his normally unflappable agent. He was aware, to some extent, of the insecurities that plagued the younger man. Ezra didn't expect anything from anyone, regarding with suspicion anything that was given freely. He had been hurt so badly by the mistrust and hateful behavior shown to him by his former co-workers that he was loath to let anyone behind the protective emotional walls he had built.

"Yes, I'm just preparing myself," Ezra said with an uneasy smile. "I would hate to have to report to the others that I retrieved you safely, only to cause your demise by my own hand. They already believe me to be responsible for your apparent deaths."

"Wasn't your fault," Chris insisted. "Vin and me were drunk. We were plannin' to hide and then jump out and scare ya when you came looking for us." Chris gave him a sheepish shrug. "Hell, we were too trashed to even see straight. Those assholes grabbed us the second we set foot outside the door. If you had been with us, they would've caught you too."

"I fear the others will require a lot of convincing," he said dispiritedly.

"Let me take care of that, okay?"

Ezra nodded, then took a deep breath and moved toward Chris. "Let's get this over with."

The bullet had entered Chris's leg from the front, lodging just below the skin in the back of his thigh. Both men agreed that it would be easier to remove it from that side. Chris buried his face in the pillow while Ezra made the incision, stifling his groans as much as possible to avoid upsetting him. The man was tense enough, and Chris certainly did not want him to become any shakier than he was already.

Ezra removed the bullet quickly, sagging with relief when it finally pulled free. "Done, Mr. Larabee," he said as he applied antiseptic and bandaged the wound.

Chris turned over slowly. "Thanks, Ez," he said sincerely.

Ezra inclined his head slightly. "You are quite welcome. Though I believe I will leave the surgery to Mr. Jackson in the future."

"I don't think that will be a problem," Chris said, yawning as the stress and fatigue of the past days caught up with him.

"Get some sleep, Mr. Larabee," Ezra admonished gently.

"What about you?" Chris asked, taking note of the dark circles under his friend's eyes.

"I will rest as soon as I am finished ministering to Mr. Tanner," Ezra assured him. "The chair is quite comfortable."

Chris looked at the overstuffed chair doubtfully. It looked soft enough, but sleeping in that position was hardly restful. "You sure? I can share with Vin."

"It's quite all right," Ezra replied. "It will be easier for me to care for your injuries if you remain where you are."

"Okay," Chris agreed reluctantly, having difficulty keeping his eyes open. His breathing evened out as sleep overtook him.

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"Buck, it's for you," Nathan called, holding the phone out toward the tall man who had just entered the bullpen.

Quickly shedding his coat, Buck took the proffered instrument. "Wilmington," he answered.

"Buck, it's Bill," Lt. Hawthorne said.

"You got something?"

"Yeah," Buck's old friend answered, not put off by the lack of pleasantries. This wasn't a time for small talk. "Computers just came back up. I'll fax you what I've got."

"Great!" Buck said gratefully. "Thanks, man."

"Hope it helps," Hawthorne said sincerely as he hung up.

"That was Hawthorne," Buck said as he replaced the phone receiver. "He got the info on that Jarvis guy. He's faxin' it over now."

The other three men watched the fax machine expectantly. JD reached for the pages eagerly as they began to spew noisily from the machine.

"Anythin' good?" asked Nathan.

"Says here that Jarvis had a brother," JD replied. "Name's Raymond, and he owns some kind of textiles company." JD's brow wrinkled in consternation.

"What is it, JD?" Josiah asked upon seeing the expression on his face.

"The other guy, Reginald Jarvis, died in prison more than five years ago." JD lifted his gaze to the other men. "That's a long time to wait for revenge, ain't it? I mean, it ain't like there was anything stopping him from doin' something to Chris before now."

"You're right, JD," Josiah commented. "But it takes some people a long time to build up the kind of rage required to commit murder."

"Oh." JD filed away yet another fact for later use, appreciative of the wealth of knowledge that Josiah always seemed to have at his disposal.

"He's a rich businessman; started the business by himself," Buck continued as he read more of the file.

"So he's smart," Nathan said.

"And, he has the resources to set up such a well-planned crime," Josiah pointed out.

"Sounds like he fits the profile," Buck agreed.

"So let's find him!" JD said excitedly. "If he's the guy, maybe we can even get him before the funeral tomorrow."

"Don't get your hopes up," Nathan warned, ever practical.

"But we can give it our best shot," Buck countered optimistically.

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Ezra stared at the two beds, the outlines of the sleeping men barely visible in the dark room. The adrenaline had worn off, leaving him tired and hurting from his overexertions, but he found he could not sleep. The events of the day continued to whirl through his mind, and the best he had been able to manage was some fitful dozing while he watched over his wounded comrades.

It was mid-afternoon when he saw the first signs of life from either of the two men. A long moan came from Vin's bed as he attempted to sit up. Ezra tossed off his blanket and hurried to his side.

"Mr. Tanner? Are you all right?" Ezra sat carefully on the edge of the bed while Vin's eyes flicked toward him, following the sound of his voice.

"Ez? It's dark," he said groggily.

"The curtains are closed," Ezra explained. "How do you feel?"

"Like shit," Vin replied.

Ezra placed a hand on his forehead, frowning at the heat he detected there.

"Cut it out," Vin grumbled, swatting his hand away. "Yer worse 'n Nathan."

"I'll tell him you said that," Ezra retorted, relieved to see that Vin was at least somewhat coherent.

"Chris?" Vin asked, his eyes widened in panic.

"He's right over there," Ezra said comfortingly, pointing toward the other bed.

"He okay?"

"He's in the same shape as you, my friend," Ezra answered. It was typical of Vin to be more concerned about others than about himself.

The sharpshooter relaxed fractionally once he saw his friend's blond head peeking out from beneath the blankets. "Ya sure?"

"I'll check on him without delay." Ezra stood and moved to the next bed, placing a hand on Chris's brow as he had done on Vin's. If anything, his fever was worse than Vin's. Ezra's forehead wrinkled in concern. Both of the men needed antibiotics to fight the infection that had developed in their bullet wounds, and the slightly labored quality of their breathing worried him as well. Their time in the cold, wet weather had served to

exacerbate their conditions, and he knew that they were too weak to fight off their many ills without help.

"Well?" Vin asked anxiously.

"He has a fever, as do you," Ezra replied.

"Yeah, I know," Vin replied despondently. "He's still got a bullet in his leg."

"Not anymore. I removed it last night."

"What?" Vin said incredulously.

"Mr. Larabee insisted," Ezra said uncomfortably.

"Stubborn cuss."

"I agree."

"You got any food in here?" Vin looked at him hopefully. "I'm starved. Them sonsabitches didn't give us hardly anythin' to eat."

"I have nothing at present, however I must leave to purchase you gentlemen some clothing, so I shall procure some sustenance then."

"Clothing?" Vin looked down at himself, then lifted the blanket. "Aw hell." His face flushed when he remembered his bath.

Ezra grinned at his predictable reaction. "Fear not, Mr. Tanner. Your virtue is quite intact."

"Fuck you, Ez," Vin grumbled.

Still smiling, Ezra entered the bathroom and quickly showered and shaved, replacing his own bandages afterward. He grimaced when he noticed some fresh blood on the gauze that covered the wound on his back. Apparently, he had pulled a couple of his stitches while aiding his friends. He put a fresh bandage in place then exited the room.

"What happened to your back?" Vin questioned while Ezra rummaged in his back for some fresh clothes.

Ezra straightened, cursing himself for allowing Vin to see his own injuries. "Just a scratch I got from the explosion," he said casually.

"Them bruises look pretty nasty, too," Vin said, arching his eyebrows inquisitively.

"Yes, well, one does tend to get bruised a bit after being nearly blown up."

"Shit, my jeep!" Vin exclaimed, suddenly remembering exactly what had exploded.

"How bad is it?"

"Vaporized," Ezra replied with a sympathetic smile.

"Damn," Vin mumbled. "I liked that jeep."

"Your insurance company should provide enough compensation to purchase a new one," Ezra suggested as he buttoned his shirt.

"Don't know if it covers 'vaporized'," he said hopelessly.

"Perhaps I can convince them to provide appropriate financial reimbursement," Ezra offered. "I was, after all, a witness to the event." He shuddered as the horrifying scene flashed through his mind once again.

"That'll be great, Ez," Vin said with a bit more enthusiasm.

"Will you keep an eye on Mr. Larabee until my return?" Ezra asked as he finished lacing his sneakers.

"Of course," he answered, slightly miffed at the insinuation that he wouldn't.

"And don't overexert yourself, either," Ezra warned as he donned his coat and left to do his errands.

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Orrin Travis stood in the doorway to the bullpen, watching his agents work. It was something he had spent a lot of time doing lately, for some unfathomable reason. Perhaps he was unconsciously taking comfort from these remaining men, striving to feel closer to those who had been lost. His heart ached for his own loss, and for these men, who were losing a part of themselves.

He had never thought that such a disparate group of individuals could come together and forge such a strong bond. It was some intangible force that held them together, like a family, but somehow different. They all functioned as part of a single, efficient machine, yet maintained their individuality -- sometimes to the extreme. Travis had not seen the like in all his years in the business and doubted he would ever see it again. They were unique, these men, and their loss would leave a permanent deficit in the law enforcement community.

Nathan was heading for the break room when he noticed the Assistant Director watching them. "Sir?"

"Hello, Nathan," he replied. "Boys," he greeted the others, who had swiveled their heads in his direction upon hearing Nathan's voice. "How are you doing?"

"We're okay," Josiah answered. "Working on some new leads."

"Anything promising?"

"Too soon to tell," Buck replied.

"We got this one from Ezra," JD added.

"Standish? Where is he?" Travis asked, surprised at this development.

"We don't know," Nathan said tersely. "He sent JD some email yesterday, but we haven't heard from him since."

"Josiah talked to him the night before that," JD supplied helpfully.

Travis regarded the big man expectantly. "Oh?"

"He didn't say much," Josiah explained. "He wouldn't tell me where he was." He looked at Travis somberly. "He didn't sound good."

"Do you expect to see him tomorrow?"

Josiah shrugged. "I don't know. It's a toss-up at this point."

"He'd better show," Nathan muttered darkly.

Travis sighed, then moved on to the reason he had visited them this day. "I'm sure you boys are aware that counseling sessions are mandatory?"

Buck stifled a groan, while the other three men nodded reluctantly.

"Your sessions will begin on Monday morning," Travis ordered. "They are meant to help you, so I suggest you make good use of them. I'm attending a few sessions myself." At their surprised looks, he smiled sadly. "I miss them too." With that, he turned and left as silently as he had arrived.

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"Mr. Larabee," Ezra greeted his boss as he entered the room carrying a pair of shopping bags. "It is good to see you awake."

"That's debatable," Chris retorted hoarsely. "Didn't hurt so much while I was asleep."

"Perhaps this will help," Ezra offered as he handed him a bottle of ibuprofen. "I apologize for not thinking of it sooner."

Chris waved off his apology, eagerly opening the bottle.

"Save some of them for me, cowboy," Vin requested from his bed. He didn't want to admit it, but his arm hurt like hell.

Chris shook several into his hand, before tossing the bottle gently to the next bed. "Be my guest." Ezra handed him a glass of water before he had even started to get up.

"Thanks, Ez. These'll take the edge off."

"Are either of you allergic to penicillin?"

"Nope," Vin answered.

Chris shook his head. "Me neither. Why?"

Ezra rooted through his overnight bag for a moment before emerging with a brown prescription bottle in his hand. "I happen to have some with me." He shook out two pills and handed one to each of them. "Your bullet wounds have become infected. These will help."

"Where did you get them?" Chris narrowed his eyes suspiciously.

"I had some left over from a previous encounter with the medical establishment. I keep them in my first aid kit," Ezra replied innocently. He wasn't about to tell them that the prescription was current.

"Ain't you supposed to finish takin' what they give ya?" Vin inquired.

"Yes, you are." Chris sent Ezra a look, daring him to argue.

"Yes, and I'm sure you two gentlemen always do as the doctor instructs you as well?" Ezra arched an eyebrow and smirked at them.

Vin snickered and Chris rolled his eyes, but both took the pills. Ezra returned the bottle to his bag, relieved that they had complied with relatively little persuasion on his part. He didn't want to have to tell them that he thought the infections they were suffering looked dangerously bad, and that he suspected that they were both on the verge of developing pneumonia.

"Would you gentlemen care for a bit of repast?"

"Huh?" Vin asked.

"Food, Vin," Chris explained.

"Hell, yeah," Vin answered enthusiastically.

Ezra smiled and removed the sandwiches and containers of soup he had purchased from the bag, placing them on the table.

Vin pushed his blankets aside, preparing to stand, when he realized he was still naked. "How about them clothes you promised?"

Chris chuckled at his discomfiture. "It's just us, Vin."

"It ain't polite to eat while ya ain't dressed," he said stubbornly.

"Try these." Ezra handed him a pair of dark blue sweatpants, an oversized blue plaid flannel shirt and a pair of thick cotton gym socks.

"Bout time," he said sarcastically.

"Mr. Larabee?" Ezra handed him a similar outfit, only with black pants and a dark green shirt.

"Thanks, Ez." Chris took the proffered items and eased himself into them carefully before limping to the table, sniffing appreciatively at the food. "Smells good."

Vin soon joined him, slipping his splinted arm into the sling Ezra had provided and shuffling painfully to the other chair dressed in his new clothes. He and Chris made short work of their meals, Vin loosing a satisfied belch when he was finished.

Ezra rolled his eyes. "I take it the meal was satisfactory?"

"Not bad," Vin critiqued. "I could really go for some Twinkies, though."

"I will not even dignify that with a response," Ezra huffed.

"Me neither. I had enough of that shit back at the bunker," Chris agreed, referring to the concrete building in which they had been detained.

"Traitor," Vin muttered under his breath.

Taking pity on him, Ezra said, "We might be able to acquire some of that nutritionally deficient food product. I believe there are vending machines located in the hallway."

"Cool!"

"Mr. Larabee, have you decided upon a plan of action?" Ezra queried.

"Yeah, I think so," he answered slowly. "We need to go to the ranch."

"You sure, cowboy?" Vin said. "Won't Jarvis find us there?"

"Not unless any of the others are there. He thinks we're still locked up, and he didn't know where Ez was at."

"Sounds as good as anything else," Vin agreed.

"Ez, you'll need to call before we get there; make sure none of the others are at the house, since Jarvis is probably still watching them."

"That would be prudent," Ezra replied.

"We're going to need their help to take down Jarvis, though." He met Ezra's cool green gaze, noticed his slight flinch at that announcement. "Think you can get them there later?"

Ezra's lips curved into an arrogant smirk. "Without a doubt. All I will need to do is alert Mr. Wilmington to my location and he will race to your abode forthwith for the sheer delight of pummeling me into oblivion."

"Aw, he ain't that bad, Ez," Vin objected.

Ezra's smile faltered a bit and he rubbed a finger along his still-bruised cheek. "I'm afraid he is, Mr. Tanner."

"Buck do that to your face?" Chris asked bluntly.

Ezra shrugged awkwardly. "Among other things."

"What other things?"

"Mr. Larabee, I don't think it matters..."

"What. Other. Things?" Chris interrupted firmly.

"I believe he provided me with some cracked ribs as well." Ezra reluctantly met Chris's angry glare. "He was quite distressed upon his arrival at the scene of your supposed demise."

"Damn, Ez," Vin said appreciatively. "You've been hauling our asses around with busted ribs?"

"I certainly could not leave you to your own devices." Ezra shuffled his feet uneasily, uncomfortable with the topic of conversation.

"Never thought you would, Ez," Vin said assuredly.

Chris eyed his undercover agent with interest and some surprise. Under the glib manner and fancy clothes lurked a tougher man than he would have believed, and yet, he had also detected a certain vulnerability underneath the hard exterior Ezra presented to the world. It made him wonder how much of what Ezra showed them was real, and how much was just a façade to keep them at arm's length. The man was a walking enigma. He was going to have to pay more attention to him in the future. And he was going to have a serious talk with Buck.

Ezra shifted his gaze between the two men uncertainly, but again saw no sign of deception. Vin even appeared to be viewing him with some admiration, an entirely new experience for him, while Chris's blue eyes showed nothing but approval. Ezra smiled half-heartedly. He was unused to such positive feedback, having far more experience with negative emotions being flung in his direction. He was beginning to think that these men were purposely confusing him to keep him off balance, or perhaps to keep him 'on his toes' as his mother was so fond of doing.

Ezra shook himself from his brief reverie and turned his attention to the table, sweeping the trash into one of the empty shopping bags. "I'm glad I could be of service."

Ezra didn't look at them and missed the silent communication that passed between the two men.

Vin looked at Chris. *"Ya need to talk to him, cowboy."*

*"I know,"* Chris nodded. *"After we take care of Jarvis."*

The two men shared a smile as they watched Ezra, who usually avoided 'engaging in menial labor', efficiently clean up the remnants of their meal. It was not a sight they were used to witnessing.

