

## Comfort and Joy

The cheery sound of Christmas music grew gradually louder as he approached the office. It was the Friday before Christmas, which was occurring on a Tuesday this year, and since the government had been kind enough to give them Christmas Eve off, it meant that this was the last workday until after the holiday. Ezra gave a wan smile. He should have expected some form of festivity from his teammates. With a sigh, he schooled his features, pasting a smile on his face, though he felt anything but cheerful. Ezra stepped into the bullpen and let his gaze wander about the room.

Buck and JD's workspace caught the eye immediately, likely due to the strands of flashing lights entwined with iridescent red and green garland that were strung along the edges of their desks. That hadn't been enough holiday spirit for the 'dynamic duo', however. Buck also had a miniature lighted Christmas tree on his desk, along with a small Santa and sleigh, complete with nine reindeer and a scantily-clad Barbie doll "to keep the old guy company". A red plastic bowl filled with sprigs of mistletoe – in case a woman happened to venture within range of Buck's 'animal magnetism' – completed the display. JD had lined a small brigade of toy soldiers along the front of his desk, the formation flanked on either end by a large stuffed snowman with a bright red top hat. A stuffed Santa clutching a collection of candy canes sat on top of his computer monitor. Both of the exuberant men were wearing fur-trimmed Santa hats.

Shaking his head at the gaudy display, Ezra switched his gaze to Nathan and Josiah's work area. Josiah had, characteristically, adorned his desk with a small nativity scene, to which JD and Buck had promptly made a few additions. Standing next to the Three Wise Men were two G.I. Joe dolls, three plastic dinosaurs, and a pair of Santa's elves. Josiah had merely smiled and said, "They are all God's creatures." Nathan's desk was decorated tastefully with a pair of small poinsettias and a miniature display of Kwanzaa items laid out on a small straw mat. The only hint of gaudiness in the vicinity of the area was the large, lighted star that hung on the wall behind Josiah.

Turning away from the star, Ezra headed for his own work area. His desk faced Vin's and he was glad the sharpshooter hadn't been quite as extravagant in his decorating as the others. Vin had taken it upon himself to put up a Christmas stocking for each of them, hanging them from the sides of his desk, but other than a couple of bowls filled with Christmas candy and a plastic Santa astride a horse, his desk looked the same as always. Similarly, their leader had limited his own decorating to a wreath on his door. The large artificial tree that stood in the corner of the bullpen had been largely Buck and JD's doing, with much encouragement from Vin.

Ezra stopped short upon reaching his own desk. He had not joined in the enthusiasm, leaving his desk as barren as usual, but today, much to his consternation, a decoration had found its way into his space. Sitting in the center of his desk was a large stuffed Grinch doll. Slowly, Ezra set his briefcase down and picked it up between his thumb and forefinger, holding it up with a frown, unsure if he should be offended by the creature's appearance on his desk.

"Looks like you found a friend, Ez," Buck said, grinning widely.

"Hardly, Mr. Wilmington," Ezra replied haughtily, setting the doll on the edge of Buck's desk. "I have no need for artificial companions... unlike some of you."

"Women love a man who owns a teddy bear," Buck said with a sniff. "It means we're sensitive and caring."

"No, just insecure and neurotic," JD snickered. He had been ribbing Buck for weeks after finding a teddy bear in the older man's closet.

Ezra rolled his eyes and returned to his desk. He was eager to immerse himself in work, so he wouldn't have to think about the upcoming holiday and what it meant to him... or, rather, what it *didn't* mean. Since Thanksgiving, he had been listening as the others excitedly discussed their holiday plans. They had spent Thanksgiving together and were planning to do the same at Christmas, which had surprised Ezra until he realized that his teammates had no other family with whom to celebrate such holidays.

Ezra had spent Thanksgiving the way he always had, eating dinner alone in his apartment as he did every night. His mother didn't have much use for the holidays, and as a result, he had never looked forward to their arrival. His teammates, though, were another matter. Even Chris had managed to dredge up some enthusiasm for the season. But Ezra felt no such zeal. Holidays, for him, meant nothing but forced cheer and deeper loneliness. Most of the time, he could easily handle being alone – after all, he was quite used to it – but the holidays made it much more difficult, what with all of the parties and celebrating that did nothing but reinforce his sense of isolation.

In his entire life, he had rarely experienced an enjoyable holiday. Maude had had much better things to do than tell her son stories of Santa Claus and reindeer, let alone explain to him the true meaning of Christmas. There were, after all, parties to attend and people to meet, and that was a much more lucrative way to spend her time. No, Ezra Standish had never known the excitement and wonder of waiting eagerly for Santa Claus to arrive. He had learned early on just what a fairy tale that was.

He had always felt out of place amidst all of the joy and affection that the holidays seemed to engender. For Ezra, Christmas had been nothing more than a day spent with distant relatives who grudgingly accepted his presence. Later, he had spent Christmases alone at boarding schools, sometimes sharing a meal with the few others whose families couldn't be bothered to come get them. He had enjoyed a couple of nice holidays when he was younger, but there were still too many where he was merely an unwanted guest for him to look upon the season with any fondness.

He had rarely felt welcome anywhere during this time of year and had grown accustomed to spending it by himself. It wasn't as though he would be missed. In his days with the FBI, he usually ended up with holiday duty, which had effectively prevented him from participating in most of the usual festivities. He had never been well-liked by his superiors, and thus ended up on the bottom of the list when it came time to make holiday and vacation schedules. Not that he minded much. Work at least gave him a way to pass the time.

He had grown used to being ignored and overlooked during the holidays. Certainly his new teammates wouldn't notice his absence from their gathering, especially since they assumed he was spending the holiday with his mother. Ezra hadn't bothered to correct that assumption at Thanksgiving, and was certainly not going to do it now. He didn't want to be included out of pity – there had been enough of that when he was a child. He had only been working with these men for four months; he could hardly expect them to want him around while they celebrated. They didn't even *like* him.

Ezra snorted faintly. *You're doing it to yourself again, Ezra*, he silently scolded himself. No matter how hard he tried to convince himself it didn't matter, he always seemed to feel that sense of longing, that tiny, niggling hope that maybe this year would be different. That maybe, for once, he would get to experience the kind of happiness that others seemed to enjoy during this time of year. He always tried to dismiss the holiday as a pointless example of commercialism, to pretend that it didn't affect him, but all it took was one glimpse of Christmas cheer to prevent the con from working. Sighing inwardly, Ezra squelched those feelings as best he could. It was only going to make him more depressed and, as much as he disliked the season, he didn't want to do anything to affect the happiness of those around him. It wouldn't be fair to drag them down with him. His teammates might not like him, but they did worry about his well-being – after all, he might endanger the team if he wasn't up to par – and he didn't want to be blamed for interrupting their merrymaking.

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"Hey Chris!" Buck called as the black-clad man headed for the break room.

"Yeah?" Chris said, sipping at his cup of coffee.

"When are we doing the gift exchange?" Buck asked, sounding like an excited five-year-old.

Chris suppressed a grin. "Not until lunchtime. And not until all your reports are done."

Buck sighed dramatically. "Okay, *Dad*."

Chris glared at his old friend, then shook his head in resignation. Buck would never change. He remembered fondly the Christmases that Buck had spent with his family, when Sarah and Adam were alive. It was always a toss-up as to whether Buck or Adam was more eager to open the gifts. Chris smiled sadly. He missed his family, but it felt good to remember the happier times. He had planned to spend this Christmas alone and brooding, the way he'd done for the past few years, but somehow, Buck had talked him into having them all over to his place for Christmas. He was almost looking forward to it.

His eyes drifted to the newest member of his team. Ezra's desk was bare, containing only his computer and a pad of paper. Chris sighed inwardly. He hadn't been blatant about it, but Ezra had quietly resisted all of their efforts to inspire him with some Christmas spirit. The elegant agent seemed almost bored by the holidays and annoyed with the festivities, and it had taken strong convincing just to get him to participate in the office gift exchange. He supposed that Ezra's plans with his mother were much more extravagant than the humble gathering he had planned at his ranch. They were probably going to attend some grand parties and eat food that would cost a month's wages. Chris shrugged. He'd take Christmas with his friends over parties full of stuffed shirts any day.

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Buck spun around in his chair and looked at his watch impatiently. "Come on, guys! It's almost lunchtime."

"Keep your pants on, Buck," Vin growled. "I'm workin' as fast as I can."

"Yes, Mr. Wilmington," Ezra agreed. "Some of us wish our reports to be completed properly."

"My reports are just fine," Buck protested.

Ezra rolled his eyes. "Perhaps, if you consider 'We done caught the bad guys' to be a complete report."

"Works for me," Buck said with a grin, refusing to be baited.

Josiah chuckled at the scene as he sent his own report to the printer. "Not everyone has your gift with words, Brother Ezra."

"Thank God for that," Nathan retorted.

Ezra shot him a glare before turning back to his computer. He was proud of his reports and wasn't about to rush them for something as trivial as a gift exchange in which he hadn't wanted to participate anyway. He was almost finished with his final revision, but he made sure to take his time completing it, just to irritate Buck. Vin finished at the same time, snatching his report from the printer before Buck could get his hands on it. Chris exited his office just as Vin was putting the papers into a folder.

"Finished?" he asked.

"Yep," Vin said, handing him the folder.

"What about the rest of you?"

Ezra handed his report to the blond leader, while Nathan merely pointed to the 'in-box' on the wall outside of Chris's office, where the rest of the reports were waiting.

"Glad to see you're all so motivated," Chris said with a grin.

Ezra lifted an eyebrow sarcastically, but said nothing.

"Come on, guys," Buck said happily. "I saw some chocolate cake in the break room." He raced toward the room in question with JD and Vin in tow.

Chris rolled his eyes but chuckled at their antics. "All right, everyone into the conference room. Grab your gifts on the way." He pointed to the pile of presents under the tree.

Ezra watched as his teammates picked up the gifts addressed to themselves and filed into the conference room. Reluctantly, he stood and followed, picking up his own gift with trepidation. Buck had drawn his name and he dreaded what might await him inside the package. His associates had explained that the gifts exchanged in the office were usually humorous 'gag' gifts, but, knowing Buck's sense of humor, Ezra was almost afraid to find out what was under the bright paper. He sighed, hoping that his own gift would be well-received. He had had the misfortune to draw Larabee's name and only hoped that he wouldn't end up with a bullet between his eyes when Chris saw what was inside his box.

Ezra wasn't used to exchanging gifts, especially those of the humorous variety. It had been a long time since he had allowed that part of his personality out in the open, likely due to what had happened the last time he had participated in an office gift exchange.

It was his second year with the FBI, and Ezra had looked forward to the office festivities, not having had any prior experience with them. He had actually enjoyed the exchange of gifts with his co-workers... until afterward, when he overheard Martin Royce, the recipient of his gift of imported port wine, discussing it in the break room with some of his other associates.

*"Can you believe this? I can't even pronounce the name of this shit. Only a stuck-up bastard like Standish would give something like this as a gift."*

*"Yeah," Bill Edwards agreed. "The guy is such a phony."*

*"He probably thinks crap like this impresses everybody," Royce added.*

*"Just like those fancy designer suits he wears. He must think they make him look successful or something," Edwards stated. "Pretentious asshole."*

*"But a \*well-dressed\* pretentious asshole," Ron Sheridan retorted sarcastically.*

*The three men laughed.*

Ezra had left after that, not wanting to hear any more. It had been a shock to discover that his associates felt that way about him, and he had reacted by withdrawing back into himself, refusing to expose himself as a target any longer. Being alone was easier.

Shaking his head, Ezra joined his teammates, who had finally gathered around the conference room table. A platter of sandwiches dominated the middle of the table, surrounded by bowls of potato chips and other snacks. Chocolate cake sat on one end, a plate of cookies on the other. Both were being eyed hungrily by Vin, their resident sweet-tooth.

"Lunch first," Chris admonished Buck, who was shaking his gift and trying to peek underneath the wrapping. Buck made a face as soon as Chris turned away, but complied, setting his package aside and reaching for a sandwich.

The men relaxed while they ate, talking about past Christmases they had enjoyed. Ezra listened silently, wishing he had had as many wonderful experiences as his associates seemed to have enjoyed, and praying that they wouldn't ask him about his holidays.

As if he were reading his thoughts, JD piped in, "How about you, Ez? What was your favorite Christmas?"

Ezra debated about what he should say. His two best Christmases were spent with his Aunt Grace but he didn't want to share those experiences, afraid that it might somehow diminish the memories. Instead, he related a story about his tenth Christmas, leaving out the part where his mother and stepfather left him alone in their big house with only the maid and cook for company while they made the rounds of the party circuit. His stepfather had bought him an expensive bicycle, but was not even there when it was delivered.

Ezra embellished the tale, making it sound like a warm, happy Christmas – which was what they really wanted to hear. He knew that they thought he had grown up a spoiled, wealthy child who got everything he wanted, including the love of his mother. Far be it from him to spoil those illusions with the truth. He never noticed the slight frown that crossed Vin's face while he spun his tale.

Once they had finished eating, it was time to open the gifts. A good-natured argument ensued as to whom would be the first to open a gift, until Chris finally intervened, indicating that JD would start.

"Why me?" JD asked.

"Cause you're the youngest," Buck said, nudging the younger man in the ribs.

JD made a face at Buck, but picked up his gift nonetheless. He tore the wrapping off quickly and stared at the contents for a moment, before hiding it quickly in his lap, his face flushing pink with embarrassment.

"What is it?" Buck demanded, his curiosity piqued by JD's reaction.

"Um, it's, uh..." JD trailed off, not knowing how to explain without embarrassing himself further.

Josiah began to laugh, and Buck impatiently snatched the gift from his young friend's lap.

"Buck!" JD reached for the gift, but Buck held it in the air, out of his reach, until the young agent slumped back into his seat, accepting the inevitable teasing that would result.

Buck lowered his arm and studied JD's gift, a wide grin breaking out on his face. "Well, well. This ought to come in handy."

"What is it, Buck?" asked Vin.

"The Kama Sutra," Buck answered, opening the book and flipping through the pages. He whistled aloud. "Damn! I've never seen that one!" He showed the illustration to JD, whose eyes widened in awe.

Vin reached across the table and grabbed the book. He looked at the picture, turning the book sideways. "I didn't know that was possible," he commented with a grin.

"I might want to borrow that sometime, JD," Nathan said as he flipped through the pages with interest.

"Uh-oh, maybe we'd better warn Rain," Buck chuckled.

Nathan blushed and passed the book to Ezra, who studied it with interest. "The authors certainly were... imaginative." He passed it to Chris.

"No thanks," Chris said, taking pity on JD and handing him the book.

"Thanks, Josiah... I think," JD said.

Josiah chuckled.

"Whatever inspired you to make such a purchase?" Ezra asked the large agent.

"Well, I thought it might be useful to broaden our young brother's horizons," Josiah replied.

"That'll broaden 'em, all right," Vin agreed, snickering.

"You're next, Buck," JD blurted, attempting to shift the attention from himself.

"All right!" Buck lifted his package and shook it, trying to discern the contents before opening it. It remained a mystery, though, so with a shrug, he tore open the wrapping.

"What'cha got, Bucklin?" asked Vin, curious at the look on Buck's face.

"It's..." Buck trailed off.

JD grabbed the package, eager to return the teasing he had received, and burst out laughing. "It's an Inflatable Playmate!" He displayed the package to the rest of the men.

"Guess that's for those nights when you ain't got a real date," Vin said, laughing at the embarrassed flush on Buck's face.