"Are you ready to depart, Mr. Larabee?" Ezra asked when he had finished cleaning.

"Whenever you are," Chris replied.

"I believe I am prepared." Ezra had packed most of his things while the other two men had slept, so there was little left for him to do.

"Don't forget, I want some Twinkies before we leave," Vin warned.

"We can get them on the way out, right Ez?" Chris said, sharing an amused smile with the undercover agent.

"Certainly," Ezra replied. "The vending machine is located near the elevator."

"Ain't you worried I'll mess up your car?" Vin asked curiously. Ezra never let him bring any kind of food into his car.

"It's a rental," Ezra replied smugly. Neither man had been coherent enough the previous night to notice that Ezra hadn't been driving his own vehicle.

"Your Jag in the shop again?" asked Chris.

"No," Ezra replied hesitantly. "I was unsure of my destination when I left the city and thought it best to be prepared for inclement weather." He grinned at them. "Jaguars are not designed for snowstorms."

Vin laughed. "Guess not."

Ezra reached into another large shopping bag at his feet and withdrew a pair of jackets and two pairs of running shoes. "I'm afraid they didn't have much selection, so these will have to do." He handed one set to each of them.

"Thanks, Ez," Vin said gratefully. "I've had enough of the cold for a while."

"Me too," Chris agreed.

Ezra shrugged. "You are both in poor health and it would be remiss of me to allow you into the cold without appropriate outerwear."

"Preciate it," Chris said.

"Shall we?" Ezra gestured to the door after the men had donned their coats and shoes.

Leaning against each other, Chris and Vin stood and slowly followed Ezra out the door.

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His eyes followed the progress of the raindrop as it meandered slowly down the windowpane, shining with an almost ethereal glow as the faint light from the street caressed its fluid surface. The droplet continued its journey, its gravity-controlled descent ending abruptly in the pool of water that collected on the windowsill. It was soon replaced with another, which chose its own silvery path along the transparent surface, but eventually succumbed to its fate, like the others that came before.

Buck Wilmington sat alone in the darkness, staring, unseeing, out his window. The thoughts that raged in his mind belied the vacant, empty look that graced his features. This week had been one of the most difficult that he had ever had to endure. Only Sarah

and Adam Larabee's passing had even come close to producing the level of anguish he now felt. But he could not allow himself to grieve. Not yet. Not until the killer had been brought to justice. Only then would he allow his grief to be released, and heaven help the poor soul in its path.

Buck feared that if he allowed himself to feel, he would be unable to stop the tidal wave of sorrow that would result. He couldn't allow that to happen. JD needed him to be strong. The others were depending on him. The evil deeds of another had torn his family apart and left gaping holes in his heart, but it was not permissible to succumb to his emotions when there was justice to be served. He wouldn't allow himself to be distracted until the job was done.

Buck closed his eyes, taking a deep shuddering breath. Control. He could do it, had done it before, and would do it again as long as necessary. He would restrain the demons. Slowly, he turned away from the window and the empty street, a lone tear sliding slowly down his cheek.

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JD blew his nose forcefully, furiously wiping the tears from his face. Damn, why couldn't he stop crying? He was trying to be tough, like the other guys, but was failing miserably. He was lost, adrift on a violent sea of emotions, and his anchors had been ripped away. It was like he was in a never-ending nightmare, with no hope of escape. Why couldn't he be strong like Buck, calm like Josiah, or practical like Nathan? Chris and Vin would have laughed to see him bawling like a baby. It embarrassed him to cry, even in front of his teammates.... How was he ever going to get through the funeral tomorrow without looking like the kid everyone thought he was?

JD punched his pillow in frustration. Why did this have to happen? It wasn't fair. He had finally found his place in the world. He had friends who cared about him. Hell, they were his family. He had a job he loved, and the respect of six men he admired more than any others. And now it was gone, and he was afraid. It wasn't the same as when he had lost his mother; he had been afraid then, too, but there was still the excitement of the unknown in his future. Now that he had been allowed the privilege of being a part of something so special, anything else was going to be a letdown. It had been like one of the cowboy movies he had liked as a child, with he and his friends playing the roles of the heroes, taking on the bad guys in the name of justice. But his 'Magnificent Seven' would ride no more, and nothing else could ever compare.

JD heard Buck's door close quietly, finally giving in to the tears. Maybe he would be lucky enough to cry himself out before tomorrow. Then again, maybe not.

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The heavy bible sailed through the air, crashing into the wall and leaving a dent behind. Josiah picked it up and threw it again, this time knocking over a lamp. It was useless; his

rage continued unabated. He laughed bitterly into the darkness. The others relied on him for leadership, for guidance. Yet, how could he guide when he could find no path himself?

The bible was supposed to provide direction, to light the course of his journey. But he could find no guidance, no words of wisdom, no solace. Instead, Josiah found his comfort in a bottle. The amber liquid provided succor, but also allowed the rage that had been trapped inside to escape. For the sake of the others, he had kept it in check, clamping the doors shut on those fearful emotions. But now the liquor had weakened those barriers, and it raged within him like an unstoppable force, consuming him in its fury.

His apartment was showing the signs of his wrath: chairs lay broken on the floor, the sofa had been overturned, the books pulled from their shelves, and anything breakable that had been within reach lay in pieces, strewn about the apartment. Josiah surveyed the damage and laughed until the tears began to flow down his face. He lifted a fist to the heavens and shouted his anger at God, cursing him for the injustice He was making them suffer.

The bottle was empty and Josiah finally succumbed to its numbing effects, falling to his knees. His large shoulders shook with grief as he curled himself into a ball in the midst of the destruction.

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He rubbed his finger across the photograph, lingering over the images of Chris and Vin. It was a photo they had taken at Chris's ranch after their first successful operation as Team Seven. There were only six men in the photo; Ezra had not yet joined them at the time it had been taken, and Nathan was secretly glad, since he didn't think he could look upon the undercover agent's smirking visage without breaking something.

Rain had wanted to stay with him, but he had asked her to go. He needed to be alone tonight. They were burying his friends tomorrow -- what was left of them, anyway. A tooth and a badge. That was all that remained of two of the finest men he had ever known. All of his medical knowledge and meticulous analysis couldn't change that fact.

Nathan felt helpless. He did his best to help his teammates and to find the treacherous bastard who had assassinated his friends, but he was unable to help them in the way they needed most. He could do little more than offer a shoulder to cry on or a kind word of support. He simply didn't know how to heal the wounds that afflicted them. Nathan set the picture down on his nightstand, tears blurring his vision as he turned off the light and prayed for sleep to take him.

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It was well past dark by the time they finally arrived at Larabee's ranch. Ezra had called to verify that the house was empty before proceeding the final few miles. He slowed the car, parking it near the kitchen door, then turned to wake his injured teammates.

Chris sat in the back, his wounded leg stretched out across the seat. Vin was in the front passenger seat, his head lolling to one side. Both men had fallen asleep halfway into the four-hour trip, which was unsurprising, considering the ordeal they had endured.

"Mr. Tanner." Ezra shook the sharpshooter's arm gently. "Wake up, Mr. Tanner."

Vin's eyes opened and he blinked several times before turning his head. "Ezra?"

"We're here, Vin," Ezra said.

"Where?" Vin squinted his eyes and looked out the window into the darkness.

"Mr. Larabee's ranch," Ezra explained.

"Oh." Vin rubbed his forehead. "I forgot."

"It's quite understandable," Ezra said reassuringly. "You took quite a blow to your head. It will take time before everything works properly again."

Vin grumbled, "Still a pain in the ass."

"Yes, I imagine it is," Ezra said with a laugh as he undid Vin's seatbelt.

"We here?" Chris's raspy voice came from the back seat.

"Yep," Vin answered.

"Good. Get me out of here."

Ezra helped both men out of the car and together, they walked slowly to the door.

"How're we gonna get in?" asked Vin. "We don't have our keys."

"Not to worry," Ezra said calmly. "I have them right here." He pulled Chris's keys out of his pocket and quickly opened the door.

Chris limped inside and punched in the code to disable the alarm system, then switched on the light, a relieved smile flashing across his face. "It's good to be home."

The three men walked through the kitchen into the living room, where Chris and Vin sank gratefully into the comfortable sofa that fronted the fireplace. Ezra removed his

coat, but noticed that both Vin and Chris kept theirs on. Quickly, he moved to the fireplace, kneeling in front of it as he added some wood and started a fire.

"Got some more ibuprofen, Ez?" Chris asked quietly, without opening his eyes.

"Certainly, Mr. Larabee," Ezra replied.

"I need a drink," Vin sighed.

"Bring the good scotch out here, too, Ez," Chris said.

"That wouldn't be sensible at the moment," Ezra objected.

"Just get it, Ez," Chris ordered, opening his eyes long enough to glare at the green-eyed man.

Ezra opened his mouth to protest further, but then decided against it. "Very well," he sighed. "But don't blame me when Mr. Jackson erupts into one of his infamous tirades."

"I won't tell if you won't." Chris grinned at him conspiratorially.

Ezra rolled his eyes and left the room to retrieve his bag from the car.

"He's hurtin'," Vin commented once Ezra was out of earshot.

"You noticed it too?"

Vin nodded. "He's movin' kinda stiff and he gets this little twitch 'round his eyes every time he's trying to hide the pain."

"Yeah." Chris chuckled. "He'd be pissed that we read him so easily."

"Can I punch Buck in the nose for 'im?" Vin asked.

"Only after I do," Chris replied. "That boy needs to think before he acts."

"Can't believe they thought Ez would ditch us on purpose," Vin said morosely.

"Yeah," Chris agreed. "The man can be a pain in the ass, but he comes through when it counts."

Vin eyed his friend critically. "Ya know, you got some apologizin' to do too."

Chris looked at him skeptically. "For what?"

"You ain't been treating him so well yourself, lately."

Chris thought for a moment, then grimaced as he remembered his irascible behavior of the previous weeks. "Yeah, I guess not."

"Why him?"

"Because he takes it." Chris shrugged. "He always acts like it just bounces right off of him."

"Doesn't always," Vin declared.

"Yeah," Chris agreed. "I'll talk to him."

"Here we are, gentlemen," Ezra said as he re-entered the room. He handed each of them some pills and a glass of water before heading for the liquor cabinet. "Scotch, you said?"

"There's a bottle in back," Chris directed.

The bottles clanked as Ezra rummaged to find the requested liquor. "Glenfiddich, Mr. Larabee? I'm impressed." Ezra ran his fingers over the label appreciatively. "Twenty-seven years old... should be very smooth."

"I've been saving it for a special occasion," Chris explained. "I think coming back from the dead qualifies, don't you?"

"Without question," Ezra said with a wide grin, the light flashing off of his gold tooth as he opened the bottle and filled some glasses.

"Good stuff," Vin said appreciatively after his first sip.

"Nectar of the gods," Ezra sighed, a blissful expression on his face as he savored the drink.

"Better than sex," Chris added languorously. "Well, almost," he amended with a grin upon seeing the amused look the other two men shared.

The three men sat in companionable silence in front of the crackling fire, enjoying the fine whiskey until the silence was finally broken by the loud growling of Vin's stomach.

"Hungry?" Chris asked with a smirk.

Vin's face reddened in embarrassment. "Hey, I have a lot of catching up to do," he protested.

Chris moved to stand, but Ezra's hand on his shoulder stopped him. "Sit," Ezra commanded. "I will take care of Mr. Tanner's stomach."

Chris glared at him defensively, then reluctantly capitulated.

"That knee ain't gonna hold you up for long anyway," Vin advised him.

Chris sighed, frustrated at his infirmity. "There's stuff in the freezer."

"I'll find something," Ezra promised as he disappeared through the kitchen doors.

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"Wonder what he's cookin' up in there," Vin asked curiously. "He's been in there for half an hour."

Chris shrugged. "The way he's been bangin' pots around, I hope it's something edible."

They received their answer when Ezra bustled out of the kitchen, a towel tucked into his waistband and a smear of flour on his cheek. "Dinner is served," he said with a flourish, then disappeared back inside.

"This, I gotta see," Vin chuckled as he got to his feet.

Inside the kitchen, they found the table set and a large bowl sitting at each place. They took their seats and watched as Ezra pulled a tray of biscuits from the oven.

"So what is this?" Chris asked, surprised that Ezra even knew how to use an oven.

"Chicken a la Standish," he replied, flashing a dimpled grin.

Vin sniffed the stew-like mixture in his bowl, then took an experimental bite.

"Should I call 911?" Chris asked flippantly.

Vin looked up, surprise etched on his face. "Damn, this is good! Where'd you learn to cook?"

"I spent some time undercover as a chef in a restaurant frequented by assorted organized crime figures," Ezra replied nonchalantly.

"Uh-huh." Chris said skeptically as he sampled the contents of his bowl.

Ezra shrugged, dropping the hot biscuits into a basket. "I've always enjoyed cooking. It's quite relaxing."

"Well, you can cook for us anytime," Chris said.

"Yeah." Vin gave him a sly look. "I could get used to bein' waited on."

"Enjoy it while you can, gentlemen," Ezra warned. "Once the rest of our merry band arrives, you will be surrounded by mother hens who will undoubtedly fuss over you until you are ready to throttle them."

"Aw hell," Vin moaned. "We're not calling 'em tonight, are we?"

Chris shook his head. "Not 'til tomorrow. There's less chance of Jarvis finding out if we wait."

"We should wait until tomorrow afternoon, at the earliest," Ezra suggested.

"How come?" Vin asked around a mouthful of biscuit.

"Your funeral is scheduled for 10:00 AM tomorrow. It would be wise to allow the deception to continue until afterward, in case the loathsome Mr. Jarvis is observing the event."

"Damn," Chris murmured, disturbed by the thought of his own funeral.

"Hope they say somethin' nice about us," Vin said.

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"That was a fine service," Orrin Travis stated as he joined the four men standing on the deck behind his house. "You all spoke well... I'm sure they would have been proud."

Josiah nodded sadly. The small church had been filled to overflowing with agents, police officers, and friends of Chris and Vin. The service itself had lasted over two hours, as many people stood to eulogize and reminisce about the two men. AD Travis had offered his spacious home for the post-funeral gathering, and inside, people milled about, comforting each other and dutifully partaking of the catered lunch.

The four members of Team Seven had fled to the deck to escape the crowd of well-wishers... for a while anyway. Travis sympathized with them, feeling somewhat hemmed-in himself, and joined them, bringing a bottle of fine brandy and five glasses.

"A toast, gentlemen," Travis offered. "To Chris Larabee and Vin Tanner, two of the finest men it has been my privilege to know."

The five men clinked their glasses together and drank a silent toast to their fallen friends.

"I see Agent Standish chose not to attend," Travis said with fire in his eyes.

Buck's expression darkened. "Next time I see the bastard, I'm going to flatten him... teach him some respect."

"The man has no decency," Nathan spat angrily. "Can't even be bothered to pay his respects."

"He's used up just about all of my patience," Travis stated. "I'm not going to be cutting him anymore slack."

"He'll be back," Josiah said confidently. "Brother Ezra needs to fight his demons in his own way."

"Doesn't excuse his behavior," Buck growled. "He should be here with us."

Their angry words were interrupted when Mary Travis came out to the deck, followed by Nettie and Casey Wells.

"Hi JD," Casey said sadly.

"Hey, Case." JD greeted her with a peck on the cheek. "Miz Nettie," he nodded to the older woman.

"Boys," Nettie greeted them. "Have you gotten any closer to finding the animals who did this to our family?"

"Not yet, ma'am," Josiah replied. "But we'll keep going until we get them."

"Good," she said, nodding her satisfaction. "I know it's un-Christian of me, but I hope the bastards rot in hell!"

"I think we all agree on that sentiment," Travis replied.

"If there's anything we can do to help..." Mary offered, fresh tears springing to her eyes.

"We know where to find you." Josiah smiled at her.

"I didn't see Mr. Standish there," Nettie said sharply.

"Don't get them started, ma'am," JD warned. "We're all a little mad at Ezra right now."

"Hmph!" Nettie sniffed. "What kind of no-account excuse of a man doesn't come to pay his respects to his friends?"

"The kind like Ezra," Nathan replied acidly.

"How awful," Mary murmured.

"How is Billy doing?" Buck asked kindly, changing the subject.

"I don't think it's hit him quite yet," she answered. "He's been wearing that toy badge Chris gave him ever since I told him. He even wears it to bed."

"Children are resilient. He'll be all right." Nathan put a comforting hand on her arm.

"Yes, I know," she replied sadly. "I wish it were as easy for the rest of us."

Orrin Travis put his arm around his daughter-in-law. "We'll get through this, all of us."

Mary smiled at him gratefully, clasping his hand in her own. "Why don't you all come back inside? Evie sent me out to get you. I think she's worried."

"I'll be right in," Travis told her.

Mary nodded, then retreated into the house. Casey and Nettie followed, leaving the men alone again.

"You boys coming?" Travis asked.

"No," Buck said. "I think we need to go... say our own good-byes in private."

"I understand," Travis said as his eyes roved over the four distraught men. "I'll give your regards to everyone."

"Thank you," Josiah said.

With a short nod, Travis went back into the house and left them to their thoughts.

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"This was a good idea, JD." Buck reached over and tousled his young friend's hair as Nathan turned the SUV onto Larabee's long driveway.

"We had a lot of good times out here," Josiah agreed. "I think it's fitting that we celebrate their lives in a place that held so many good memories for all of us."

"Hey, whose truck is that?" Nathan slowed his vehicle as the black Ford Explorer came into view.

"Maybe it's that guy who takes care of the horses when Chris is away?" JD suggested.

"Jack Patterson." Buck dredged the name from his memory. "But he drives an old Ford pickup."

"Maybe he got a new car?" JD looked at Buck inquiringly.

"Maybe," Buck mused. "We still better check it out."

Nathan parked behind the unfamiliar vehicle. All four men exited, drawing their weapons from their shoulder holsters. They had kept their weapons handy, since there was no way of knowing if they were next on the 'hit list'.

"Nathan and I will check the barn," Josiah said softly.

Buck nodded, then gestured to JD to follow. They crept close to the front of the house and peered through the windows.

"You see anything?" JD whispered.

"No... wait!" Buck squinted his eyes, a frown slowly forming on his face. "There's someone in there."

"What? Who?"

"Don't know, but there's a foot hanging off the sofa."

"What do you want to do?"

Buck turned toward the barn, where Nathan and Josiah had just exited and given the 'all-clear' signal. He motioned to them that there was at least one person inside and for them to enter through the kitchen door. He waited for a minute, then quietly pulled out his keys and unlocked the front door and went inside. He and JD moved to either end of the couch just as Nathan and Josiah came through the doorway to the kitchen. Buck looked at the slumbering form on the couch, the cursed, lowering his gun.

"It's Ezra!" JD exclaimed upon recognizing the sleeping man.

Buck angrily shoved his gun back in its holster and reached toward the object of his wrath. Grabbing Ezra by the front of his shirt, he hauled him from the couch and shoved him into the brick wall by the fireplace. "What the fuck are you doing here?!"

Ezra awoke with a start, confused by the sudden, violent movement. Panicking, he began to struggle, his head bobbing back and forth while his half-asleep brain struggled to put together a coherent thought.

Buck lifted him off his feet and shoved him against the wall hard enough to crack his head against the bricks. "Too busy gettin' your goddamned beauty sleep to pay your respects?!" He pulled his fist back and slammed it into Ezra's face. "Answer me you son of a bitch!"

"Put him down, Buck," a gravelly voice commanded.

Four heads instantly whipped around to confront the voice from the grave. "Chris?" Buck said incredulously, suddenly letting go of Ezra, who slid limply to the floor.

"My God!" Nathan whispered, taking a step toward the apparition that stood before him.

JD gaped, mouth hanging open, while Josiah closed his eyes and whispered a silent prayer of thanks.

"Chris!" Buck practically leaped over the sofa and rushed toward his friend, wrapping him in a huge bear hug.

"Ow, easy, Buck," Chris gasped as Buck squeezed his aching ribs.

"Geez, what's all the damn racket in here. Can't a guy get some sleep?" Vin grumbled good-naturedly as he shuffled down the hall in his stocking feet.

"Vin!" JD finally found his voice and rushed toward his friends. "What... how... I don't understand?!"

Vin held up his good hand. "Long story, pard."

Buck released Chris, then moved to Vin, a grin threatening to split his face. "Hell Junior." Buck gripped the smaller man by the shoulders. "You two are sure a sight for sore eyes." He turned back to Chris. "And you better have one \*hell\* of an explanation."

"Welcome back, brothers," Josiah's cheerful voice boomed.

"What are you guys doin' here, anyway?" Vin asked curiously. "We weren't gonna call ya until tonight."

"We came out here to toast your memory," Nathan said sheepishly.

"Now we can toast your miraculous resurrection instead," Josiah laughed.

"Too late," Vin said mischievously. "We already done that last night. Me and Chris and Ez polished off a mighty fine bottle of scotch."

"Where is Ezra, anyway?" Chris craned his neck to look around Josiah, but saw no sign of him.

"He went in the kitchen," JD said. "I'll go check on him."

Chris nodded, then gave Buck a dirty look. "\*We\* are going to have a talk, but not right now. We have work to do first." He gestured to the others to follow as he started toward the center of the room.

Buck frowned, but helped Chris to the couch.

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"Ezra?" JD called as he entered the kitchen.

"Here, Mr. Dunne," Ezra replied.

"What'cha doin'?"

"I thought a pot of coffee might be welcome."

"Need some help?"

Ezra looked at him, prepared to rebuff his offer, but relented when he saw the sincerity in his face. "The coffee is on the shelf over there." He pointed to his right.

JD grabbed the can of coffee from the shelf and handed it to Ezra. "Guess we know why you didn't go to the funeral."

Ezra gave him a half-smile but said nothing.

"Have you known the whole time?"

"No," Ezra replied after a brief pause. "I only learned of their continued existence early on Thursday morning. Needless to say, I was quite astonished to hear their voices on the telephone."

"How come you didn't tell the rest of us?" JD asked petulantly.

"I believe Mr. Larabee is about to relate the entire sordid tale, so I suggest you join the others," Ezra said, somewhat testily. "I shall be along with the coffee shortly."

"Uh, sure." JD headed for the door, tossing a last look over his shoulder before he left.

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"You need to go for x-rays," Nathan said as he got his first close look at his two friends. "Both of you."

"Later, Nathan," Chris argued.

"You belong in the hospital," Buck maintained, agreeing wholeheartedly with Nathan's assessment. "You look like hell."

"We already went through this with Ezra," Chris explained tiredly. "It's too dangerous."

"Hey guys," JD greeted them. "Ez is makin' coffee."

"Good, I could use some," Vin said eagerly.

"So what the hell happened?" Buck asked impatiently. "We thought you were blown to bits in the jeep."

"Vaporized," Vin moaned. "My poor jeep."

"Yeah, and the two homeless guys Jarvis blew up in it," Chris said somberly.

"Jarvis? That's the name Ez gave us," JD said.

"Yeah, he was right," Chris nodded. "Raymond Jarvis grabbed us at the bar. Staged the whole explosion thing so you guys wouldn't come looking for us."

"He was probably attempting to demoralize you as well," Ezra stated as he emerged from the kitchen with a tray of coffee cups. He set the cups down, not looking at anyone but Chris and Vin.

Josiah nodded thoughtfully. "That fits with the careful planning of the whole scenario."

"Yeah, he made sure we knew nobody was coming to the rescue," Chris replied grimly.

Ezra left again, returning with the pot of coffee and a pitcher of milk, which he set on the table before retreating to a position on the fringe of the group, positioning himself as far from Buck as possible. Chris noticed this and frowned, but continued with the story.

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"Jesus." Buck stared at them in disbelief as Vin and Chris finished relating their story. "You hiked all that way in that condition?"

"Yep," Vin said with a grin. "Then Ez came and picked us up."

"Literally," Chris said, shooting a grin toward Ezra, who gave a self-deprecating shrug.

"How are we going to catch Jarvis?" asked JD.

A predatory grin took up residence on Chris's face. "He's planning to go back to the bunker on Monday to finish us off, so we'll just have to be there waiting for him."

"You two are doing no such thing," Buck stated vehemently. "You're in no shape to be running around on a mountain in the snow."

"Buck," Chris warned.

"Nope. Uh-uh. No way. You ain't goin' with us." Buck folded his arms across his chest and glared at the two men. "We'll take care of the sonofabitch. We ain't taking a chance on losin' you again."

"You'd do the same if our positions were reversed, brother," Josiah pointed out.

Chris and Vin looked at each other then reluctantly surrendered. "All right, but I want video," Chris demanded. "I want to see the look on the bastard's face when he goes down."

"You bet," JD said confidently.

"Are we going to let AD Travis in on this?" asked Nathan.

"Yeah," Chris answered. "We'll need him to get us backup. We'll call him tomorrow when we finalize the plans."

"He's going to be in for a shock," JD said.

"No joke," Buck agreed.

Vin's stomach chose that moment to begin growling again.

"Hungry brother?" Josiah grinned at his young friend.

Vin shrugged sheepishly. "Ain't had much to eat this week."

"Hey Ez, you gonna cook for us some more?" Chris sent the undercover agent a teasing smile.

Nathan looked up in surprise. Ezra cooked?

"I suggest you send out for something if you expect to eat soon," Ezra replied. "Cooking for a large group takes a significant amount of time."

"I could go for pizza?" JD offered.

"Sounds good," Buck agreed, not sure that he'd want to eat anything the southerner might prepare anyway. "I'll go with you."

"Damn, I was hopin you'd make some more of that chicken stuff," Vin sighed disappointedly.

"Perhaps another time," Ezra offered, pleased that his efforts had been appreciated.

"I'm holding you to that," Chris warned with a smile.

"While they're getting the food, I want to take a look at those bullet wounds," Nathan said sternly. "They could be infected."

"They're fine," Chris said irritably.

"Sorry pard, but I'm with Nathan," Buck said.

"So am I," Josiah said.

JD grinned and sidled alongside Buck, who looked around with a self-satisfied smile. "Looks like you're outvoted and you aren't in any condition to argue with us."

"Ez, help us out here," Vin pleaded.

"I'm afraid I have to abstain," Ezra replied with a wicked smirk.

"Thanks a lot," Vin said grumpily.

As the group ushered Vin and Chris past on their way to the bedroom, Ezra made some clucking noises, drawing dirty looks from both injured men and raised eyebrows from the others.

"I'll remember that," Chris warned.

Ezra gave him their standard two-fingered salute, accompanied by a cocky smile.

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"You dig the bullet out yourself?" Nathan asked Chris incredulously.

"Nah, I made Ezra do it," Chris replied with a grin.

"You really need to be in a hospital," Nathan said with a frown. "Your wounds are infected and you're both congested. You could get pneumonia if you don't get some antibiotics soon."

"We've been takin' penicillin," Vin argued.

"Where'd you get that?"

"Ez had some left over from one of his hospital visits," Chris explained.

"Ain't supposed to have any 'left over'," Nathan grumbled.

"Yeah, well, he did, an' he let us have some," Vin said defensively.

"You need proper medical care," Nathan maintained.

"We'll go to the hospital after Jarvis is taken care of," Chris said reassuringly. "We can't risk blowing this."

Nathan frowned, then gave a reluctant sigh. "All right, but I'll hog tie the both of you and drag you kicking and screaming if I have to."

"Don't worry, Nate," Chris assured him with a crooked grin. "I'm looking forward to gettin' some real painkillers."

\*\*\*

Ezra stared up into the darkness, unable to sleep. They had spent several hours talking that night, the others being reluctant to let Chris and Vin out of their sight, but eventually, everyone had yielded to their fatigue and gone to sleep. Chris and Vin shared the king-size bed in the master bedroom, with Nathan sleeping on the floor at the foot of the bed, disinclined to leave his charges in case they required his help during the night. JD had been relegated to Adam's old room, while Josiah and Buck had claimed the sofas in the living room. Ezra had, thankfully, been assigned to the guestroom, where he could have some solitude. It made him wonder if Chris had done it on purpose.

Chris and Vin were perceptive, and it probably hadn't escaped their notice that Ezra and the other four agents never communicated directly with each other. There was a decided coolness in the air. The others still blamed him for Chris and Vin's condition and Ezra wasn't certain that they were wrong, but he was still angry at the way they -- especially Buck -- had treated him. Chris and Vin didn't blame him at all, as they had repeatedly told him, but Ezra was confused by the opposing views of all of the other men.

He really hated being so unsure of himself. Sure, he was self-confident when it came to his job. He was good at what he did; no one had ever disputed that fact. But when it came to the emotional side of things, he was at a complete loss. Nobody had ever taught him about that. His mother had scoffed at such things. For Maude, emotions were simply another tool to be used when necessary, another mask to slip into place when the situation demanded it. "Appearances, you know, are everything, darlin'," she would tell him. The family friends and relatives who had reluctantly provided him accommodations when Maude couldn't be bothered -- which was, truthfully, most of the time -- had not troubled themselves with him any more than necessary, so he had learned little from

them. He simply never learned to deal with people on anything other than a superficial level, and his past unsuccessful attempts to do so had only discouraged him from trying.

Several times that evening, he had caught Josiah staring at him thoughtfully, almost as though he wanted to talk to him, but Ezra wasn't ready for any discussions, especially not in front of everyone else. If he was ever going to make peace with these men, it was going to have to be on an individual basis. He had had enough of group dynamics and didn't feel like facing four-to-one odds again.

Chris and Vin would probably back him, but he didn't want to be put in a position between all of the men. It was hard enough for him to fit in as it was, without the others fighting because of him. He didn't want to be the source of discord within the group -- if he was even a part of it any more. He had yet to face AD Travis, and he knew the man was likely to be even less forgiving than the rest of the men.

Travis had made it clear from the start that he thought Ezra's addition to the team was a mistake, never letting an opportunity pass to let his opinion be known. If it hadn't been for Chris's intervention, Ezra would have been tossed off of the team after that first disastrous assignment. Chris had given him a second chance, something that everyone else seemed reluctant to do, and he wondered if, this time, he had used up the last of his good fortune.

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Vin awoke to find the first faint tendrils of dawn streaking their way across the morning sky. Glancing to his right, he found Chris fast asleep, his knee elevated slightly on a pillow. A faint rumbling snore told him that Nathan was still sleeping as well. Quietly, he eased his way out of bed, stepping carefully around Nathan and slipping out the door. After a short visit to the bathroom, he made his way to the kitchen, in desperate need of coffee.

Pushing his way through the door, Vin was surprised to find Ezra already up, a full pot of coffee on the counter behind him. "Ain't it a little early for you?" Vin asked as he poured himself a cup.

"Under normal circumstances, yes," Ezra agreed. "But these hardly qualify as 'normal', wouldn't you say?"

"Yeah, things're a little weird right now." Vin scrutinized the southerner, noting the dark circles under his green eyes. "Y'okay, Ez?"

"I should be asking you that question, Mr. Tanner," Ezra replied pointedly. "You are the one who is injured, not I."

"Then how come you're sittin' there with a face that's half purple and a buncha cracked ribs," Vin retorted.

"It hardly compares to what you've suffered recently." Ezra waved a hand dismissively.

"Yeah, but I ain't hurtin' on the inside."

Ezra snapped his head around to look at Vin, unable to come up with a suitable response.

"Gotta be tough seein' two of your friends blown to hell right in front of your face," Vin sipped his coffee, watching Ezra out of the corner of his eye.

"Yes, well...." Ezra worried at the edge of his mug with his thumb. "You were not, as you put it, 'blown to hell', so I am fine."

"Uh-huh," Vin replied, sounding unconvinced.

Ezra stared into his mug, avoiding the penetrating blue eyes that were studying him. The man was too damned perceptive sometimes.

The silence was broken by Chris's quiet entrance into the kitchen. He stopped short upon seeing the other two men there.

"Guess I ain't the only one who slept too much yesterday," he said with a grin.

Vin snorted. "Eighteen hours in a single day hits my limit for sure."

Chris filled his mug with coffee, a sigh of pleasure escaping at the rich aroma. He maneuvered himself carefully into a chair and gazed at the other two men over the rim of his mug, frowning at Ezra's tired countenance. A slight shake of the head from Vin told him not to press the issue for now.

"So who's gonna call Travis?" Vin asked suddenly.

"Might give him a heart attack if he hears either of us on the phone," Chris replied.

"Yes, it might," Ezra agreed. "I know it certainly gave me quite a start."

"I can just picture his face," Vin said, suddenly pulling his face into a slack-jawed, stunned expression.

Chris laughed, nearly choking on his coffee, and Ezra chuckled heartily, setting his mug down so as not to drop it.

"Maybe you should call him, Ez," Vin suggested.

Ezra looked at him, shaking his head vehemently. "Not a good idea. From the tone of his voice in the rather scathing message he left on my answering machine, I suspect his reaction would be quite violent."

"Like this?" Vin frowned, squinting his eyes angrily.

"No," Ezra answered thoughtfully. "More like this." Ezra pulled his face into a deep, threatening scowl, his brows furrowed in feigned anger.

"Nah, this is it." Chris glowered menacingly, his eyes focused in a piercing gaze as his face began to turn red from the effort.

At this, the three men erupted into loud laughter.

"Damn, that looked just like him, Chris," Vin gasped, clutching his aching ribs.

"Yes, you have mimicked the glare quite effectively," Ezra said, trying not to inhale any more coffee into his nose.

"All together now," Chris directed, and as one, the three men did their impressions of AD Travis.

Awakened by their voices, Buck and Josiah entered the kitchen at that moment, freezing in their tracks at the angry expressions with which the three men were regarding one another. Ezra, Chris, and Vin saw their stunned expressions and dissolved into a fit of laughter.