"You might even practice some of those moves from JD's book," Nathan observed, grinning broadly.

The rest of the table erupted with laughter. Buck suddenly grinned and snatched his blow-up doll from his roommate's grasp. "Hell, I can use her to drive in the carpool lane! Thanks, Nathan!"

"You'd better not," Chris warned with a smile.

Buck stuck out his tongue once Chris had turned away.

"I saw that, Buck," Chris said.

Buck rolled his eyes then turned to Vin. "Come on, Junior. You're next."

Vin eyed his package with trepidation, but then realized that JD had probably not gotten him anything too embarrassing. He carefully stripped off the paper, a wide grin breaking out on his face when the giant Super Soaker water gun was revealed. "Cool! Thanks JD!"

"We'll have to try it out later," JD said eagerly.

Chris groaned. "Just don't use it at the office. Travis is still pissed about the time he walked into the middle of that shootout you guys were having in the hallway."

"Yes, *Mom*," Vin said, making a face.

Chris shot a glare in his direction, but gave in and smiled ruefully when he realized it was being ignored. "Nathan. Your turn."

Nathan picked up the rectangular box and opened it slowly, delicately prying away each piece of tape.

"Sometime this year, Nate," Buck complained, impatient to see the gift.

Nathan frowned at him and continued at his sedate pace. Finally, the gift was opened, and Nathan's rich laughter filled the room.

"What is it?" JD asked, craning his neck to see around Buck, who was leaning halfway across the table in an effort to see what had inspired Nathan's reaction.

"Operation!" Nathan said, displaying the game to everyone. "Thanks, Vin! I loved this game when I was a kid!"

"Me, too," Buck said. The others at the table, with the exception of Vin and Ezra, added their comments about the game.

Ezra shrugged, never having seen the game before.

Vin was the only one who noticed that Ezra's voice had been silent, since he himself was not participating in the reminiscing that was occurring at the table. There hadn't been too many games or toys in the foster homes in which he had stayed, so he was as unfamiliar with the game as Ezra appeared to be. He had bought it for Nathan, figuring that the medical aspect would be good for a chuckle or two, but hadn't realized that the game qualified as a 'classic'. Shaking his head slightly, Vin tuned back in to the conversation around him.

"I bet Nate would kick our butts, what with all that medical training he has," Buck postulated.

"Nah, Vin could probably beat him," JD said. "You gotta have real precise aim."

"We'll just have to find out, won't we," Buck said, grinning in anticipation.

"Did I hear the word *bet*?" Ezra said, a sly smile lighting his face.

"Never mind," Nathan said with a sigh.

"Hey, Josiah," JD called to the big agent. "Open yours next!"

Smiling, Josiah unwrapped his gift, wadding up the paper, which he then sent flying toward JD's head. A short paper-wad battle broke out and was quickly ended by Chris's high-pitched whistle.

Josiah chuckled at his friend's antics and lifted the lid off of the plain cardboard box, peering inside curiously. He burst into laughter as he lifted out a book, a roll of duct tape, a wrench, and a container of oil. "'Car Repair for Dummies'," he said as he passed the book around the table.

"How appropriate," Ezra remarked.

"Yeah," Nathan concurred. "Now maybe you can fix that rolling junkyard you call a car."

"It's a classic," Josiah retorted.

"A classic *what*?" Vin said with a grin.

"This will come in quite handy," Josiah said happily, ignoring the disparaging remarks about his vehicle. "Thank you, Chris."

Chris nodded. "You're welcome."

"Come on, Ez," Buck urged. "Open yours."

Ezra felt suddenly self-conscious as he started to open his gift. He hoped it wouldn't be too embarrassing, but considering that it was from Buck, he didn't expect that to be the case. He carefully peeled the paper away from the slim box and lifted the lid.

"What is it?" JD asked eagerly.

Ezra lifted the item from the box, displaying it to the rest of the men, who promptly burst into laughter at the sight of the loud necktie with a Christmas tree design, complete with flashing lights.

"Push on the star, Ez!" Buck prompted.

Shooting the ladies' man an evil look, he did as requested and was rewarded with an electronic rendition of 'Jingle Bells'.

"Cool!" JD said with a grin.

Ezra rolled his eyes, looking appropriately horrified.

"You can wear it when you see your Ma," Buck suggested.

The thought of his mother's reaction to such a tasteless accessory brought a smile to Ezra's lips. It might have been worth the embarrassment of wearing it, if he were actually going to see her this holiday season. "I think my mother would find it... interesting," he said with a chuckle. "Thank you, Mr. Wilmington."

"So is she coming here?" Vin inquired curiously.

"No," Ezra answered quickly. "She wished to remain in London."

"London at Christmas with Maude," Josiah said with a wistful sigh. "Sounds wonderful."

"I bet it'll be fun, huh Ez?" JD said as he reached for the chocolate cake.

Ezra forced a smile. "Quite."

"Hey, someone hasn't opened his gift yet," Buck said, wagging his finger at Chris.

Chris shot him a look, but reached for his gift anyway, tearing the paper off quickly.

Ezra watched apprehensively, wondering what kind of reaction his gift would garner.

Chris opened the plain cardboard box and stared inside with a blank look on his face. Slowly, he reached inside and withdrew the gift.

Buck broke the silence with his loud guffaws as he took in the brown teddy bear, dressed like a cowboy, all in black. The rest of the men followed, with the exception of Ezra, who favored his boss with a weak smile.

Chris turned the bear around slowly, his expression revealing nothing. He found the button on the back of the stuffed toy and eyed it curiously. The team leader raised his eyebrow and looked at Ezra, who shrugged innocently. Chris pushed the button.

"Freeze! ATF!" Chris's voice emanated from the toy.

He pushed the button again. "Don't you have work to do?!"

"You're under arrest!"

"Let's ride, boys!"

The men collapsed in fits of laughter. Buck, who had been drinking some coffee, nearly choked, snorting coffee through his nose.

Chris finally succumbed to the mirth and began to laugh, much to Ezra's relief.

"Where the hell did you get that?" Buck asked finally, once the merriment had died down somewhat.

"I, er, found a shop that creates such customized items," Ezra explained, slightly embarrassed. "I merely provided a tape that I culled from some of our operational recordings."

"Edited for content," Josiah added with a chuckle.

"Thanks, Ezra," Chris said quietly.

"You're welcome," Ezra replied, pleased that he hadn't just received a fist in his face.

"That was cool, Ez," Vin complimented.

"Thank you, Mr. Tanner," Ezra answered, surprised by the accolade.

"Ain't too many people can surprise Chris like that," he said with a grin.

"Well, it *is* my job to deceive people," Ezra agreed.

"Yeah, I guess it is," Vin said thoughtfully.

"Who wants cake?" JD called as he sliced into the confection.

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"Merry Christmas, everybody!" JD said cheerfully.

"Have fun in London, Ez. We'll see the rest of ya at Christmas!" Buck said as he and JD left the office.

Ezra waved at the departing pair and returned to his desk, putting his papers in order before he left for the holiday. He gathered his papers and placed them neatly into his briefcase before shutting it with a snap.

"You ain't taking work with you this weekend, are you?" Vin said, aghast at such a thought.

"Of course not," Ezra lied smoothly. He always found that work distracted him from the loneliness, keeping him busy so he wouldn't have the time to think about it and end up wallowing in misery over his pathetic lack of a social life.

"Uh-huh," Vin said doubtfully. He suspected the man was lying to him, but he couldn't figure out why he would do so over such a trivial matter.

"I have things much more interesting than work in mind for this holiday," Ezra insisted.

"I would hope so," Josiah said, clapping Ezra on the shoulder as he passed.

Ezra stood, donning his coat as he prepared to leave. "Gentlemen, I hope you enjoy your holidays."

"You too, Ez," Nathan said. "Have a good time in London."