"Everyone all right?" Nathan asked breathlessly as he burst through the doors, JD close on his heels.

The new additions only served to increase the laughter, until all three men were red-faced and gasping for breath. The four other men exchanged bewildered expressions.

"They were mad at each other when I walked in," Buck said, shrugging uncertainly.

"Ah shit," Chris finally wheezed. "That hurt."

"Most definitely," Ezra agreed, nodding his head as he attempted to catch his breath.

"This is all your fault," Chris accused, glaring half-heartedly at Vin.

Vin looked at them innocently, still chuckling. "I just started it. Y'all didn't have to join in."

"All right, \*what\* is going on in here?" Nathan glared at them, folding his arms across his chest.

Vin snorted, threatening to break out in laughter again. "I think Nathan's got him down pretty good."

Chris and Ezra choked, shaking their heads in dismay while stifling their chuckles.

"Brothers?" Josiah prompted gently.

"We was just tryin' to picture what Travis's face would look like if one of us three called him today," Vin said with a grin.

"We figure he'd either have a heart attack or a hissy fit," Chris added with a snicker.

Josiah began to laugh, while the other three men shook their heads in disbelief, certain that the three men had lost their minds.

"Great," Buck grumbled. "They've turned into the Three Stooges."

"They have a point, guys," JD said with a smile. "I think one of us should call him."

"Josiah." Chris nodded toward the big man. "Travis told me once he thought you and Nathan were the voices of reason on this team."

"What does that make the rest of us?" asked Buck.

Chris grinned. "You don't want to know."

"I'll make the call," Josiah agreed.

"Just tell him we need him out here ASAP," Chris suggested.

Josiah smiled and returned to the living room to make the call.

"I'm hungry," JD said. "What's for breakfast?"

"I don't know," Vin answered. "Hey Ez, what're you makin' us for breakfast?"

Ezra arched an eyebrow at him and smiled sardonically. "What would you like?"

"I don't know," Vin shrugged. "Eggs or somethin'."

Ezra nodded. "Mr. Larabee?"

"Sounds good to me."

"Gentlemen?" He turned to the rest of the group.

"Eggs have too much cholesterol," Nathan said flatly.

"I'm havin' cereal," Buck said absently.

Ezra ignored the obvious snubs and turned to JD inquiringly.

"I'll have what they're having," JD said hesitantly, indicating Vin and Chris.

As Josiah re-entered the room, JD asked, "Hey Josiah. Ezra's making breakfast. You want some?"

"No, thank you," he replied. "Coffee will be just fine."

"Travis coming?" Chris directed his question to Josiah.

"Yeah. Should be here in an hour or so."

"Good," Chris nodded.

"Could you gentlemen kindly vacate the room so I can prepare our morning repast?" Ezra said as he rummaged in the refrigerator.

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"That was excellent, Ez," Chris complimented his undercover agent.

"Yeah," Vin said through his mouthful of omelette.

"And these cinnamon rolls are awesome!" JD said as he grabbed another one off of the plate in the center of the table. "Where'd you learn to make 'em?"

"I observed an elderly aunt prepare them once," Ezra said with shrug, pleased that they enjoyed his cooking.

"Ez's been holdin' out on us, JD," Vin said as he reached for another roll himself. "He cooked me and Chris some really good chicken stuff the other day."

"Will ya show me how to cook sometime, Ez?" JD asked hopefully. "It'd be real great to have something' besides takeout or..." He shuddered. "...Buck's cooking."

"Something edible, you mean," Chris said with a grin.

Ezra chuckled. "Certainly, Mr. Dunne. I could show you a thing or two."

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Josiah sniffed the air appreciatively. "Smells good. I may have to change my mind about breakfast."

Nathan rolled his eyes. "Heart-attack on a plate, that's what it is." He stuffed the last of his English muffin in his mouth and leaned back in the overstuffed chair, trying to ignore the tantalizing odor of cinnamon that wafted from the kitchen.

"Yeah," Buck agreed, setting his spoon in his empty cereal bowl that sat on the coffee table. "I have to watch my girlish figure."

Josiah chuckled and was about to go back into the kitchen for more coffee, when the doorbell rang. The three men looked at one another, before Josiah stood and headed for the door.

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Orrin Travis stood impatiently on the front porch of Larabee's house. He should have known the men would come out here after the funeral; he had been tempted to do so himself, even though he didn't have all of the shared memories of the place that his agents did. Josiah's call had surprised him and he hoped that whatever they wanted him for was important, since he was missing his usual Sunday brunch to be here.

"Josiah," he greeted the large man who opened the door.

"Come in, sir."

Travis followed him inside. "Buck, Nathan." He nodded to the two men sitting in the living room. "What was so important that you had to see me on such short notice?" It was usually best to get right to the point with these men.

"Have a seat, sir," Josiah said, gesturing to an empty chair.

Travis sat, the pleasant aroma in the air making his mouth water, and looked at them questioningly.

JD burst out of the kitchen clutching his cinnamon roll and acknowledged Travis's presence. "Good morning, sir. Would you like a cinnamon roll?"

Travis eyed the exuberant agent curiously, then nodded. "They certainly smell delicious."

"Ez made 'em," JD said over his shoulder as he dashed back into the kitchen.

"Standish is here?" His eyes narrowed and he looked to the other agents for confirmation.

"Yes," Josiah answered. "But that's not why we asked you to come."

"Then what is the reason," Travis asked, a tinge of annoyance in his voice.

"That." Josiah pointed at the kitchen door.

Travis turned his gaze toward the kitchen and felt his heart begin to pound in his chest. Limping through the door was a very-much-alive Chris Larabee, followed by an equally-animated Vin Tanner. It wasn't often that Orrin Travis, Assistant Director of the Denver ATF, found himself speechless, but this was one such occasion. He gaped at the men, his mouth opening and closing silently until he finally found the words. "Sweet Jesus! What in heaven's name is going on?!"

"It's complicated, sir," Chris replied with a crooked smile as he took a seat on the sofa.

"Would you like some coffee?" Ezra asked hesitantly as he stood next to Travis.

Travis nodded, his eyes never leaving his two formerly-deceased agents. "Well? Let's hear it!"

Vin and Chris looked at one another, then began retelling their tale

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"What do you need?" Travis said, his voice hard. He had found himself growing more and more furious as he had heard about what had transpired during the past week. Nobody messed with his boys and got away with it -- not if he had anything to say about it.

"Back-up," Buck answered simply.

"We tracked down the location where they were being held, and it turned out to be an old weather station that isn't being used anymore," JD said, pointing at the map that lay spread out on the coffee table.

"Jarvis said he'd return Monday to finish his little game," Chris said icily. "I want our guys waiting for him when he gets there."

"Gotta send 'em in by chopper," Vin announced. "If Jarvis sees tire tracks in the snow, he'll know somethin's up."

"We can do that," Travis said with a slow nod. "I'll put Team Four on it; they're not doing much right now." Travis looked up at the men and grinned. "Besides, I seem to remember that they owe you boys for saving their bacon on the McLaughlin job."

Chuckles rippled through the assembled men.

"We'll be heading back to our own places this afternoon," Nathan explained. "We don't figure Jarvis will bother watchin' us anymore now that the funeral is over."

"One of us will wait in the woods near the access road here..." Josiah pointed at the map. "...while the rest of us park in this rest area and follow Jarvis after we get the alert."

"We don't know when he's planning to show up, so we'd better have everyone in place early, like 6:00 AM or so," Chris suggested.

"Good plan," Travis nodded. "I'll make sure everything else is ready." He stood and favored Chris and Vin with a broad smile. "Damn good to have you back, boys. Place wouldn't have been the same without you."

"Thank you, sir," Chris said with a smile.

Travis stood and headed for the door. "I'll call you later with the details." His eyes passed over Standish, who had sat unobtrusively in the corner during the discussions, and he briefly considered having a much-needed talk with the man, but then decided it could wait until later. One problem at a time.

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The men spent the rest of the morning going over their plans and, but for Ezra, enjoying each other's company. Ezra had retreated to the kitchen after breakfast, taking his time cleaning up the detritus from his cooking, even to the point of doing the dishes by hand instead of using the dishwasher. He was uncomfortable spending much time in the presence of his other four teammates, their disdainful glances and silence beginning to wear away at his composure.

He seemed to be on a more even keel with JD, and Josiah didn't appear to be as upset with him as before, but Buck and Nathan were another story. He wasn't surprised; they had been his biggest detractors all along. Buck had been afraid that Ezra's apparent unreliability would hurt, or worse, kill, one of the others and his protective nature kicked in against the perceived threat. Nathan had disliked him on sight and had strong opinions on his lack of character and ethics, and Ezra's actions on that first assignment had only cemented his beliefs.

Finally, he could delay no longer and slipped quietly from the kitchen, taking a seat on the far edge of the group. He sat silently, not offering any opinions or participating in any conversations except to answer direct questions. Chris and Vin sent him occasional looks of concern, but Ezra shrugged them off with a smile. They had more important things to worry about than his emotional state.

"We should get going, guys," Nathan suggested with a yawn. "It's two now and we really ought to get some sleep before heading out tonight."

"It takes around four hours to get there from here, so make sure you give yourselves plenty of time," Chris told them.

"Yeah, I figure on leaving around midnight," Buck said. "We can't be sure how early he's gonna show up."

"Good," Josiah said. "Why don't we meet at your place?"

"You comin' too, Ez?" JD asked.

Ezra opened his mouth to answer, but was interrupted by Chris. "He's staying here with us."

Ezra was about to object, when he spotted the slight wink Chris sent his way. "Ah, yes, I believe I will stay and keep these two out of any more trouble."

Buck snorted slightly, but quieted after a glare from Chris. He and the others turned to leave, and Vin noticed that they had seemed relieved that Ezra was not accompanying them. He frowned at that thought, but knew that this was not the time to open that particular can of worms.

Once the door was shut, Ezra turned to the blond leader, his eyebrow arched inquisitively. "You do not expect me to stay here, do you?"

"Hell no," Chris said with a sly grin. "You're drivin' us up there."

"Mr. Larabee..." Ezra began to protest.

"Relax, Ezra," Chris said. "We're going to stay in the car, don't worry."

"Yeah," Vin agreed, nodding vigorously. "We ain't dumb enough to go runnin' around out in the woods again. We just need to be there when that asshole goes down."

"Just like you do," Chris added.

"What about your agreement with the others?"

"Hell, he only promised we wouldn't go with them... and we ain't," Vin said. "We're goin' with you."

"Semantics, Mr. Tanner," Ezra frowned.

"Would you rather we go without you?" Chris asked pointedly.

Ezra studied them for a moment, then slowly nodded. "All right, but if your conditions deteriorate, we will immediately seek out the nearest hospital."

"Deal," Chris agreed.

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Ezra looked over his shoulder at Chris, who sat in the back seat with his leg propped on a pillow, snoring softly. Next to him, Vin reclined in the passenger seat, dozing quietly. Ezra smiled slightly, stifling a yawn. When this was over, he would sleep for a week. His back was throbbing, the long hours of driving taking their toll. He hoped Dr. Landry didn't find out how poorly he had followed her directives.

The sun was beginning to peek over the horizon and Ezra craned his neck slightly to get a glimpse of the main road. They had found this small dirt road on the map before they left the house. It was located a half-mile from the access road leading to the old weather station, in the opposite direction from the rest area where the others were waiting, but close enough to hear their radio conversations. Ezra kept his microphone switched off so as not to inadvertently alert them to his presence. Even though it had been Chris and Vin's decision to be present at the bust, he doubted that would carry much weight with the rest of his teammates.

JD had drawn the short straw and was currently sitting in the bushes at the foot of the access road, complaining occasionally to the others out of sheer boredom. Ezra was bored himself, but didn't want to pull Vin and Chris from their much-needed sleep simply to converse with him. So, he sat quietly, playing a rather cramped game of solitaire on the clipboard on his lap. He nearly dumped the cards all over the car when the call finally came.

"Guys, he's here!" JD's excited whisper came over the earpiece.

"Okay, JD," Buck replied. "Sit tight. We'll be there in a minute."

Ezra shook Vin's shoulder gently. "Mr. Tanner."

"Huh?" Vin blinked sleepily.

"Jarvis has arrived."

"Hot damn!" Vin exclaimed. "Let's go!"

Vin took over the task of waking Chris while Ezra piloted the car onto the highway. They reached the trail shortly after the rest of their team and followed the bumpy road through the woods, staying far enough back so that they wouldn't be seen.

When they arrived at the top, the raid was already in play. Agents surrounded the concrete structure, exchanging fire with those inside. Over the smoke and gunfire, their arrival went unnoticed.

"Stay here," Ezra warned. "I'm going to assist them."

"Be careful, Ez," Vin cautioned.

"Aren't I always?" Ezra gave him a two-fingered salute and slipped out of the car to join the fray.

He crept along the back of Nathan's car, moving alongside JD, who was firing from his position near the front. "What the hell are you doin' here?" he hissed when he noticed Ezra at his side.

"Mr. Tanner and Mr. Larabee were determined to view the event in person," he explained. "With or without my assistance."

"Stubborn..." JD shook his head and continued firing.

Ezra smiled and moved away, edging toward the bushes located to one side of the vehicle. As he arrived, there was a shout from within, and three men suddenly burst from the building. A moment afterward, the building exploded, sending chunks of concrete shooting in all directions. Ezra ducked, narrowly avoiding one such projectile, only to be struck by another directly in the center of his chest. The blow knocked him backwards into the side of Nathan's truck and he slid to the ground, trying to catch his breath.

In front of the building, agents swarmed around the three suspects, who lay either dead or unconscious next to the remains of the structure. Travis had let Team Four in on the miraculous return of Vin and Chris to avoid any excessive violence in the name of vengeance, but that didn't prevent the suspects from succumbing to their own miscalculations. As Ezra watched, Buck approached the crowd of agents, clutching his left wrist with his right hand. Nathan followed on his heels, attempting to examine the injury, while Josiah approached from the other direction, a bleeding gash on his forehead.

"You okay Ez?" JD asked, stopping short when he saw the undercover agent sitting on the ground.

"Just fine, Mr. Dunne," Ezra said, somewhat breathlessly. "I merely had the wind knocked out of me."

JD nodded then rushed to join the others. Taking a careful breath, Ezra pushed himself to his feet and walked toward the other agents, rubbing absently at the ache in his chest. Nathan spotted his approach first and shot him a fierce glare, moving to intercept him.

"What are you doing here?"

Ezra gazed at him calmly for a moment before stepping around him without responding.

Nathan grasped Ezra's shoulder and pulled him around to face him. "I'm talking to you!" he snarled.

"Yes, you are," Ezra replied placidly. He was tired, sore, and sick to death of having to justify his every action to people who would believe what they wanted regardless of what he might say.

Buck then took notice of his presence and stomped toward him angrily. "You're supposed to be watchin' out for Chris and Vin!" he shouted.

"I am," Ezra answered with a smirk. "They're over there in the truck."

"You \*brought\* them here?!" Buck was furious.

"It was either that or let them come by themselves," Ezra said acidly. "Would you have preferred that, Mr. Wilmington?"

Buck glared at him, his fists clenching and unclenching at his sides. Ezra sighed and moved aside, continuing toward the men surrounding the suspects.

"Are they alive?" Ezra asked Agent Tom Harrison.

Harrison looked up at him, an expression of distaste flashing across his face. The grapevine being what it was, Standish's recent actions were well known to all of the ATF agents. He hesitated a moment before replying flatly, "Jarvis is dead, along with one of his gorillas. The other one took a hit, so he'll be visiting the ER before we haul his ass to jail."

"What happened?"

"Jarvis was gonna blow the place with Tanner and Larabee inside, only he set the timer before he made sure they were still there." He shook his head in disbelief. "Idiot didn't leave himself anyway to shut the thing off if he changed his mind."

"And his time ran out," Ezra said quietly. "Thank you." He had seen the look Harrison gave him, but forced himself to ignore it. It wasn't the first time he had been subjected to such expressions, though he had hoped to never experience them again after leaving the FBI.

Ezra turned to leave, so that he could report the news to Chris and Vin, who were probably impatient to hear from him.

"Standish," a voice barked behind him.

"Yes sir," Ezra said, reluctantly turning to face the Assistant Director.

"I thought you were sitting this one out," Travis asked coolly.

"Mr. Larabee and Mr. Tanner insisted upon being present for the festivities," he explained yet again.

Travis looked over Ezra's shoulder toward the black sport-utility vehicle. Vin, watching from an open window, waved at him. A faint smile flickered across his stern face.

"Stubborn S.O.B.'s, aren't they?"

"Quite," Ezra agreed.

The rest of Team Seven joined them, and Travis looked at each one in turn. "Good job, gentlemen. Now, why don't you go round up those two idiots sitting in that truck over there and escort them to my helicopter." He gestured behind him to the short path that led to the helipad.

"Bradley," Travis called to Rick Bradley, leader of Team Four. "Can you have one of your guys drive Agent Jackson's vehicle back to the office?"