"I always do," Ezra intoned with a smile. It wasn't a lie. He *did* enjoy visiting London.

"Merry Christmas, Ez," Vin said.

"Merry Christmas, Mr. Tanner," Ezra replied. "You too, gentlemen."

"Happy holidays, son," Josiah said warmly. "Give my regards to Maude."

Ezra nodded. "I'll do that, Mr. Sanchez."

"Have a good one, Ezra," Chris said with a smile.

"I shall endeavor to do so, Mr. Larabee," Ezra replied, feeling suddenly uncomfortable with all of the warm wishes and cheer being sent in his direction. It made him feel almost guilty about hiding the truth from them. "I hope your holiday is enjoyable as well." His smile faltered briefly, but he recovered quickly and tossed his standard two-fingered salute before exiting the office.

Vin watched him leave, frowning slightly.

"Something wrong, brother?" Josiah asked, noting the odd expression on the younger man's face.

"Not sure, Josiah," Vin said quietly.

Josiah nodded sagely, accustomed to the Texan's strange moods. He would be sure to make himself available if Vin wanted to talk.

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Ezra shut the door behind him, placing his briefcase on the table as he entered his apartment. After hanging his coat in the closet, he returned to the table and opened his briefcase, withdrawing the package containing his gift. With a wry smile, he pushed the button on the tie, setting off another tinny rendition of 'Jingle Bells'. As it played, he carried the box across the room to the small decorative table that sat against the wall of his living room. He flipped a switch, and the lone decoration in his apartment came alight.

The small ceramic Christmas tree was the one holiday tradition he had never ignored. His Aunt Grace had made it one year when she had attended a ceramics class with two of her fellow teachers, and had given it to him when he went away to college, claiming it was small enough to fit into any dorm room. Ezra knew that it was her gentle way of ensuring that he didn't completely ignore the holidays. He treasured it and had always brought it out at the holidays, even when he had no desire to celebrate. It often gave him the only measure of happiness he would enjoy during the Christmas season. It had pleased his aunt so much to make it for him, and now that she was gone, he looked to it as a reminder of the good times they had shared.

Ezra deposited the tie beside the tree, next to the four Christmas cards he had received. It wasn't much, but it was enough to make him smile. Extravagant decorations and true holiday cheer were for others. He would have his own simple celebration, with a gourmet meal prepared ahead by his favorite restaurant, a bottle of well-aged brandy, a few videos that he had been wanting to watch, and a good book to read by the fire. What more could a man ask for?

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The slamming of a car door roused him from his reverie. Chris took a last look at the picture of his wife and son, before setting it back on the bureau. He had promised Buck that he would try to have a good time this Christmas, if only for the sake of JD, who was spending his first Christmas without his mother. It wasn't going to be easy, but he was determined to try. Wiping a stray tear from his cheek, he made his way to the door to welcome his guests.

Christmas Eve. The day had finally arrived, and Chris prepared for the onslaught that was Team Seven. He grinned as Buck and JD argued their way up the stairs onto the porch, their arms laden with bags and boxes.

"Hey, Chris," JD called cheerfully, peering around the cardboard box he carried.

"JD, Buck," Chris greeted his friends. "What's all that stuff?"

"Oh, uh, Casey found out we were all spending Christmas together and she baked us a pie and some cookies." JD's cheeks, already flushed with the cold, turned an even deeper shade of red.

"I see," Chris said with a smile.

"I brought us some beverages, as requested," Buck said, hefting his bag.

"Good," Chris said. "You know where the fridge is."

The two men bustled into the house with Chris trailing behind them, chuckling softly at the banter being exchanged. A noise that sounded suspiciously like a gunshot brought the three of them to immediate attention, as they searched warily for its source.

Buck began to laugh when he identified the cause of the ruckus. "Josiah's here."

Chris shook his head and headed back to the porch, watching Josiah park his car, which was spewing oily black smoke from its tailpipe. "Guess you haven't had time to make use of your gift yet." Chris remarked once Josiah had reached the stairs with his box.

A hearty laugh was his answer. "No, not yet. I've been busy helping out at the homeless shelter this weekend."

Chris nodded, knowing that the older man devoted much of his free time to helping the disadvantaged, especially at this time of year. "I'm glad you could make it."

"Wouldn't miss it." Josiah studied his boss for a moment, noting the hint of sadness in his eyes, and smiled knowingly, knowing that the man was struggling against his memories. "Where do you want this?" He hefted the box in his arms.

"What is it?"

"It's a ham," Josiah replied. "Big one, too."

"It should fit in the fridge," Chris answered. "...provided Buck hasn't filled it completely with beer."

Josiah laughed. "Don't worry, I'll make room."

Nathan and Vin arrived shortly after Josiah, both bearing food.

"So what did you guys bring?" JD asked curiously.

"I made some sweet potatoes," Nathan answered as he searched for a place in the refrigerator to set his dish.

"I brought munchies," Vin replied, dumping bags of chips and pretzels on the counter. "And Nettie sent us this broccoli casserole." He wrinkled his nose. Vegetables were not his favorite type of food.

"She probably knows how y'all usually eat," Nathan said with a smirk. "Wouldn't hurt ya to eat something green once in a while."

Vin smiled and held up a package of green marshmallow Christmas trees.

"Don't count if there's sugar in it," Nathan snorted.

"Well, I like broccoli," Josiah announced.

"Me too," Chris added.

"Good, you can have my share," Vin retorted, taking a bag of chips and his sugary green snack into the living room.

Nathan shook his head, muttering, "Why do I even bother?"

Chris leaned against the doorjamb and smiled as he watched his friends putter around the kitchen. Maybe it wouldn't be so hard to enjoy this Christmas.

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Ezra yawned and stretched as he shuffled into the kitchen. The one good thing about it being Christmas day was that he could sleep in without worrying about missing anything. He had no place he had to be, so he could stay in bed as late as he wanted. He brewed a pot of coffee while he prepared his bagel. Opening the refrigerator, he frowned when he realized that he had forgotten to buy cream for his coffee. Ezra contemplated drinking it black, but then decided he really wanted cream. It was Christmas, after all.

Dressing quickly in jeans and a sweatshirt, Ezra grabbed his coat and keys and headed for the convenience store down the block. It was cold, having snowed the previous evening, and Ezra shoved his hands into the deep pockets of his wool coat. It was only a short walk to the store, but he hurried anyway, not eager to spend any more time in the cold than was necessary.

Nodding toward the bored sales clerk, Ezra entered the store, bells chiming merrily behind him as the door shut. He quickly retrieved his cream and headed for the counter, but when he attempted to pay for his merchandise, he discovered that he had forgotten his wallet. Heaving an annoyed sigh, he returned the carton of cream to its case and turned to leave the store, stopping short when he spotted the man who had just walked through the door.

The man was tall and thin, with long stringy hair covered by a black watch cap. His face was unshaven and his clothes were badly in need of washing, but it was the gun in his hand that had captured Ezra's attention. Cursing himself for not having his own weapon available, he ducked behind a display case and quietly made his way toward the front of the store, where he circled around the armed man and crept up behind him silently. In a flurry of motion, he tackled the would-be robber, kicking the gun away as he restrained the thief's arms. The wiry man struggled against his grasp, but Ezra held firm.

"Call 911!" he shouted to the frightened young man behind the register.

The boy reached for the telephone, then froze suddenly, ducking his head below the counter with a gasp. Ezra turned to see what had frightened him and was met with a sharp blow to the face by a second armed man, who had managed to enter the store unseen while Ezra had been subduing his cohort. Rolling into a

defensive crouch, he attempted to take cover behind a shelf of potato chips, but did not move fast enough. The shot rang out and Ezra was flung backwards into a rack of magazines, a burning pain flaring in his chest. His awareness was fading quickly, and his last thought was that he really should have taken his coffee black that morning.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Incoming!" Vin called, as JD tossed a cookie at Buck.