Bradley nodded, and Travis turned to Nathan with a smile. "You boys come along so we can make sure Larabee and Tanner get to the hospital where they belong."

Buck grinned broadly. "Yes sir." He, JD, Josiah and Nathan hurried toward the car to retrieve their recalcitrant friends.

Travis pointed at Ezra, his smile turning to a frown. "I want to see you in my office when you get back." He turned abruptly and headed toward the helipad.

Ezra watched him go, followed by the boisterous members of his team. They were quickly joined by the rest of Team Four, who were eager to see Chris and Vin for themselves. He smiled sadly as he found himself alone in the cold once again. Some things never changed.

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Ezra sat in his car and stared out into the half-empty parking garage. It was nearing 7:00 PM and he was exhausted. He had been up since 10:00 PM the previous night and had spent more than ten hours driving. His back was killing him and he felt unequivocally horrible. It was tempting to simply go home and face the Assistant Director tomorrow, but he knew he would sleep easier once he got this over with. Though, Ezra did wonder if he would be leaving here this day as a member of the ATF or as someone destined for the unemployment line. With a weary groan, he opened the door and went to face the inevitable.

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Travis looked at his watch and sighed. Standish would be arriving shortly and he still had no idea what he wanted to say to the man. Part of him wanted to simply fire his ass and be done with it, but Chris and Vin's explanation of the events leading to their supposed deaths merited some consideration. He could understand the undercover agent's reluctance to face the rest of his team, given the abuse he had endured at the accident scene. He had already reprimanded Agent Wilmington for that incident. The explosion hadn't been Standish's fault, but that didn't excuse his later actions. Deserting the team, as he had done once before, was simply not acceptable, especially in a time of such crisis. Travis was still pondering the dilemma when the soft knock sounded on the door.

"Come in," he called, already knowing who was there.

Ezra pushed through the door and stood before his desk, his usual poker face tainted by lines of stress and exhaustion.

"You look like shit, Agent," Travis commented.

Ezra winced at his directness, but shrugged indifferently. "Yes, probably."

Getting straight to the point, he asked in a demanding tone, "What do you have to say for yourself?"

Ezra blinked against the sudden wave of dizziness that washed over him, then replied carefully. "Nothing you'd want to hear."

Travis felt his temper rising. "Agent Standish, I will not tolerate your flippant attitude! Now I want an answer!"

Ezra smirked weakly. "You and everyone else. Unfortunately, I have none to give. Not that it matters anyway. You've already made up your mind... haven't you?"

Travis was about respond with a harsh reprimand when the arrogant southerner's face suddenly lost all color and he toppled silently to the floor. "What the hell?" Travis jumped up from his seat and hurried to the unconscious agent's side, placing a hand on his forehead. Ezra's skin was cold and clammy and his pulse was beating far too rapidly. Travis wasn't a doctor, but he knew that spelled trouble for the young man. He reached for the phone and dialed 911.

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Six men looked up when the door to the room opened.

"How are you boys doing?" AD Travis asked as he entered the room to which Chris and Vin had been admitted.

"Be better if they'd let me outta here," Vin complained.

Travis smiled a bit at that. None of these men were known for their patience with doctors and hospitals.

"I didn't think we'd see you again tonight, sir," Josiah asked curiously.

Travis sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose. "I hadn't planned on it, but Agent Standish had other ideas."

"Ezra?" Chris inquired sharply. "Where is he?" He had been more than a little perturbed that Travis had made Ezra drive home by himself, while the rest of the team had a much shorter ride in the helicopter.

"In surgery," Travis replied. He lifted a hand to forestall the questions he knew were forthcoming. "I don't know what's going on yet. We were having a little discussion in my office when he suddenly collapsed." He looked up at them with tired eyes. "They almost lost him in the ambulance -- something about his blood pressure."

A stunned silence filled the room as the men tried to comprehend what they had just been told. Finally, JD's distressed voice broke the stillness. "I didn't think he got hit that hard."

"What are you talking about, JD?" Chris asked more sharply than he intended.

"Um, when that building blew up, one of the pieces hit him in the chest." JD looked up at them guiltily. "He seemed okay."

"Damn," Vin whispered.

"Josiah, Nate," Chris called to the two men. "Can you see if you can find out anything?"

Both men nodded grimly and left the room.

"I never saw anything coming either, son," Travis said comfortingly to JD, who still sat with a stricken look on his face. "Hell, he was his usual \*charming\* self when he came into my office." He shrugged helplessly. "There simply wasn't any warning."

"To us, anyway," Chris said with a sarcastic snort. "He could be bleeding all over the floor and the obstinate bastard would still insist that he was 'fine'."

"Sounds like some other people I know," Travis said with a smile, looking pointedly at the two men in their hospital beds.

"He's got your number, guys," Buck said with a chuckle.

Nathan and Josiah returned a few minutes later.

"Anything?" JD asked hopefully.

"They couldn't tell us much," Josiah said apologetically. "Only that he has internal bleeding and they're operating on him now."

"That explains the blood pressure problem," Nathan determined. "All we can do is hope they caught it in time."

"I asked the nurse to have the doctor come speak to us here when she was through," Josiah added.

The seven men shared a grim look and settled in to wait.

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Dr. Beth Landry pushed her way wearily through the door. She had to suppress a smile at the way the seven hard-looking men suddenly came to attention at her entrance. Visiting hours had long since passed, yet these men remained, awaiting word of their friend. Her gaze lingered on the men occupying the two beds in the room. The story of the extraordinary return of the two agents had spread through the hospital like a firestorm, and she found herself feeling immensely grateful that these fine men had been spared. There were far too few of the 'good guys' these days, and she was glad that these two would live to fight another day.

"Doc?" Vin asked tentatively, noting the faraway look on her face. "How's Ezra?"

"Gentlemen," she sighed, pulling herself from her thoughts. "Mr. Standish is in critical condition. He re-injured himself and nearly bled to death."

"What do you mean, 're-injured'?" Chris asked.

"Mr. Standish was nearly killed in that explosion last week," she explained, figuring that the others hadn't informed him of that incident yet. From the blank looks on their faces, she suddenly realized what had happened. She sighed, rubbing her forehead tiredly. "I take it he didn't inform you of his stay with us?"

"No, he didn't," Josiah said.

"I should have known," she muttered. These men all seemed to suffer the same lack of common sense when it came to taking care of themselves. "Your Mr. Standish arrived in my emergency room after that explosion and collapsed, much like he did today. He was

apparently thrown quite forcefully against a tree and suffered a deep puncture wound that nicked his kidney and renal artery."

"Shit," Nathan commented. Those were serious and potentially fatal injuries.

She regarded them with a frown. "I specifically told him to avoid strenuous activity and driving. Apparently, he doesn't follow directions well, as he has managed to reopen his wound and acquire a few new ones."

"Hell, he's been lugging our sorry butts around since Thursday," Vin said gloomily.

"Literally," Chris added darkly.

Dr. Landry reached into her pocket and removed a plastic bag, handing it to JD, who sat the closest to her. "I forgot to give that to Mr. Standish when I discharged him last Tuesday," she explained. "I didn't know if it might be needed for evidence or something."

"What is it?" Buck asked curiously.

"It's the pieces of the vehicle that I removed from his body," she replied.

"Jesus," Vin said, leaning his head back against his pillow.

"Is he going to be all right?" Travis asked.

"Yes," she replied. "As long as he does what he's told this time and gets plenty of rest."

"Can we see him?" asked JD.

"One at a time," she said. "And don't get in the way of my nurses."

"Thanks, Doc," JD said.

"I'll keep you informed of any changes in his condition," she said as she left the room.

"I'm gonna go see him," JD said determinedly, quickly following her out the door.

The other men sat in guilty silence, wondering why they hadn't taken greater notice of his injuries. All of them hoped they would have a chance to make things right.

"Well, now we know why he wasn't in the office," Josiah said sadly.

"Stubborn fool," Nathan said. "Why didn't he say anything?"

"After the way you guys treated him, can you blame him?" Chris asked pointedly.

"He tell you about that?" Buck inquired.

"No, Jarvis did," Chris replied.

"Jarvis? He was there?" Nathan said with surprise.

"Yeah," Vin nodded. "He waited until Ez got a good look at what was supposed to be us sittin' in the jeep before he blew it up."

"Hell, Chris. We didn't even know he saw it," Buck explained. "He didn't tell us."

Chris rolled his eyes. "He watched two of his friends get blown up right in front of him, and from what the Doc says, looks like he was pretty messed up himself. I'm surprised he could remember his own name."

"Why wasn't it in the police report?" Travis asked.

"They only sent us their final report, not any individual statements," said Josiah.

"He still should have told us," Nathan insisted.

Chris snorted. "He probably figured you guys would jump all over his ass again if he showed his face."

"Sounds like you gentlemen need a refresher course in teamwork," Travis stated. "Maybe I should sign you up for one of those team-building retreats." All of the men grimaced at the thought.

"I think we can handle this, sir," Chris said confidently. "We'll work it out our own way."

"Yeah," Vin agreed. "I don't think this bunch would react too well to outsiders tellin' 'em what to do. I know I wouldn't like it."

"All right, but I expect to see results," Travis warned. "You're too good a team to let things fall apart like this. You're not going to encourage teamwork, especially with someone like Standish, by beating up on each other or tossing accusations around every time the chips are down."

"Ezra don't make it easy," Buck said with a sigh.

"I know," Travis said with a sigh. "I find it difficult to talk to the man myself."

"He's used to being the scapegoat," Chris said, shaking his head in disgust. "When he was with the FBI, the blame always seemed to fall on him, no matter what happened."

"He expects it," Josiah agreed sadly. "So he does nothing to defend himself."

"Well, we're going to change that," Chris said. "Whether he likes it or not."

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Ezra looked fragile. That was the first thing JD noticed when he stepped quietly into the room. Tubes and wires were attached to his body, his skin was pale gray, looking death-like in contrast to the white sheets, as he lay there, unnaturally still. "God, Ez," JD said, swallowing nervously as he stood next to the unconscious man. "Ya look terrible, man," he continued. "I'm sorry I didn't pay more attention to how you were feeling."

JD reached down and took Ezra's cold hand in his. "You know, all of us are worried about you. Even AD Travis is here. You scared him good passin' out in his office like that." JD smiled slightly. "I bet nobody's ever done that before."

"You gotta wake up soon, Ez," JD pleaded. "I want to tell you how sorry I am about the way I acted. I was a real jerk and I'm sorry." He toyed with the edge of the sheet, standing quietly by the bed until the nurse gently tapped his shoulder to indicate his time was up. Tossing a last look over his shoulder, he headed back to Chris and Vin's room.

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The voice slowly filtered through his muddled consciousness, though he couldn't quite discern what it was saying. Slowly, his consciousness began to return and Ezra was able to determine that the voice murmuring nearby belonged to Buck. With great effort, he cracked an eye open and confirmed what his ears were telling him.

Buck was seated in a chair next to his bed, reading aloud from a magazine. Ezra closed his eye, wondering what the mustached man was doing there. Their recent encounters had been anything but friendly, and Buck was the last person Ezra expected to be sitting with him. He frowned slightly, wondering what he had done to put himself back into the hospital. No answer was forthcoming from his sluggish brain, so instead he focused on the words Buck was reciting.

"... thirty-eight, twenty-five, thirty-six. Blonde, blue-eyed nymphet likes to swim naked in the surf and do it in elevators." Buck paused and chuckled. "What'cha think, Ez? Sounds pretty good to me."

Unable to resist, Ezra smiled faintly and opened his eye again, turning his head toward the other man. Only Buck would read to him from Playboy.

Seeing movement from the corner of his eye, Buck turned toward the bed, breaking out into a grin when he saw that Ezra was awake. "Bout time you woke up," he said cheerfully. "We've been waitin' on you for two days."

Two days? Ezra frowned. He didn't remember getting hurt again. The last thing he remembered was standing in the Assistant Director's office receiving a reprimand. "Wha...?" he started to ask, when the nurse came in and hustled a protesting Buck out of the room. She checked his monitors then moved aside as Dr. Landry stepped into the room.

"Well, it's good to see those eyes open, Mr. Standish," she said with a smile. "You gave everyone quite a scare, you know."

No, he didn't know. Ezra gave her a confused stare and attempted to speak. "What hap..." he trailed off into a cough that sent pain ricocheting through his back.

"Relax, Mr. Standish," she urged him as she poured some water into a cup and gave him a drink. "You managed to ignore all of my instructions and reopen that wound of yours. You're very lucky that you received help as quickly as you did, otherwise there would be some very upset men attending your funeral."

She folded her arms and frowned at him, a very familiar occurrence for him lately. She was right, of course. He had done everything she had warned him against. Ezra looked at her guiltily, hoping he wasn't going to be subjected to a long tirade about how poorly he followed instructions. He had experienced far too many of those already in his life and he didn't think there was anything she could say to him that he hadn't heard before.

"Sorry," he whispered quietly, looking away.

"Well, from what your friends tell me, there were some extenuating circumstances," she said kindly. "But, I expect total cooperation from you this time... and I think there are six men who will be more than happy to help me out."

Ezra nodded, but groaned inwardly. It appeared that he was going to be subjected to the mother-hen treatment himself, though he did rather doubt that all of his teammates would be participating. Even though Buck was there when he awakened, Ezra didn't think he or Nathan would choose to spend any more time with him than necessary. They had made their opinions clear at the bust. Since Chris and Vin would be subjected to their own share of fussing, Ezra didn't believe they would stifle him too badly; they would be more likely to yell at him for keeping the truth about his condition from them. He sighed and cast a furtive glance at the door, wondering if he could escape unnoticed.

Dr. Landry smiled at the expression on his face. "It's not so bad. Most people would enjoy the chance to lounge around in bed."

Ezra gave her a wan smile. "Yes, but those people don't have to be subjected to the unbearable fussing that my associates are able to dispense."

"It's a small price to pay for your health," she reminded him.

Ezra yawned and nodded at her, sleep tugging at his eyelids.

"You rest now." Dr. Landry squeezed his hand.

Ezra started to form a reply, but was sound asleep before any words could leave his mouth.

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The next time he awoke, Ezra found himself in a different room, one that was humming with activity. A glance to his left confirmed that he was now in a regular room with Chris and Vin. Chris lay in the bed next to him, while Vin occupied the bed by the window. Every available surface seemed to be covered with vases of flowers or fruit baskets. It seemed that word of Chris and Vin's return from the dead was out.

The rest of his team, minus Nathan, milled around the room, talking or watching the rerun of Star Trek someone had found on television. Seated next to his bed, Josiah was reading a book, occasionally glancing up at the television.

Ezra shifted slightly, eliciting a sharp pain from his back. A soft groan escaped him before he could prevent it. Josiah turned to him and smiled.

"Welcome back, brother."

At Josiah's words, the rest of the men turned to look over at him. JD jumped up from his chair and came over to Ezra's side. "Hey Ez. How're ya feelin'?"

"Fine," he said hoarsely.

JD rolled his eyes. "Yeah, and Buck just took a vow of chastity."

The other men laughed, and even Ezra had to chuckle, though he regretted the pain the motion caused him.

"So how are you really feeling," Josiah asked.

"Dreadful," Ezra muttered, wishing they would all go away and leave him to suffer in peace.

"That's what happens when you don't follow doctor's orders," Chris proclaimed with an amused grin.

Ezra shot him the best glare he could muster then turned away, muttering obscenities under his breath. He knew this was only the beginning of the torture he would have to endure at their hands.

"You really freaked out AD Travis," JD commented.

"Good," Ezra said with a hint of a smile.

"Better not let him hear you say that," Vin warned.

"I don't intend to," Ezra replied.

Nathan's arrival interrupted the conversation, and JD and Buck immediately rushed over to relieve him of the bags he was carrying.

"I'm starved," JD said as he dug through the bag looking for his food.

Buck had found his burger and fries and was digging in with a blissful expression on his face. Nathan removed deli sandwiches for himself and Josiah as well as drinks for everyone.

"Couldn't you guys eat that somewhere else?" Vin whined. "We still gotta eat mystery meat and green jello, ya know."

"Here." Buck tossed him a package of cookies. "We figured you might want something edible."

Vin grinned and eagerly opened the package. "You want some Chris?" he asked, stuffing a cookie into his mouth.

"No thanks," Chris said, shaking his head with amusement.

"How 'bout you, Ez?"

"No, thank you," Ezra said. Just the smell of all the food in the room was making him nauseous, probably due to the painkillers he was being given.

The men ate their dinner while watching one of the Lethal Weapon movies being shown on a local channel, punctuating the movie with their own comments about the procedural deficiencies and inaccurate special effects. An orderly arrived, delivering meals for the three bedridden men, drawing comments of sympathy from the others.

"Man, that looks awful," JD said, making a face.

"Yeah," Buck agreed. "What's that brown stuff supposed to be?"

"How can something that looks so bad be healthy?" Chris wondered aloud, poking at the shapeless mass on his plate.

Ezra wrinkled his nose in distaste and pushed his meal away, opting to eat only the orange jello that had been provided. He actually liked jello, though he would never admit it to his associates.

"You should eat your dinner, Ez," Nathan urged.

"I don't believe my stomach will tolerate this sad excuse for sustenance," he replied dismissively.

Chris eyed him with concern, knowing that the man hadn't eaten for more than two days. He looked to Nathan, who shrugged helplessly. They couldn't make him eat if he didn't want to.

Ezra finished his jello and apple juice, then found himself yawning sleepily, despite the fact that he had only been awake for a few hours. He had just about fallen asleep when the doctor arrived, shooing the visitors out of the room and drawing the curtain around his bed.

"Mr. Standish." She shook his arm gently. "I need to examine you."

Ezra mumbled incomprehensibly, but opened his eyes and glared at her. "Is that necessary?"

Dr. Landry smiled at him. "Someone's cranky today."

Ezra rolled his eyes and sighed.

"Behave yourself, Ezra," Chris called from the other side of the curtain.

Ezra made a rude gesture, knowing that Chris wouldn't see it.

"Now that was uncalled for," Dr. Landry said sternly, though a suggestion of a smile played on her lips. "Let's see how you're doing." She checked his chart and the various tubes still connected to his body, then began poking and probing at his back.

Ezra gritted his teeth, flinching when she touched a particularly sensitive spot.

"That's still a bit tender?"

"Yes," Ezra said in a pained voice.

"Well, we did have to go back in and stitch you up again," she reminded him. After a bit more poking and prodding, she stated, "If you keep doing as you're told, I think you can be out of here in four or five days."

Ezra grimaced, but didn't protest. It wouldn't do him any good, especially with Chris and Vin within earshot. He would acquiesce and be a well-behaved patient... for now. "Thank you, doctor," he said quietly.

Dr. Landry drew the curtains back and smiled. "I'll see you tomorrow."

"How you doin'?" Vin asked.

"Just fine, Mr. Tanner," Ezra replied, closing his eyes.

"You sure about that?" asked Chris. "Ezra?" Chris called again when the undercover agent didn't respond.

"He's asleep," Vin said, noting the deep, even rhythm of his breathing.

The other four men returned to the room, and Chris immediately shushed them, pointing toward Ezra. They immediately dropped their voices and quietly took their seats.

"How's he doing?" Josiah asked, looking at the slumbering man with concern.

"Fine," Chris replied. "But he's going to be here for a few days."

"Not surprising," Nathan said. "He messed himself up pretty good."

"Yeah, all three of us are going to be on desk duty for a little while," Chris said with a sigh.

Vin groaned. "I hate desk duty."

"Sorry pard, but there isn't much call for one-armed sharpshooters these days," Buck said with a snicker.

"Fuck you, Bucklin," Vin muttered.

"Hey guys, we better get going before Attila the Nurse kicks us out again," JD said, referring the stocky, gray-haired nurse who had strictly enforced the visiting hour rules the previous evening. Neither Buck's charm nor JD pleading puppy-dog eyes had worked on her.

"She reminds me of a drill sergeant I had once," Buck said with a shudder.

"We'll see ya tomorrow," Vin said as the rest of the guys collected their things and shuffled out the door.

Vin sighed. "Think they'll let us out of here soon?"

Chris shrugged. "Probably. We weren't too bad off when we got here, so there wasn't much else the docs could do for us anyway."

"Thanks to Ez," Vin pointed out.

"Yeah." Chris frowned. "Nathan said those antibiotics he was giving us were the ones he was supposed to be taking for himself. He found the bottle in his bag and it was only dated last week."

"I can't figure him out," Vin said with a sigh. "He acts like a selfish bastard half the time, then he goes an' does somethin' like this."

"I don't understand him either," Chris said quietly. "But I aim to try."

Ezra slept on, completely oblivious to their conversation.

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Ezra flipped through the television channels apathetically. It was Sunday afternoon, and there was nothing even remotely interesting to watch in the limited selection of channels available in the hospital television service. Finally, he shut it off in disgust and gazed out the window of his room at the gloomy, overcast day.

Chris and Vin had both been released the day before, and he had been moved to a private room in order to spare any potential roommates from the antics of his associates. The others had not been able to visit him yet, since AD Travis had needed them for backup on an important bust. Chris and Vin were staying at Chris's ranch and had been ordered not to drive for a few days. Other than a phone call earlier that day, Ezra hadn't heard from them.

He smiled briefly when he remembered Chris's awkward apology for his behavior prior to the explosion. Ezra understood how his approaching anniversary could make the man more irritable than usual, though the apology had taken him by surprise. He had assumed that Chris's anger was a result of something he had done, since he seemed to have an uncanny knack for pissing people off without realizing it. It was confusing to discover that he had been wrong. Yet again, he had been caught off-guard by one of these men, and he decided to simply give up trying to figure them out. It was giving him too much of a headache.

Ezra picked up a copy of 'Guns & Ammo' that Vin had left for him and flipped through it, trying to find something worth reading. He actually found an interesting article on gun imports and was totally engrossed in it when AD Travis quietly entered the room.

"Standish," Travis called.

Ezra looked up from the magazine, his eyes widening in surprise at the identity of his visitor. "Good afternoon, sir," he addressed his superior.

"How are you feeling?" Travis asked, moving toward the side of the bed.

"Much better, thank you," Ezra replied.

"I'm glad to hear that," Travis said. "You gave us all quite a scare. I've never had anyone pass out in my office before."

"Sorry about that," Ezra said, an embarrassed flush stealing across his face.

"Not your fault," Travis replied. "I do, however, have issues with you keeping your injuries from the rest of us."

Ezra swallowed nervously. "I didn't wish to distract anyone from the pursuit of the murderous Mr. Jarvis. That was much more important than my physical infirmities."

Travis sighed. "Ezra, you're just as important as anyone else, regardless of what others might say. You have to remember that you're part of a team now, and you have responsibilities to that team. You can't just run off on your own anytime you want to."

Ezra fiddled with his blankets for a moment before answering. "I cannot be a team player if the team doesn't want me there." He looked up at Travis. "I assumed I was doing everyone a favor by removing my presence and averting any further conflict. I did not wish to hinder the investigation in any way."

"I can understand your feelings on this; Larabee and Tanner explained the situation to me. But I don't want another incident like this to occur," Travis said. "I've already spoken to the rest of the boys, and I hope you'll make an effort to work through this."

"I will try," Ezra said hesitantly. "But I'm not wagering on the outcome."

"That's a first," Travis said with a wry grin.

Ezra shrugged and gave him a small smile. "I only bet on sure things."

"Well, I think you might be surprised." Travis gave him a stern look. "I hope you'll listen to your doctor this time."

Ezra merely grinned in response.

Travis chuckled and shook his head. "You take care of yourself, son."

Ezra sighed as he watched Travis leave. He hoped the Assistant Director was correct... but he wasn't going to get his hopes up.

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He was bored. And restless. He didn't want to be here anymore, despite the doctor's insistence. Finally, Ezra couldn't stand it anymore and calmly pressed the call button. The nurse arrived and he requested to speak to the doctor. Since Dr. Landry had that day off, Dr. Carter, who was covering her patients, entered the room instead.

"What can I do for you, Mr. Standish?" he asked pleasantly.

"I'm leaving," Ezra said in an equally pleasant tone of voice.

Dr. Carter frowned. "I'm sorry, but that's not possible. Dr. Landry specifically told me that you weren't to be released until Tuesday at the earliest."

"Yes, I expect that's true," Ezra replied placidly. "However, I do not wish to stay any longer and you are not legally allowed to keep me here against my wishes."

"Mr. Standish, it would be extremely unwise for you to leave at this juncture."

"Dr. Carter, I am not scheduled for any procedures, tests or physical therapy, and I can rest more easily at home than I can here," Ezra explained patiently. "And I assure you, I intend to do nothing more than climb into my comfortable bed and sleep, so I suggest you have the nurse remove these attachments," he lifted his arm to display his IV, "...so that I can be on my way."

The doctor frowned, but could see that Ezra was determined. "Very well. I'll get the necessary paperwork."

Ezra called to him as he was leaving. "Oh, and if you attempt to delay me while you call Dr. Landry or anyone else, I will simply remove these tubes myself and leave without the paperwork."

The doctor frowned, muttering under his breath about patients who thought they knew better than their doctors. Ezra grinned with relief, knowing that he was going to be free shortly.

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He drove carefully, trying to avoid as many potholes as possible. Though it was against the doctor's orders, Ezra had thought it best to drive his own vehicle home, since the Jaguar was still in the parking garage where he had left it after his previous hospital stay. It was a short drive and Ezra wasn't planning to go anywhere else, so he didn't think it would be too great a risk.

He was thankful to whoever invented automatic garage door openers as he arrived home, driving his car effortlessly into its enclosed space. A smile lit Ezra's face when he finally entered his apartment and locked the door behind him. It was a relief to be in his own home again, free from nurses and visitors, however well-meaning they might be.

Ezra knew it wouldn't take long for the others to discover his escape from the hospital, so he quickly penned a note to them, which he taped securely to his door. Then, he proceeded to disconnect his doorbell and shut off the ringers on his telephones so that he could rest relatively undisturbed. As a last measure, he recorded a message on his answering machine that assured his teammates that he was quite well and simply wanted some peace and quiet. Satisfied with his efforts, he locked his door and went into the kitchen to make himself a cup of tea before retreating to his bedroom and his soft bed.

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"What do you mean, he's gone?!" Chris barked into the phone.

"We dropped by to see him after the bust, and he was gone. Checked himself out AMA," Josiah explained on the other end of the phone. "The doctor tried to stop him, but he was determined to leave. Said he'd rest better at home."

"Shit," Chris cursed. "I should have expected something like this. You try his place yet?"

"We called, but he left a message on his machine saying he's fine and just wants some peace and quiet."

"He does have a point about that," Chris admitted. "Still, I'd feel better if one of you went over there to check on him."

"We're on our way now," Josiah replied. "I'll let you know what happens."

"Thanks Josiah." Chris hung up the phone with a sigh.

"Ezra flew the coop?" Vin asked with a grin.

"Yep," Chris replied with a frustrated shake of his head. "Stubborn cuss took off as soon as he had a chance."

"Can't say I blame him," Vin said. "The food sucks and you can't sleep for shit with them wakin' you up all the time."

"Yeah. I just hope he stays put and doesn't hurt himself again. The rest of the guys are going over to check on him now."

Fifteen minutes later, the phone rang again. "Yeah?" Chris answered.

"Chris, he's at home, but he won't let us in," Josiah said, sounding somewhat amused. "He left a note on the door. It says: 'Gentlemen, I am quite well and simply wish to sleep undisturbed, so please go away and leave me alone. Sincerely, Ezra P. Standish!'"

"He's got all the bases covered doesn't he," Chris said with a chuckle.

"Buck tried knocking, but all we got was a grouchy yell telling us to go away."

"Well, at least we know he's all right," Chris sighed.

"I'd suggest we just leave him be for now," Josiah said. "He'll talk to us when he's ready."

"All right," Chris agreed. "Thanks, Josiah."

"No luck, huh," Vin said knowingly after Chris had hung up the phone.

"Nope. He wouldn't let 'em in."

"He can't stay in there forever," Vin said. "Reckon he'll let us in when he's ready."

"That's what Josiah said," Chris replied. "It might do him good to have some time to himself. I know it was kind of nice to get away from the rest of the guys for awhile."

"They can be a little bit much to take sometimes," Vin agreed.

"I hope he doesn't hide out too long, though," Chris said thoughtfully. "We still have some talking to do with that fool. I think he has a lot to learn about being part of a family."

"Ain't no surprise with a mother like Maude."

Chris scowled darkly, remembering how Maude had been 'too busy attending to social obligations' to visit her son in the hospital when he had called to inform her of his condition. "I suppose it ain't."

"I was jealous of 'im when I found out his ma was still livin'," Vin admitted quietly. "But now, I ain't so sure. 'Least my ma gave a damn."

"She's not much of a mother," Chris agreed. "Hell, she dumped him at boarding schools his whole life; it's no wonder he doesn't know how to deal with anybody givin' a shit about him."

"Too bad it takes somethin' like this to make us understand 'im better."

Chris nodded in agreement, silently vowing to bring the reluctant southerner into their family.

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The final credits for 'Casablanca' rolled across the screen as Ezra sat, lounging casually on his couch, dressed in comfortable pair of sweatpants and a matching sweatshirt. With a steaming mug of tea in hand, he smiled and stretched, feeling only a small twinge in his back. Three days of uninterrupted rest had done wonders and he was feeling better than he had in days. He was surprised that his teammates had actually respected his wishes and left him alone, but he was grateful for the time to himself. He had slept until noon today and spent the afternoon watching old movies on the classic movie cable channel. It was a pleasant and relaxing way to spend the day.

Ezra set his mug down and stood, heading to the kitchen to make himself some dinner. It was early, but he was hungry, having eaten so little during his stay in the hospital. There was a knock on his front door just as he passed it, and he stopped, debating whether he should answer. He stepped toward the door and looked through the peephole, surprised to see Chris and Vin standing outside. Slowly, he unlocked the door and opened it.

"Mr. Larabee, Mr. Tanner." Ezra greeted them, surprised by their presence. "I didn't realize that you were allowed to drive as of yet."

"Technically, we're not," Chris said. "But, that didn't seem to stop you, did it?"

Ezra smiled. "No, it didn't." He gestured inside. "Would you like to come in?"

"Yep," Vin said, stepping into the apartment.

"Would you like something to drink?" Ezra asked, moving into the kitchen. "I'm afraid all I have is juice in the refrigerator, but there's coffee and tea in the cupboard."

"Coffee sounds good," Chris replied as he gazed around the apartment curiously. As far as he knew, none of them had been inside Ezra's apartment yet. It was a spacious place with a large set of French doors leading to a balcony, where there was a nice view of the mountains. There wasn't much in the way of decoration inside, other than a couple of art prints on the walls and a vase of silk flowers on the hall table. The sofa and chair were dark blue, blending nicely with the pale blue carpeting and the white walls. It was a neat and tasteful place, but didn't have a lived-in look. Chris wondered if the bedroom had any personal touches or if it was as sterile as the rest of the apartment.

Vin nodded and took a seat on the couch. "Hey look! 'High Noon' is coming on."

"I haven't seen that one in years," Chris commented as he sat in the overstuffed chair that sat next to the couch, watching Ezra move around the kitchen.

Ezra started the coffeemaker then returned to the living room and his cup of tea.

"How're you feeling?" Chris asked him, eyeing him critically.

"I'm feeling quite well," Ezra replied truthfully.

"You look better," Chris replied.

"It is much easier to rest in one's own surroundings," Ezra said with a shrug. "You and Mr. Tanner are looking better yourselves."

"We're all right," Vin said. "The doc is lettin' us go back to work on Monday. Says you did good work helpin' us."

Ezra gave a self-deprecating shrug. "I only did what was necessary."

"Yes, and we're very grateful," Chris said sincerely.

"Yeah, thanks, Ez."

Ezra looked away, uncomfortable with the praise. His stomach suddenly rumbled and his face flushed with embarrassment.

"Hungry?" Vin asked with a grin, glad that it was someone else's stomach making the noise for a change.

"Obviously," Ezra said with a self-conscious smile. "I was going to see if there was anything edible in the kitchen, but I believe I'll order from the deli instead. Would either of you like anything?" He opened the drawer of the small table that stood near the front door and removed a folded menu, handing it to the two men.

Vin took the menu eagerly.

"I could eat," Chris said slowly, mentally chastising himself for not bringing food with him, given the hour. He hadn't even been sure that Ezra would talk to them, let alone invite them to dinner.

"I'll have a roast beef on a bulkie roll, a pastrami on rye, an order of potato wedges, and a piece of apple pie," Vin declared, passing the menu to Chris, who shared an amused look with Ezra.

Chris perused the menu quickly. "Make mine a roast beef on wheat and a bowl of beef barley soup... and some apple pie."

Ezra phoned in the order, adding his own order of a smoked turkey sandwich and chicken soup. As an afterthought, he decided that apple pie sounded good and added that to his

order as well. He settled himself on the couch to wait and was soon absorbed in the movie along with Chris and Vin.

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"Man, that deli has great sandwiches," Vin said, patting his stomach contentedly.

"Yes, they do," Ezra agreed.

"Wonder if they'd deliver to the office," Chris mused.

"I believe the federal building falls within their service area," Ezra supplied helpfully.

"Good," Vin said. "I have a feelin' we'll be ordering lunch from there a lot from now on."

'High Noon' had ended and was followed by 'North by Northwest'. All of them admitted to enjoying the Hitchcock film and settled in to watch it. The opening credits were still rolling when a knock sounded on the door. The three men looked at each other and grinned.

"Two guesses who that is," Vin said with a chuckle.

"No dice," Chris answered. "They probably just got off of work."

Ezra answered the door, much to the surprise of the four men standing in the hall. "Come in," he said pleasantly as he returned to his seat on the sofa next to Vin.