Buck ducked and the cookie hit the side of Chris's head. Chris turned around slowly, arching an eyebrow in JD's direction.

"Um, sorry Chris," JD said, chagrined.

Chris picked up the cookie and took a large bite. "Thanks, JD."

"I must say, this has been an enjoyable day," Josiah said as he sipped contentedly on his beer. They had awakened early, courtesy of Buck and JD, who couldn't wait to open the gifts they had brought. After a leisurely breakfast, Vin and JD had taken out Chris's snowmobiles, while their older teammates took the horses for a quiet ride through the woods. A vigorous snowball fight had ended the day, and now, they were finally relaxing after a satisfying dinner. It didn't get much better than this.

"Yeah. That dinner was really great," JD said enthusiastically. "Even the broccoli."

Vin made a face and Chris chuckled. "Yeah, it was pretty good."

"Too bad Ez couldn't be here," Buck added as he dropped into a chair.

"I wonder how he's enjoying his Christmas," Josiah pondered.

"He's probably having a hell of a time at all those fancy parties," Nathan replied.

"I bet there's some fine looking women there," Buck said wistfully.

"Maybe," Vin said quietly.

Josiah looked at him questioningly. "You don't think so?"

Vin shrugged. "Just got a feelin' Ez ain't having as good a time as he wants us to think."

"What makes you say that?" Nathan asked.

"Nothin' in particular," Vin replied. "Just a feelin'."

Chris eyed him thoughtfully. Vin's feelings were usually close to the truth.

The phone rang and Chris went to answer it, while Buck and JD started wrestling on the floor. Vin entered the fray, jumping onto Buck's back when it appeared that he was winning. Josiah smiled indulgently and Nathan watched closely to ensure that they didn't injure themselves. None of them noticed the rapid loss of color from Chris's face until he said sharply, "When did it happen?!"

As one, the five men turned toward their boss, matching looks of concern on their faces once they saw Chris's expression.

"We'll be there in about an hour," Chris said, hanging up the phone. He sighed, pinching the bridge of his nose before turning to face his men. "Looks like you were right, Vin."

"What do you mean?" Vin asked, a feeling of dread settling into his stomach.

"Ez ain't having a very good time today," Chris replied. "He's in intensive care at Mercy Hospital."

"What happened?" the men asked, nearly in unison.

"They wouldn't give me any details," Chris replied. "All I know is that he got shot somehow."

"So much for tidings of comfort and joy," Josiah said sadly as he joined his comrades in heading for the door.

\* \* \* \* \*

The nurse's eyes widened at the sight of the six imposing men making their way determinedly toward her desk. She opened her mouth to speak, but shut it when her supervisor approached and motioned to her to leave. Grateful, she hurried away from the desk, but remained within earshot to see what these men wanted in her hospital.

"Mr. Larabee," Nurse Baker greeted the blond ATF leader. She was familiar with these men and was well aware of their tendency to intimidate her nursing staff.

"Where is he?" Chris demanded.

"He's in intensive care," she replied.

"What happened?" Nathan asked politely.

"Agent Standish was brought in at around ten o'clock this morning," Nurse Baker answered succinctly. "He was apparently shot while trying to thwart a robbery at a convenience store."

"Ten a.m.?" Chris asked incredulously. "That's eleven hours ago! Why weren't we notified immediately?!"

"I apologize, Mr. Larabee, but Mr. Standish had no identification on him, and none of the morning staff recognized him," she explained. "I came in for my shift at seven and called as soon as I realized that no one had been notified."

"Damn," Buck said, rubbing his hand over his face.

"Hell of a way to spend Christmas," Vin commented softly.

"Can we see him?" JD asked.

Nurse Baker sighed. She was supposed to limit visitors in the ICU, but she knew that such restrictions never worked with these men. "You can see him for a few minutes, but only two of you can stay at a time."

They grumbled, but accepted the conditions, following her apprehensively down the hall to Ezra's room. Quietly, the six men surrounded the bed where their seventh lay.

"What the hell is he doing here?" Buck asked, frustrated by the incongruity of the situation. "He's supposed to be in London with Maude."

"Well, he's not," Nathan said, frowning as he tallied the damage that was done to the undercover agent.

"How does it look, Nate?" Chris asked.

"It looks like he took a shot to the chest, probably through the lung – I'd guess that's why he's on the ventilator."

"Is he gonna be okay?" asked JD, worry etched deeply on his face.

"I can't say," Nathan answered. "I'll know more after I talk with the doctor."

The men looked at the livid bruises and bandages on the pale man's face and listened to the steady thrum of the respirator, wondering how their friend had ended up in this condition.

The doctor arrived twenty minutes later, stopping uncertainly inside the doorway when he saw the formidable group of men surrounding his patient. He cleared his throat and stepped into the room. "Gentlemen?"

"Doctor...?" Chris offered his hand.

"Robertson," the doctor supplied his name and shook Chris's hand. "I hear our John Doe has a name."

"Ezra Standish," Buck stated.

"Agent Ezra Standish with the ATF," Josiah added.

Dr. Robertson nodded. "That makes sense, considering the circumstances of his injury."

"How is he?" Chris asked insistently.

"The gunshot wound was quite serious," the doctor explained without preamble, sensing that these men would not appreciate any beating around the bush. "The bullet pierced the lung and bounced off of a rib, so we had to pick out some bone shards before we could stitch him up. He's a bit weak from blood loss, but he's doing quite well."

"What about the head wound?" Nathan inquired.

"We had to put in a few stitches along the hairline, but, aside from a moderate concussion, there was no other damage."

"Will he wake up soon?" JD asked, twisting the hem of his shirt nervously.

"It's difficult to tell," Dr. Robertson said. "He's suffered quite a trauma, so it could be as little as a few hours or as much as a few days."

Nathan nodded his agreement. "We'll be staying with him 'til he wakes up."

"I understand," the doctor said with a sympathetic smile. He had dealt with members of law enforcement before and knew it would be almost impossible to dislodge these men from the side of their fellow agent, even if he had objected to their presence – which he didn't. He, unlike many of his associates, felt that family and friends were often the best medicine.

"I do need to examine my patient, gentlemen," he said politely.

Chris gave a curt nod and herded his men out of the room.

"I just don't understand what he was doing in a convenience store today," JD muttered.

"Maybe he changed his plans," Nathan suggested.

"Lord, someone should call Maude," Josiah said, rubbing his hand over his face.

"Do we have her number?" asked Nathan.

Chris shook his head. "No. He told me she moved around too much and never gave me a contact number."

"He must have a number for her somewhere," Buck said.

"Why don't you and Vin go check his place?" Chris directed. "See if you can find anything."

Vin gave him a tense nod and headed down the hall with Buck.

"I'll go check the office," Nathan offered. "He may have an address book or something in his desk."

"I'm going to check with the PD, find out what happened," Josiah said.

"JD and I will stay here with Ez," Chris said, stating the obvious.

\* \* \* \* \*

The apartment manager had left for the day, so in the interest of saving time, Vin picked the lock on Ezra's apartment door. Buck eased the door open and stepped inside the apartment, whistling softly. "Damn, this is a nice place!" This was the first time any of them had been inside Ezra's apartment, and Buck was impressed with the spacious residence.

Vin looked around the living room and frowned. "Kind of empty." The apartment was tastefully decorated, but seemed to lack the warmth of a real home, looking more like a magazine layout than a place where someone actually resided. He spotted the small Christmas tree and moved to get a closer look.

"What is it?" inquired Buck.

"His Christmas tree," Vin replied, picking up one of the greeting cards.

"Anything from his ma?"

"This one's from his dry cleaner," Vin said as he set the card down and picked up the one beside it, which had a large, colorful Nutcracker on the front.

"Here's the one JD sent," Buck said. Their youngest teammate had sent them each a card, despite the agreement among the men not to send them to one another. "Who's that one from?"

"The Atlanta Children's Center," Vin said with a hint of surprise.

"Let me see," Buck said, looking over Vin's shoulder.

"Dear Mr. Standish," Buck read aloud. "The children wanted to let you know they miss you and hope that you are happy in Denver. Your generous donation was much appreciated, but I think the time you spent with the children was just as precious. They especially miss the stories you read to them when you visited. I know that Christmas just won't be the same without your rendition of the story of the Nutcracker. I believe the little girls will always consider you their favorite Nutcracker Prince. Happy holidays from the children and staff."

"Well, I'll be damned," Buck said softly as he set the card back on the table. "Never would have thought Ez would be one to spend his time with kids."

"Yeah," Vin agreed, handing him the last card.

"Denver Children's Hospital," Buck said. "Guess he does like kids."

"Ain't no other cards," Vin pointed out.

"Geez," Buck said sadly. "Guess his friends aren't into sending cards."

Vin shook his head. "From what Chris told me, the guys he worked with at the FBI weren't exactly friends. They turned on him as soon as the rumors about him bein' on the take started."

"Hell, that's gotta suck," Buck said with a frown.

"Yeah," Vin agreed. "Why don't you check the bedrooms? I'll look out here."

Buck started down the hall while Vin looked around the living room, checking any drawers and papers he encountered for information about Maude. He felt a bit guilty about poking through Ezra's wallet and personal papers, but recognized the necessity of what he was doing. Finding nothing there, he moved on to the kitchen, not expecting to find anything helpful. There was no number for his mother programmed into Ezra's phone and nothing on the counters except for the usual kitchen paraphernalia. Sighing in defeat, Vin opened the refrigerator, idly studying the contents while he waited for Buck to finish.

Buck came back out to the living room empty-handed. "Any luck, Junior?"

"Nope," Vin said, still gazing into the refrigerator.

"Something interesting in there?"

Vin pointed to the foil container on the shelf. "Looks like Ez was doing take-out for Christmas dinner."

"You think his mother cancelled on him?"

"I don't think he was ever goin' to see her in the first place," Vin said quietly. "He's got dinner and enough videos for the whole holiday weekend."

"But he said he was going to London," Buck argued.

"He never actually said he was spending Christmas with his mother," Vin said. "We all just assumed he was."

"He never denied it," Buck said, doubt creeping into his voice.

"Would you?" Vin asked. "JD must have told him ten times how lucky he was to be spending his holiday with his mother. Nathan made a lot of cracks about how he'd be spending Christmas in luxury. He was probably too embarrassed to admit that he wasn't seeing his ma at Christmas like we all expected."

"Shit, I wish he would'a said something," Buck said regretfully. "Nobody should have to spend Christmas alone with a TV dinner."

Vin nodded. "Come on, Buck. Let's see if Nathan had any better luck at the office."

The two men started toward the door.

"Hey!" Buck said, pointing at the blinking light on the answering machine near the door. "Maybe there's something on here."

"Worth a shot," Vin agreed.

Buck hit the button and listened to the first message, which was just a computerized telemarketer selling replacement windows. The next and final message was more interesting. Maude's voice, sounding peeved, emanated from the answering machine.

*"Ezra, darlin', I received your latest missive. Christmas cards? I suppose you'll be writing to Santa Claus next. Really, Ezra, I do wish you wouldn't wallow in such useless sentimentality every year. Whining to your mother is quite unbecoming. You know very well that this time of year presents the best business opportunities. You cannot expect me to ignore them simply to waste my time on pointless holiday nonsense. The holiday season in Rome is especially rife with prospects this year. You would do well to use your god-given talents to take advantage of some of these opportunities, instead of wasting them on that pitiful government job. \*sigh\* Well, I'll speak with you soon, darlin'."*

"Jesus," Buck said. "No wonder he didn't say anything."

Vin said nothing, but his clenched jaw and stormy eyes spoke volumes.

"Come on," Buck said. "Let's get back to the hospital."

\* \* \* \* \*

The rest of the men were lounging in various positions around Ezra's bed in his new private room when Vin and Buck arrived back at the hospital.

"How's he doin'?" Vin asked.

"Better, but he hasn't woken up yet," Nathan answered.

"Did they get the guys that did this?" asked Buck.

"Not yet," Josiah said disgustedly. "But they've got some good video footage from the store surveillance system to work with."

"You guys have any luck finding Maude's number?" Nathan queried.

"Nope," Vin answered tersely.

"Don't much matter," Buck said darkly. "She probably won't give a damn, anyway."

"What?!" JD said, aghast.

"Care to explain that?" Josiah asked, his eyes narrowing at the insult to Ezra's mother. They had only met the woman briefly when she had stopped by to take Ezra to lunch on a visit to Denver two months earlier, but he had found her beautiful, charming, and seemingly devoted to her son.

"Don't mind if I do," Buck answered grimly. He explained Maude's phone message and what they had found at Ezra's apartment, while Vin radiated silent anger by his side.

"Knew there was something I didn't like about that woman," Chris muttered angrily.

"But... she's his Mom," JD said, confusion in his eyes.

"Not everyone is cut out for motherhood, JD," Nathan explained, feeling a pang of sympathy for the man lying in the bed. He didn't have much growing up, but at least his parents had been supportive of him and the career choices he made.

Josiah sighed sadly and reached for Ezra's hand. He knew firsthand the pain of an uncaring parent. His own father had placed everything and everyone else ahead of his own children, never showing any real love toward them. It saddened him that his young friend apparently suffered the same kind of pain.

"Why didn't spend Christmas with us?" JD wondered aloud. "I mean, if his mother wasn't gonna be with him, why didn't he come and hang out with us instead?"

"Cause he's a stubborn cuss, kid," Buck said glumly. "How would you feel if your own mother didn't want to see you at Christmas?"

JD pondered that for a minute before nodding sadly. "Man, that sucks." He looked at his friends guiltily. "I told him he was so lucky to be able to see his mother at Christmas. I guess I made him feel worse."

"Ain't your fault, JD," Vin said softly. "He's real good at hiding his feelings." In truth, Vin felt a bit guilty himself as he remembered all of the times Ezra had witnessed their discussions about the holiday festivities they were planning. Having been on the outside looking in a time or two himself, Vin knew how isolated it must have made the southerner feel.

"He hasn't known us long enough to even begin to trust us with what he's feeling," Josiah postulated. "I gather that his former associates didn't exactly inspire trust, so it's to be expected."

"Don't make it right," Chris said finally. It bothered him that he knew so little about his undercover agent, even after four months of working with him. Ezra's transition to this new position had been anything but smooth, and his emotions were probably still raw from being forced out of his former job. The man was probably feeling quite alone in the world. Chris shook his head in disgust. It shouldn't require something like this to gain insight into the reticent southerner. Watching the heart monitor flash regularly, he decided he was going to have to do something to change that.

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The harsh odor of antiseptics filtered through the fog of unconsciousness, making his nose tingle. Ezra attempted to take a deeper breath, then started to panic when he couldn't seem to do it. His eyes snapped open as he struggled to inhale and a shrill alarm shrieked from somewhere behind him as Ezra clawed frantically at his throat.

"Leave it alone, Ez," a voice soothed from his left. "You've got a ventilator in there. Just relax and let it work."

Ezra turned his head toward the familiar voice and relaxed fractionally at the sight of Vin at his side. A sharp pain shot suddenly through his chest and he gripped Vin's hand tightly until it passed. A doctor and nurse rushed into the room, silencing the annoying alarm before they proceeded to examine him. Vin gave Ezra an encouraging smile when he met his confused and frustrated gaze.

"Mr. Standish? Do you know where you are?" the doctor asked.

Ezra rolled his eyes and nodded.

"Good," the doctor said. "Are you in any pain?"

Ezra nodded slightly, moving his hand to his chest to indicate the area that hurt.

"This will help," the doctor said as he injected something into Ezra's intravenous line. "Do you remember what happened?"