Buck entered first, followed by JD, Nathan, and Josiah.

"Looks like all the invalids are here," Buck commented with a grin upon seeing Chris and Vin in the apartment, lounging comfortably in front of the television.

"Hi guys," JD said affably. "We went for pizza at Mario's and we figured we'd drop by and see how Ez was doin'."

"You're not supposed to be driving yet," Nathan said sternly, glaring at Chris and Vin.

Josiah chuckled. "It appears that all three of our brothers share the same disregard for doctor's orders."

Ezra lifted an eyebrow and gazed at Chris and Vin, who smiled in response.

"Cool! A big screen TV!" JD stood, gawking at Ezra's large television.

"Guess I know where the Super Bowl party's gonna be," Buck said.

Ezra grimaced at the thought, eliciting chuckles from Chris and Vin.

"How're you feelin'?" Nathan asked, concern etched on his face.

"I'm doing well, thank you," Ezra replied, still unused to the level of concern his teammates were showing him these days. He was starting to believe that they truly cared -- an alien concept to someone who had never had anyone show him that kind of emotion in the past.

"Looks like you're eating better, anyway," Nathan commented, gesturing toward the sandwich wrappers and empty pie containers that lay on the coffee table.

"Yeah, Ez found this great deli," Vin said appreciatively.

"See, I told ya we didn't need to bring any pizza with us," JD said, punching Buck in the arm.

Ezra looked at the empty wrappers on the table, suddenly embarrassed to have left such a mess sitting there. He got to his feet and started gathering them up.

"Let me help, Ez," JD said, enthusiastically crumpling the papers into manageable bundles and following Ezra to the kitchen to throw them away.

"Would you gentlemen like some coffee or juice? I'm afraid I'm out of everything else," Ezra offered.

Josiah moved to join him in the kitchen. "Why don't you sit and enjoy your movie. I'm sure we can manage."

"Yeah, don't let us interrupt," Buck agreed.

Ezra hesitated for a moment, then shrugged and returned to his seat on the sofa while Buck and Josiah poured themselves some coffee.

"Do you have any tea?" asked Nathan.

"In the cabinet above the coffeepot," Ezra replied.

JD had brought a large bottle of soda, quickly settling himself on the floor next to the sofa to watch the movie. Vin scooted over on the couch, moving closer to Ezra, to allow Josiah to take a seat on the other end, while Buck sat on the floor next to JD and Nathan borrowed a chair from the dining table.

"I've never seen 'North by Northwest' before," JD commented.

"It's a classic," Nathan replied.

The men settled in, watching the movie together while adding their own commentary and conversation. Chris sent frequent surreptitious glances in Ezra's direction. While watching movies as a group was nothing new to the rest of the men, it was the first time Ezra had participated in such an activity with them, and Chris wondered how he would react. They had invited him to a few such gatherings in the past, but he always refused, and eventually, they had stopped asking. Chris wondered now if Ezra simply didn't know how to interact with them on that level and found it easier to simply avoid the situation. It didn't seem like a big deal to him, but he was used to 'hanging out with the guys'; Ezra wasn't.

To anyone who didn't know him, Ezra appeared relaxed and content. But the fact that he never met anyone's eyes directly when he spoke to them and the way his fingers worried ever so slightly at the hem of his sweatshirt spoke volumes to Chris. The man was nervous. He met Vin's eyes, catching the slight nod the sharpshooter sent him. Vin had noticed it too. It was ironic that a man who was so comfortable when associating with gunrunners and thieves -- who would just as soon kill you as look at you -- could be such a nervous wreck when dealing with his friends. Unless, of course, he didn't recognize them for what they were. Chris sighed inwardly. This was a step in the right direction, at least. But they still had a lot more bridges to build with the stubborn southerner.

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Ezra cast a furtive glance at the men who were so comfortably ensconced in his living room. He wondered at his sanity at letting them into his abode so easily. The fact that they actually seemed to \*want\* to be there mystified him. Just a scant few weeks ago, most of these men had wanted nothing to do with him, yet here they were, laughing and socializing as if it were the most natural thing in the world. For him, there was nothing natural about it. He kept wondering what this was going to cost him, for it surely came with a price. Such friendly gestures always did.

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The movie was nearly over and Ezra found himself stifling a yawn. He had slept for nearly thirteen hours the previous night, but he still tired easily. The doctor had told him it was to be expected due to the amount of blood he had lost and the accumulated trauma of the past few weeks. Still, he didn't want his associates to think he was bored by their company, so he forced himself to remain alert.

Vin watched Ezra from the corner of his eye, hiding a smile at the man's valiant attempts to cover his weariness. He shared a look with Chris, nodding almost imperceptibly toward Ezra. Chris hid a smile and shook his head in agreement.

The movie finished and Vin took the opportunity to give an exaggerated yawn. "Man, I'm wiped. How 'bout we head back to the ranch, Chris?"

"Sounds like a plan," Chris said, stretching languidly as he got to his feet.

"We should be on our way, too," said Josiah. He had also noticed the increasing droop to Ezra's eyelids.

"Yeah," Buck agreed. "Some of us actually have to work tomorrow." He scowled at the three injured men in feigned annoyance.

"Sucks to get old, eh Bucklin?" Vin said, a devilish grin on his face.

Buck gave him a one-fingered salute while the others chuckled in amusement.

"Hey thanks for lettin' us hang out, Ez," JD said cheerfully.

"My pleasure, Mr. Dunne," Ezra replied, somewhat surprised. He wouldn't have thought that sitting around watching a classic movie was something the energetic young man would enjoy.

"That movie was great! I'll have to rent it next time me and Casey watch videos," JD continued as he shrugged into his coat.

"There's a reason it's a classic, JD," Nathan remarked. "You ought to check out some of Hitchcock's other movies. If you liked 'North by Northwest', I bet you'd like some of the others as well."

The men gathered their belongings and said their goodbyes, slowly ambling out of the apartment. Chris stopped before leaving and turned to Ezra. "You take it easy, ya hear," he warned.

Ezra smiled. "I fully intend to, Mr. Larabee. It's not often that I am actually encouraged to sleep late."

Vin laughed. "Yeah, but it gets old kinda quick."

"Yes, I imagine that I will soon reach the end of my tolerance for daytime television programming," Ezra said with a smile.

"Don't remind me," Chris said with a groan.

"Take care, gentlemen," Ezra said, shutting the door behind them. After locking the deadbolt, Ezra leaned against the door thoughtfully. The evening had been as enlightening as it was confusing. His teammates had seemed truly concerned about him, and yet.... Ezra shook his head. He was too tired to wonder at their motives tonight. With a heavy sigh, he levered himself off of the door and shuffled toward his bedroom and a welcome date with his pillow.

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The light knock on his door woke Ezra from his light doze. Rubbing his eyes, he set aside the book that still lay open on his lap and rose from his seat on the sofa to answer the door. His eyes widened slightly in surprise when he saw Josiah waiting outside his door. He hadn't expected to see any of the others again so soon after their visit the previous evening. With a shrug, he opened the door.

"Ezra," Josiah greeted him. "Did I wake you?" He noted the slightly glazed look to the younger man's eyes and his sleep-mussed hair.

Ezra smiled. "It's all right. I merely dozed off while reading my book. Please, come in."

"I brought some lunch," Josiah said, lifting the bag he was carrying.

Ezra looked at his watch, noting that it was one in the afternoon. He had arisen before ten that morning and had spent his time reading a book that had been in his 'to be read' pile for several months. Since he hadn't had any breakfast, Ezra realized that he was hungry.

"That sounds nice, Josiah," Ezra said agreeably.

"I remembered that you liked the chicken salad at that little cafe across from our building, so I picked it up on my way over."

Ezra smiled at the man's thoughtfulness as he accepted the sandwich. "Thank you."

The two men settled in chairs at Ezra's small kitchen table.

"Would you like some coffee or tea?" Ezra offered.

"No, thank you," Josiah said. "I brought us some mineral water."

Ezra took his bottle, smiling when he saw the label; it was his favorite brand.

"I hope you don't mind my coming over," Josiah began hesitantly, "but I wanted to talk to you alone for a bit."

Ezra lifted an eyebrow and eyed him suspiciously. "About what?"

Josiah sighed. "I wanted to apologize for being such an ass lately. None of this was your fault and we -- \*I\* -- should have known better."

Ezra stared at his sandwich for a moment, then raised his head uncertainly, afraid of what he might see in the big man's eyes. All he found, though, was remorse and sincerity, and

he was good enough at reading people to recognize it as the truth. He gave him a tentative smile. "I suppose I can accept that."

Josiah's eyes brightened with relief, and he grinned at Ezra. "Good. I was afraid I might have to grovel."

"Groveling is acceptable, too," Ezra said with a hint of a grin.

Josiah rolled his eyes and took a bite of his sandwich.

"Can I ask you something?" Ezra asked hesitantly after a few minutes.

"Sure," Josiah replied.

"Why?" Ezra asked simply, a puzzled look on his face. "I understand that I'm not the easiest person to get along with," he paused, giving a self-deprecating shrug, "but why was it so easy to believe that I cared so little about Mr. Larabee and Mr. Tanner?"

Josiah frowned and thought about it for a moment. "I can't speak for the rest of the guys, but I think that Chris and Vin's supposed deaths were such a shock that we needed someone to blame." He looked Ezra in the eye. "You were in the wrong place at the wrong time."

Ezra sighed resignedly. "The story of my life."

Josiah looked at him curiously for a moment then nodded slowly. "I guess it is." He sighed again. "None of us were in any condition to be thinking rationally then, either. Not that it excuses our behavior, but it takes more than a couple of hours to sleep off the quantity of alcohol we all consumed that night."

"Yes, you were all a bit..." Ezra paused, looking for the right word.

"Soused?" Josiah offered.

"That would be it," Ezra said with a grin.

They finished their lunch quickly, with no further discussion of the matter. Instead, Josiah related all of the latest office gossip and the details of the case they were working with Team Two. Ezra was relieved, since he found it a little uncomfortable speaking about the recent events. Though, he was glad Josiah had apologized. He hadn't expected that from any of them. No one had ever apologized to him for something like that before. "*See, they do care.*" The nagging voice in the corner of his brain started in again. He pushed it aside, still not entirely convinced. Josiah had apologized, but the others had yet to say a word.

"Well, I'd better get back to the office before they send out a search party," Josiah said, pushing back from the table.

"You didn't inform them of where you were going?" Ezra asked.

"No, I just told them I had an errand to do," Josiah explained, giving him an embarrassed grin.

"I see," Ezra said with a smile. So he was an 'errand', now. He wondered why that bothered him.

"I didn't want the others to come along," he explained further. "This isn't the kind of discussion I like to have in front of an audience."

Ezra nodded, feeling somewhat better about the situation.

"I expect you'll be hearing from the rest of them before too long, though," Josiah said with a chuckle.

Ezra groaned. "Wonderful," he said sarcastically.

"Chris and Vin really read us the riot act after the raid," Josiah continued. "They even told off Travis. They were really pissed that he made you drive back all that way while the rest of us rode in the helicopter."

Ezra looked at him in surprise, a smile playing on his lips. "I would like to have seen that."

Josiah laughed. "It was truly a spectacle. Travis and Chris were having quite a glaring duel."

Ezra had to laugh at the picture that presented.

"Anyhow, I'd better be on my way," Josiah said as he put his coat back on. "I hope you can come back to the office soon. It's far too quiet without you and Chris and Vin giving each other grief."

"I should be able to return soon," Ezra replied, walking with Josiah to the door. "All this resting is becoming rather dull."

"Take care, brother." Josiah wrapped an arm around his shoulder in a one-armed hug before stepping into the hall.

Ezra smiled and shook his head in wonder. The previous night's impromptu get-together had been a surprise, but Josiah's visit was even more unexpected. He had honestly believed the previous evening to be the extent of the apology he would receive from these

men, unspoken as it was. He hadn't even been looking for an admittance that they might be wrong. He expected more of a "we still think you're a jerk but we'll work with you anyway" type of response, and even that was more than he had gotten from many of his former associates. Yet Josiah had actually admitted his own fault, showing that he believed Ezra was worth an apology. "*See, I told you so,*" the little voice said sarcastically. He tried to ignore it, but Ezra's step was a bit lighter as he returned to the couch.

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Nathan stood before the closed door, shifting nervously from one foot to the other while he worked up the nerve to knock. Finally, he sighed. "This is ridiculous," he muttered to himself as he raised his hand and rapped sharply against the door.

Ezra looked up from his book, the corners of his mouth lifting in an amused grin. "I wonder which one of them it is," he asked himself softly as he moved toward the door. After Josiah's visit earlier that day, he hadn't expected anyone else so soon. Peering through the peephole, he was surprised to see Nathan standing there. He had expected the team medic to be the last to visit, if he did at all.

"Mr. Jackson." He nodded in greeting to the man in the hall. "What can I do for you?"

"Hi Ezra," Nathan said. "I just wanted to see how you were doing."

"Would you like to come in?" Ezra inquired. "I was just about to make some tea."

"Uh, sure," Nathan said hesitantly. He stepped inside and followed Ezra to the kitchen.

"I have some Earl Grey," he offered. "It's quite good. My mother sent it to me from London last month."

"Sounds good," Nathan said.

Ezra set some water to boil, then moved into the living room. Nathan followed him stopping in front of the rack of CDs that stood next to his stereo system. He looked over the titles, surprised at the variety of music Ezra owned. There was everything from Metallica to Mozart, including some jazz albums that were among Nathan's particular favorites.

"You like all this stuff?" he asked curiously.

"Yes," Ezra answered. "I find I like different types of music depending upon my mood."

"Never figured you'd go for Billie Holliday," he commented. "... or Metallica, for that matter."

Ezra shrugged. "I've been told my tastes are... unusual."

Nathan thought about it for a minute, then said, "Nah, it makes sense." He grinned at Ezra. "You're kind of a complicated person."

"I suppose that's one way of putting it," Ezra replied with an uncertain smile, wondering if he had just been insulted.

The whistling of the teapot interrupted their conversation and Ezra hurried to the kitchen to prepare the tea. "Cream and sugar?" he called over his shoulder.

"Please," Nathan said.

Ezra returned with the teacups, handing one to Nathan, who sipped the hot liquid carefully. "Damn, this is good." He looked at Ezra in surprise. "I've had Earl Grey before, but it was never as good as this."

"I've been told that the English don't ship their best quality teas to the United States," Ezra explained. "They don't expect us to appreciate the difference."

"That's too bad," Nathan said disappointedly. "I can certainly appreciate it."

"I'll ask Mother to send more next time I speak with her," Ezra offered.

"Thanks," Nathan said, surprised at the offer.

The two men sat quietly, enjoying the tea, until Nathan set his cup down with a sigh. "Listen, Ez, I wanted to tell you that... what I said to you after the jeep blew up..." he paused, looking Ezra in the eye uneasily. "... I was wrong. I shouldn't have said that stuff, but..." he trailed off, unsure of how to continue.

Ezra stared at him, his face not revealing the emotions that whirled through his mind. Finally, after a moment, he said carefully, "I suppose it's understandable. After all, it was quite a distressing scene. I was certainly unprepared for it."

"Yeah, but, we still shouldn't have jumped to conclusions like we did," Nathan said with a sigh.

"It's quite all right," Ezra said with a shrug. "I'm rather used to it."

Nathan looked up sharply. "You shouldn't have to be."

Ezra's poker face fell for a moment, and Nathan got a glimpse of the uncertainty that was usually hidden. "I suppose not," he said, "but I usually don't have a choice in the matter."

"Well, I can say for sure that you shouldn't expect that from me," Nathan said assuredly. "I'll try not to do that in the future."

Ezra looked at him suspiciously, but heard the sincerity in his words, and relaxed into a smile. "I'll remember that."

"Good," Nathan said, a smile of relief spreading across his face. He had been afraid that Ezra wouldn't accept his apology, and that thought had bothered him much more than expected. When he had heard how Ezra had ignored his own injuries and given up his medication to help Chris and Vin, he had realized how badly he had misjudged the southerner. It had simply never occurred to him that Ezra could behave so selflessly, and now he was ashamed of himself for being so narrow-minded. Fortunately for him, Ezra seemed inclined to be forgiving and he swore to himself that he wouldn't let the man down again.

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As Ezra waited for his taxi, he reflected on the previous evening. Things had become much more relaxed after he and Nathan had talked and they had spent several hours discussing music and movies. He smiled as he remembered the look on the dark man's face when he discovered that they enjoyed many of the same things. Ezra knew they would never agree on a lot of things, but he felt strangely pleased to have something in common with the man.

The taxi arrived and Ezra climbed in for his ride to the hospital. Dr. Landry had called him as soon as she had heard of his escape from the hospital and had insisted upon seeing him right away. With much effort, he had finally convinced her to wait until Friday, since he was certain she would find some excuse to readmit him if she saw him too soon. Today was the appointed day, and he was sure that she would be pleased with his progress. Though he was confident in his ability to drive, he decided it would be wise to take a cab so that he wouldn't be forced to lie to the good doctor about his mode of transportation.