Ezra thought about it for a moment then nodded again. He remembered everything up until he was shot in the convenience store. It was hard to forget taking a bullet to the chest. He pointed to the ventilator tube in his mouth and gave the doctor a hopeful look.

"Now, I know it isn't very comfortable, but we need to leave the respirator in for a little while longer," the doctor responded, much to Ezra's disappointment. "The bullet that hit you penetrated your lung, so it's important that we let it heal some before we let you breathe on your own."

Closing his eyes, Ezra sank wearily into his pillow.

"You rest now, and we can see about removing the vent tomorrow."

Ezra opened his eyes and glared at him, waving him away weakly. Vin chuckled at the look. It seemed that the southerner hated hospitals as much as he himself did.

"How're ya doin', Ez?" Vin asked once the medical personnel had left.

The look the man in the bed gave him told him all he needed to know.

"That bad, huh?"

Ezra shrugged, immediately regretting it when the pain in his chest intensified. He closed his eyes and clenched his fists until it passed.

"I guess those drugs haven't kicked in yet," Vin said sympathetically.

Nodding weakly, Ezra opened his eyes and looked at Vin inquiringly, as if to say, *"What are you doing here?"*

"We've been here since they called us at Chris's place last night," Vin answered the unspoken question. "Course, we would have been here sooner if'n you'd had your wallet on you when they found you."

Ezra waved his hand around the empty room, the question evident in his eyes.

"The others had to go back to the office for a bit, but they'll be back later," Vin explained.

His hands toying with the sheets, Ezra nodded, then looked away, as if embarrassed to be asking about his teammates.

"Hasn't been much of a Christmas for ya, has it?" Vin asked ruefully.

Christmas? Ezra's eyes widened and he stared at Vin, a stricken look on his face. After all of his careful prevarication he had still managed to ruin the holiday for his associates, giving them yet another reason to dislike him. Not that he needed any help in that regard. He seemed to have quite a knack for alienating people without much effort at all.

"Hey, what's wrong?" Vin frowned at the sudden change in his friend's demeanor. "Ezra?" But the undercover agent refused to look at him, shutting his eyes and turning away as much as the tube in his throat would allow.

Vin studied his friend in consternation, wondering what had brought on his sudden withdrawal. Ezra's face gradually relaxed as the painkillers finally took effect and sleep claimed him. Vin settled beside him to wait, reviewing the one-sided conversation in his head. It finally came to him a few minutes later.

"Aw hell," Vin muttered softly. Christmas. He had mentioned the day, reminding Ezra of what he had missed and probably embarrassing him in the process. Ezra now knew that they were aware of his

deception and was likely feeling guilty for having misled them. Vin sighed, wishing the obstinate man would look beyond his formidable barriers and see that they weren't enemies from whom he had to hide. But he knew how difficult it was to trust when you were used to being alone, and Ezra had only been with them for four months – a short time compared to the many years of doubt and suspicion that had caused him to hide behind his walls in the first place. Vin figured they had their work cut out for them.

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"Any change?" Chris asked Vin as he and Buck entered the room.

Vin nodded. "He woke up a couple hours ago. Gave the doctor some dirty looks."

Buck smirked. "Guess he feels the same way about 'em as you do."

"How did he seem?" Chris asked.

Vin shrugged. "He was hurtin' some, but the docs fixed that." He paused, looking down at the sleeping man. "I don't think he was expecting to see me."

"Why not?" asked Buck.

"Don't know," Vin answered. "Maybe he figured we wouldn't want to interrupt our plans. He got kind of upset when I mentioned Christmas."

"Damn," Chris answered.

"That boy's got a lot to learn about us," Buck said sadly.

"Yep," Vin said simply.

Chris stared at his friends thoughtfully, then, nodding to himself, strode purposefully from the room.

Buck and Vin looked at one another in surprise and confusion.

"Any idea what that was about?" Vin asked.

"Not a clue," Buck said, eyeing the closed door through which Chris had disappeared.

\* \* \* \* \*

The thin light of dawn was filtering through the curtains when Ezra opened his eyes. The room was eerily silent, the equipment that monitored his condition having been switched to a quieter mode during the night. Ezra yawned, then smiled, remembering what had happened the previous night to allow him that action.

He had awakened after dark, unable to keep the surprise from his face at the sight of his six teammates draped over every available piece of furniture in the room. He had not expected to see them there at such a late hour; they had, after all, already done their charitable duty by visiting him earlier. Ezra had been utterly confused by their continued presence but, due to the ventilation tube in his throat, he had been unable to question them about this anomalous behavior.

The doctors had not given him time to ponder on this, however. Minutes after he awakened, the other men were ushered from the room while the doctor finally removed the hated respiration tube. The injection that followed had sent him quickly back into slumber, his questions unanswered, while his teammates favored him with unexpected looks of concern. His last memory of the night was of Josiah saying, "Just sleep now, son." It was extremely unsettling, to say the least, and Ezra wondered if he hadn't imagined some of it.

The room was empty, this time, much as Ezra would have expected prior to his recent experience, and he found himself feeling oddly disappointed. It had never bothered him before to have no visitors while he was in the hospital. In fact, he was accustomed to it. Usually the only people who visited were his superiors, who were intent only on getting a statement or report before leaving him alone to recuperate. No one had ever come just to visit. It made him wonder what Larabee and company wanted from him. Ezra sighed. He supposed he would find out, now that he was once again able to communicate.

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The sound of metal clattering on tile woke him with a start. Ezra didn't remember dozing off, but the sky outside his window now reflected the warm hues of sunset; he had slept the entire day away – quite a feat considering the usual disruptions his slumber endured while incarcerated in a medical establishment. A cough directed his attention away from the windows and Ezra turned, his eyes suddenly widening and darting around the room, bewildered at the sight of his co-workers, frozen like statues in the doorway, with their arms full of boxes.

"What is going on here?" Ezra rasped.

JD looked up at him from his position on the floor, where he was scrambling to collect the silverware that had escaped his grasp. "Hey, you're awake!"

Ezra rolled his eyes. "Obviously," he retorted dryly.

"Guess that means we don't have to be quiet no more," Vin said with a smirk as he set his box down on the folding table that had mysteriously appeared in the room.

Ezra's confusion grew as the men removed foil-covered containers from the boxes and laid them out on the table. The situation became more clear when JD and Buck left the room, returning with a small, decorated Christmas tree. Ezra's lips tightened into a hard line. He knew what they were up to and he was *not* happy about it. Ezra Standish didn't need anyone's pity. His lack of holiday plans had obviously been discovered, and his associates now felt sorry for him, thus the current display of holiday cheer. Ezra watched irritably as they turned on some Christmas music on JD's portable CD player and began dishing out food.

"What are you gentlemen doing here?" Ezra asked, attempting to make his hoarse voice sound indignant.

Vin grinned at him, dropping a small plate of food in front of him on the rolling table designed for that purpose. "You never got to have your Christmas dinner, seein' how you were out saving the day and all, so we figured we'd bring it to ya."

Ezra looked at the men, searching their faces for any sign of deception, but to his surprise and chagrin, he found none. Then he realized that they had probably had their own Christmas dinner interrupted as well. Turning away, he mumbled softly, "I'm sorry."

Chris frowned. "What for?"

"I apologize for spoiling your holiday celebration," Ezra replied quietly, not looking any of them in the eye.

"You didn't spoil nothin'," Vin said dismissively. "We just wanted to make sure you got to have your own Christmas party."

Ezra turned his head slowly and asked uncertainly, "Why?"

"'Cause we like you," Buck replied simply. The disbelief on Ezra's face made Buck want to laugh and cry at the same time. He silently cursed Maude and all of the others who had made the southerner so wary of a simple act of friendship. The past days had been quite a revelation. It had been a surprise to Buck that their suave, confident undercover agent could be so uncertain and fearful in his personal life. He had

always assumed that the southerner was something of a snob and was aloof because he didn't want to associate with the rest of the team, but after what he had seen recently, he suspected that wasn't the case at all. The gregarious agent decided then and there that he was going to make it his personal challenge to show the stubborn cuss what it meant to be part of Team Seven.