"Mr. Standish," she said coolly as he stepped into her exam room.

"Doctor," he said with a smile.

"You know the drill, Mr. Standish." She handed him a gown and left the room.

Ezra looked disdainfully at the thin material and sighed in resignation as he started removing his clothes. A few minutes later he was dressed in the *\*very\** short garment and perched uncomfortably on the paper-covered table while he awaited her return. She kept him waiting for another fifteen minutes, and he was about to give up and leave when she appeared at the door.

"How are you feeling?" she asked.

"Fine," he answered, somewhat irritably.

She listened to his heart and lungs with her stethoscope -- which Ezra swore had just been removed from the refrigerator -- then removed the bandages from his back and poked at the wound. Finally, she turned to face him. "It looks good," she said with a hint of a smile. "I think we can remove the stitches, along with the other ones I put in."

"Um, actually, I already removed those," he admitted sheepishly.

She frowned at him and lifted an accusatory eyebrow. "You couldn't wait for me to take them out?"

"Well," he shrugged innocently. "They itched, and a couple of them fell out in the shower anyway, so I..."

She held up her hand to interrupt. "Never mind. I don't want to know."

Ezra sighed. "I don't mean to be difficult. I simply dislike spending time in hospitals."

She eyed him critically, then smiled, her expression softening slightly. "I think I can understand that. I have seen your chart, after all."

Ezra looked at her sharply, suddenly alarmed by the knowing tone of her voice. "What do you mean?"

"I'm very thorough, Mr. Standish," she said firmly. "And I don't like surprises. I saw the evidence of numerous old fractures, so I backtracked your record. I had to call in a couple of favors from some colleagues to do it, but suffice it to say, I know where those injuries came from."

Ezra looked away, suddenly embarrassed. He had tried to keep that information hidden, but had not been as successful as he had hoped.

Dr. Landry gently squeezed his shoulder. "You have nothing to worry about. That information is strictly confidential," she assured him. "I wouldn't have gone digging if it hadn't been important. I needed to know if you had any bone problems I should know about."

Ezra smiled nervously. "No, no bone problems. Just baseball bat problems."

"You're lucky that you were still young and that you had such good doctors," she continued. "Otherwise you might have had some difficulties."

"I would have been luckier to associate with less-violent people," he said plainly.

Dr. Landry studied him for a minute, seeing the painful memories that flashed in his eyes. "Yes, but you seem to have done well for yourself despite that fact," she said finally. "You're a survivor, Mr. Standish. You should be proud of that."

Ezra gave her a tentative smile. "I suppose I should."

"Have you ever talked with anyone about it?"

"Yes," he admitted. "After college I saw a therapist."

"Well, if you need to talk some more, let me know," she offered. "I know some good people."

"Thank you, but I'm fine," he said, desperate to close the subject. He had enough things happening in his life right now without thinking about his violent step-father's propensity for beating on him with a baseball bat. Even though he was young when his mother left him with the man, the memories of his abuse still played vividly through his mind. Maude had left for what was supposed to be a month-long shopping trip in Europe. Associates of her husband saw fit to inform him of the affair she was having with a French businessman, and he took his drunken rage out on the nearest convenient target, which turned out to be his cheating wife's ten-year-old son. Ezra shuddered again at the image of the angry man waving a baseball bat in his face.

As if sensing his distress, Dr. Landry abruptly changed the subject. "How about we get rid of the rest of those stitches?"

Ezra smiled with relief. "By all means."

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Ezra stood at the door to his apartment feeling oddly unsettled. The unexpected discussion with Dr. Landry had roused some old demons and they didn't seem content to leave just yet. He stood for several more moments, wrestling with his indecision, before finally turning away and heading for the garage instead.

After a quick lunch stop at the deli, Ezra headed the car toward a picturesque spot he had remembered from his first attempt at finding Chris Larabee's house. He had taken a wrong turn and had ended up on a desolate stretch of road that ended abruptly at a small stand of trees. He had spotted an overgrown path through the trees and had been hoping to find some sort of clue as to his location, but had instead discovered a breathtaking view of the valley below him, hidden by the small grove of trees. Ezra had returned to the spot several times since, enjoying the quiet and the view and finding it an excellent place to clear his mind. Today, it beckoned to him again.

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The dazzling orange and purple hues of sunset played across his face as Ezra sat, wrapped in his car blanket, and watched the daylight fade away with a smile on his face. He shivered slightly and drew the blanket closer. It had been a pleasant afternoon, leaning comfortably against a tree and relaxing in the sun, doing nothing more strenuous than watching the clouds scud across the azure sky.

His memories had finally left him in peace and Ezra had turned his thoughts to his... associates. No, he decided, not associates. Friends. "Friends," he repeated it aloud. The word felt as odd on his tongue as it did in his thoughts, yet it fit. He wasn't sure when it had happened, but these men were indeed his friends. Sure, he still had some issues to work out with them -- especially Buck -- and it would take some time before he could give them his complete trust, but for the first time in a long time, he actually felt some hope that it might happen. "Friends," he repeated, liking the sound of it. With a smile, he climbed to his feet and made his way back to his car and headed for home.

As he approached the intersection in the road, Ezra hesitated. Chris's ranch was only fifteen minutes away, and he debated with himself as to whether he should drop in unannounced. A grin crossed his features as he remembered that no one had called first before visiting him recently, so he surmised that it wouldn't be too rude for him to return the favor. His mood was brighter than it had been earlier and he didn't feel like hearing the melancholy classical CD he had listened to on his way out to the overlook, so he replaced it with the Motown mix disk he had found in his glove box. Turning up the volume on his car stereo, he sang along to the upbeat tunes as he drove to Larabee's house.

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As he drew closer to Chris's home, Ezra felt a sudden sense of apprehension at the sight of Buck's truck sitting in the driveway. There didn't appear to be any other vehicles parked there, and he wondered if any of the others were there, since he wasn't sure he wanted to be alone with Buck just yet. He was about to turn around when he saw the door open and a person step out onto the porch. Stifling a sigh, Ezra parked the Jaguar behind the old Chevy pickup and slowly walked to the porch.

"Ezra?" the shadowy figure called.

Ezra hesitated then answered. "Yes, Mr. Wilmington."

"Where the hell have you been?" Buck bellowed, stepping into the light and closer to the smaller man. "We've been out looking for you all day."

Ezra flinched and took a step back, eyes widening in surprise.

Buck stopped, seeing the flash of fear in the green eyes. "Ah shit, Ez," he sighed, rubbing a hand over his face. "I didn't mean to yell. We were all really worried, is all."

"For what reason?" he asked tentatively.

"Me and the kid went to see you this morning and you weren't there," Buck replied. "We waited around for hours but when you didn't show up, we got worried. Nathan said you had a doctor's appointment, but we checked and she said you left at 11:30." He frowned at him. "She said you really shouldn't be driving yet."

Ezra stared at him a moment. "Um, weren't you supposed to be working today?"

"Yeah," Buck said, somewhat sheepishly. "But we were gonna take you to lunch. We had our laptops so we were able to work from your apartment. We headed out here after Nathan came by your place. I think he wanted to be there to read you the riot act when you showed up."

"Oh," Ezra said thoughtfully, stunned at the concern the others were showing him. "Where is Mr. Larabee?"

"Vin insisted that he knew where some of your favorite hiding places were, so he and Chris went to check them out," Buck explained. "JD was here for awhile, but got bored and took off on his motorcycle to look for you some more. Josiah's got the office staked out, in case you decided to go by there."

"I see," Ezra said quietly, suddenly uncomfortable with the thought of these men expending such effort on his behalf.

"So, where were you?" Buck prodded.

"I, uh, needed some time to myself, so I went someplace to think for awhile." Ezra looked at Buck and shrugged. "I didn't think that anyone would be looking for me."

Buck sighed. "Yeah, well, we were worried about ya. That's what friends do."

Ezra looked away, suddenly embarrassed. "Yes, I'm beginning to realize that."

The comment brought Buck up short, until he remembered something Josiah had told him about Ezra not having much experience with friendship. He had dismissed the idea at the time, not believing that it was the case at all. He had believed that Ezra was simply arrogant and self-centered and didn't want to associate with them, since he had continuously rebuffed all of their efforts to draw him into the group. But now, seeing the hesitancy and embarrassment on the younger man's face, he realized that Josiah was probably right.

"You comin' in?" Buck said finally, hoping he hadn't scared him away.

"I suppose I'd better," Ezra said with a faint smile.

Buck grinned. "I'll call the others and let them know you're okay."

Ezra followed him inside, still reeling from the idea that these men were his friends. He smiled to himself and decided he rather liked that feeling. Buck was already on the phone, so Ezra took a seat on the sofa in front of the fire, leaning his head back against the soft cushions with a sigh.

Buck clicked off his cell phone and dropped onto the sofa next to Ezra. "They're all coming over," he said, chuckling at the grimace that crossed Ezra's face.

"Good lord," he muttered. "Perhaps I should make my escape before they arrive."

"Won't help," Buck said. "They'll just follow you home."

"I suppose I'd best get it over with then," he said with a dramatic sigh.

"JD was at your place. He and Nathan are bringing pizza," Buck said. "Have you eaten today?"

"Yes, mother," Ezra answered, opening one eye and sending Buck a dirty look.

"Hell, you think I'm bad, wait 'til the others get here," Buck said, snickering at Ezra's expression.

Ezra groaned then slowly stood, turning toward the kitchen. He stopped, then looked at Buck inquiringly. "Would Mr. Larabee happen to have some tea?"

"Don't know," Buck said with a shrug. "We can look." He stood and Ezra followed him to the kitchen, where they found a container of herbal tea that looked suspiciously like one of Nathan's preferred blends.

Ezra began to prepare a cup of tea while Buck leaned against the counter and watched. He set the water to boil, then noticed the other man's scrutiny. "Is something wrong, Mr. Wilmington?"

Buck lowered his gaze for a moment, then lifted his head to look Ezra in the eye. "I'm just trying to figure out how to apologize for the way I treated you."

"Mr. Wilmington, I..." Ezra began, but was halted by Buck's raised palm.

"Let me do this, Ez," he asked earnestly.

Ezra nodded slowly.

"I ain't gonna lie and say I didn't mean it, 'cause at the time, I did." He cast a guilty glance at Ezra and winced inwardly at the pain he saw in the man's face. "It ain't right,"

he added hastily, "but all I saw when I looked at what was left of the jeep was that Chris and Vin shouldn't have been there in the first place. I didn't think you gave a damn about any of us. Hell, you never wanted to hang out with me and the boys, so I figured you didn't even like us." He shrugged helplessly.

Ezra nodded slightly and looked at his feet.

"It didn't help that I was still drunk. I know I was wrong, especially after Vin and Chris told us how good ya took care of 'em." Buck ran a hand through his hair. "I shouldn't have hit ya and... I know I don't deserve it... but I hope you'll give me another chance." He looked hopefully at Ezra, who hadn't met his eyes. "Ez?"

Ezra swallowed and slowly raised his eyes to Buck's face, taking note of the guilt etched there. "Mr. Wilmington... Buck, I..." he trailed off, looking away as he tried to put his thoughts into words. "I haven't had many friends in my life, but I would like to count you as one of them." He gazed tentatively at Buck.

Buck grinned widely in relief. "Sure thing, pard."

The teakettle whistled and Ezra turned to remove it from the burner, a smile creasing his face. As he poured water into his teacup, he heard the front door open and JD's voice calling, "Buck!"

"Pizza's here," Buck said, rubbing his hands together eagerly.

Ezra shook his head and followed Buck out to the living room.

"Hey Ez!" JD said excitedly, rushing to greet the southerner.

"Mr. Dunne," Ezra said, acknowledging his greeting with a nod as he reclaimed his seat on the sofa.

Nathan came in, his arms full of pizza boxes which he brought directly into the kitchen. He came out with some paper plates loaded down with pizza slices, handing one each to Ezra and Buck. "We got mushroom for ya, Ez," he said as he sat in the chair across from him.

"Thank you, Mr. Jackson," Ezra said as his stomach responded to the aroma.

"You shoulda told us where you were going," Nathan admonished him, after he had sampled his pizza.

"Hell, Nate," Buck interrupted. "The man wanted to get some fresh air. Let him eat in peace."

Nathan looked at Buck in surprise. He hadn't expected the ladies' man to jump to Ezra's defense. He glanced at Ezra, who cocked an eyebrow and smirked in response. With a snort of disgust, he stood and headed to the kitchen to get himself some pizza, muttering about "ungrateful idiots who never listened to him".

JD grinned and bounded toward the kitchen to grab his own dinner. He and Nathan had just joined Ezra and Buck in the living room, when the door opened to admit Josiah.

"Good evening, brothers," he said. "Anyone in the mood for some beverages?" He hefted a case of beer under one arm.

"You have to ask?" Buck replied with a grin.

Josiah laughed and carried the case into the kitchen to stock the refrigerator.

"Who wants one?" Buck asked.

"I do," Nathan said.

"Me too," JD added around a mouthful of pizza.

"Ezra?" Buck queried.

"Yes," Ezra said after a moment's consideration.

"No," Nathan countered. "Not with your medication."

"I finished my medication yesterday," Ezra answered smugly.

Buck laughed as he went into the kitchen, while Nathan shook his head.

Josiah joined them, balancing his loaded plate and bottle of beer carefully as he sat in the big recliner next to the sofa. "How is our wayward brother?" he asked Ezra.

"Just fine, Mr. Sanchez," Ezra said, taking another bite of pizza.

"And where were you hiding yourself today?"

"Around," Ezra replied with a shrug. "I merely needed some time away from the confines of my abode."

"Did the doctor say when you could come back to work?" JD asked.

Ezra nodded. "Monday... for desk duty only."

"For how long?" inquired Nathan.

"Two weeks." Ezra made a face as he replied.

"Could be worse," added Buck. "Vin's off field work for at least a month."

"That sucks," JD commented. "He's gonna drive us crazy in the office."

"Mr. Tanner does display limited patience with being confined to sedentary activities," Ezra said with a smile. "I'm sure Mr. Larabee will be using his glare quite frequently over the next few weeks."

The five men were still laughing when Chris and Vin came through the door.

"Pizza!" Vin made a beeline for the kitchen as soon as he spotted his friends eating in the living room.

Chris rolled his eyes and shed his coat, limping slightly as he joined the group. "Ezra." He pinned his wayward undercover agent with a mild glare. "Where were you?"

Ezra shrugged. "Out."

"Out where," Chris prodded. He was not amused.

Ezra opened his mouth to reply, but Buck beat him to it.

"Aw, leave 'im alone, Chris," Buck chided. "Vin ain't the only one who gets stir crazy."

Chris merely lifted an eyebrow at Buck's interference, the expression on his face matching several others in the room. He turned his gaze to Ezra, who was sipping his beer, seemingly oblivious to their reactions. He nodded slowly, realizing that Ezra and Buck must have made their peace. "Okay, just let us know next time so we don't worry about you."

Ezra inclined his head slightly in response. "I'll do that."

"No beer, Vin," Nathan warned the sharpshooter, who came out of the kitchen with a plate loaded with pizza and a beer tucked under his arm. "It don't mix with painkillers."

"Hell, Nate. I ain't even takin' 'em anymore," Vin protested.

"I give up," Nathan grumbled in frustration. "Y'all never listen. Well, don't come whinin' to me when ya get sick."

The entire group chuckled at that, knowing how much they aggravated the medic with their aversion to hospitals and medication.

"Well, I'm just glad to have our family together again," Josiah said.

"I'll drink to that," Buck agreed, taking a large swig from his bottle of beer.

"You'll drink to anything, Bucklin," Vin said with a smirk.

"I'll drink to that," JD answered, provoking laughter all around.

The evening continued in the same jovial manner, until Ezra found himself drifting off.

"Hey Ez? You awake?" Vin said, nudging Ezra's leg.

"I am now, Mr. Tanner," Ezra replied, stifling a yawn.

"Why don't you stay here tonight?" Chris offered.

"Yeah, you shouldn't try such a long drive when you're tired," Nathan added.

"That sounds like a good idea," Ezra reluctantly agreed. "I am feeling a bit weary."

"Go on and take the guest room," Chris suggested.

Ezra nodded as he got to his feet. "Good night, gentlemen," he said as he shuffled off to the bedroom.

As he lay on the bed listening to the muted conversations and laughter in the next room, Ezra reflected on the last time he had occupied this bed and the changes that had occurred since then. He hadn't thought it possible, but he was now a part of their family. It was an unfamiliar sensation, but one he was beginning to enjoy.

The overprotective nature of his friends was unwelcome at first, but he found himself growing more comfortable with it. It certainly beat his previous lonely existence, though there was still much to which he would have to become accustomed. He wasn't sure he really wanted fly fishing lessons from Vin, for instance, but he supposed he would have to take the good with the bad. As he was starting to learn, that's what families did. With a smile on his face, Ezra drifted off to sleep.

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