"Eat up," Nathan said, depositing some silverware next to the plate. "You need to get your strength back."

Ezra stared at him for a moment like he was an alien, then turned to stare at his plate. Slowly he picked up his fork with a shaking hand and began to eat, sending surreptitious glances at the men currently making themselves at home in his room. He wanted desperately to throw them out and regain his fractured composure, but for the life of him, he couldn't seem to do it. Something was holding him back, preventing him from driving them away yet again, and Ezra wasn't quite sure what to make of it.

This motley group of men had willingly given up their free time to spend it with *him* of all people. This was new territory for Ezra. Normally, he was quite good at discerning the multitude of motivations behind a person's actions, but his teammates were defying all that he knew. Nobody had ever acted in quite the same way as this before, and Ezra found himself in the unaccustomed position of being utterly clueless as to how to deal with the situation. Against his better judgment, he decided to accede to their wishes – at least until he could figure out what was going on.

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"How is he today?" Buck inquired as Vin strolled into the bullpen. It was nearing the end of Ezra's fifth day in the hospital, and while each of the men wanted to lend his support to their ailing friend, they still had jobs to do, which forced them to take shifts staying with him. After learning about how Ezra had planned to spend his Christmas – and why – they had insisted, both to the doctors and to their superiors, that at least one of them would remain with Ezra at all times to lend their support.

Vin shrugged in response to Buck's question. "He's doin' better, but... he's quiet."

"And this is a bad thing?" Nathan asked, half-joking.

Vin tossed him a dirty look. "It ain't like him."

"I know what you mean," JD agreed. "It's like he's afraid to talk to us."

"I think our injured brother is not used to having so much concern directed at him," Josiah offered. "He doesn't quite know what to make of it."

"He did seem awful surprised when we showed up with Christmas dinner," JD pointed out.

"Surprised?" Buck snorted. "Hell, you would'a thought we all walked in there dressed in pink tutus by the bug-eyed look on his face."

"Now there's a picture," Josiah said, chuckling.

"Damn, Buck," Vin said, stifling a laugh. "I don't think I wanna know why you're dreamin' of us in pink tutus."

"Pink tutus?" Chris said mildly, his eyebrows lifting in question as he entered the room in time to hear Vin's comment. "Something you want to tell me, Buck?"

"We're discussing Ezra," Buck said, shooting a glare at Vin.

"What does Ezra have to do with pink tutus?" Chris said, then held up his hand. "Never mind, I don't want to know."

Buck gave a long-suffering sigh, while the rest of the men broke into unrestrained laughter at his expense.

"So, whose turn is it?" Vin asked, once the merriment had died down.

"Mine," JD said enthusiastically. "I'd better get going. Don't want Ez to get lonely."

Buck watched enviously as his roommate practically bounced out of the room. "Damn, I wish I had that kind of energy after a full day's work."

"It's called gettin' old, Bucklin," Vin taunted, ducking out of the taller man's reach as he attempted to grab him.

"Shut up, Junior," Buck grumbled, pitching a paper wad at the nimble sharpshooter.

Chris watched his team with an amused grin. Sometimes they acted like overgrown third-graders. The smile faded when he thought about the newest member of the team. After joining the team, Ezra had rebuffed all of their attempts to get him to join in their social activities, something that had not endeared him to the rest of the team, and Chris had begun to wonder if he had been wrong in bringing the southerner on board. It was hard for a team to function properly if they were unsure of one another. It was difficult enough for him to have to manage such a disparate group of men without having to worry about their emotional issues as well.

Since Christmas, though, Chris had gained new insight into the man's character. With what he knew of the man's past with the FBI, and this new information about his less than warm relationship with his mother, Chris had begun to get a clearer understanding of his undercover agent. When Vin had first joined the team, he had been wary and suspicious, not trusting any of them right away. He had been let down in the past and was used to having no one to depend on but himself. Finding himself suddenly surrounded by people who cared what happened to him and were willing to watch his back was a huge adjustment for someone who was used to facing life alone. Chris surmised that it was much the same with Ezra, perhaps to a greater degree. Maude's unfeeling message for her son told Chris volumes about his newest agent and he felt a sudden pang of sympathy for the man. He had suffered through hard times himself, but he had at least had Buck to help him through the worst. Ezra apparently didn't have anyone at all.

"Something troubling you, Chris?" Josiah asked, noting the thoughtful look on his boss's face.

"Just thinking about Ezra," Chris replied.

"I think we've all been doing a bit of that lately," Josiah said with a sigh. "He has given us all a lot to contemplate."

"Yep," Chris agreed. "They're releasing him tomorrow and I was thinking about bringing him out to the ranch."

Vin shook his head. "Not a good idea, cowboy."

"Why not?" Buck asked curiously. "We brought you out there after you got shot."

"Yeah, but Ez ain't gonna take too kindly to havin' all of ya hoverin' over him," Vin warned. "I sure as hell got sick of it, and Ez is a mite touchier than I am."

"He's right," Josiah agreed. "Having us all around while he's been in the hospital has been enough of a shock to him. We might overwhelm him if we don't give him some time to himself."

"But someone needs to look after the stubborn bastard," Nathan countered. "If he's half as bad as the rest of y'all, then he ain't gonna take care of himself."

"We'll figure something out," Chris said, running a hand through his hair tiredly.

"I'm plannin' to pick him up from the hospital tomorrow," Vin stated. "I figure I'll take him home and stay with him a while."

Chris met the sharpshooter's eyes and read the unspoken intentions there. He nodded slowly. Vin was the one of them who could most identify with Standish and was the least likely to have his offer of assistance refused.

"Let us know how it goes," Buck said with a smirk. He remembered all too well how cranky and uncooperative the Texan had been upon his release from hospital confinement.

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JD bustled into the room with his usual exuberance and Ezra had to stifle a smile at the younger agent's unfailing good cheer. He couldn't handle the man's enthusiasm for life in large doses, but he did find it refreshing at times.

"How are you feeling today, Ez?" JD asked brightly as he dropped into the chair beside the bed.

"Better, Mr. Dunne," Ezra replied sincerely.

"Guess that's why they're lettin' you out tomorrow, huh?"

"Presumably," Ezra said.

"At least you'll be home for New Year's," JD continued.

"It does set a bad precedent to begin the year in a hospital bed," Ezra said wryly.

JD smiled and looked at his friend, pleased that he had regained some color in his face. Seeing him so pale before had worried him greatly. He suddenly remembered the bag in his hand. "Oh, I brought you something." He reached into the bag and retrieved a book, handing it to the bedridden agent.

Ezra took it, glancing at the title. His eyes widened in surprise. "The Three Musketeers?" He eyed JD curiously.

JD gave him an embarrassed shrug. "When I was a kid, I had the chicken pox and had to stay home from school for a week. I was bored silly and my Mom went out and bought me a copy of that book." He shrugged again. "Anyway, I always liked that story and working with all of you guys kind of reminds me of it." He looked at Ezra apprehensively, hoping the man wouldn't poke fun at him, but he saw only understanding in the southerner's face.

"One for all and all for one," Ezra murmured. *If only that were true.*

"Yeah, that's it," JD said with a smile, glad that Ezra knew what he meant. "I mean, there's something about working with you guys that's just... different. I never felt that way when I worked on the Boston PD."

"Well, we are a different sort of group," Ezra conceded. He wouldn't go as far as equating them with the Musketeers, however, at least not where he was concerned. He could see how JD would feel that way, probably seeing himself in the young d'Artagnan.

"I knew you'd understand," JD said happily. "I tried to explain it to Buck once, but he can be kind of dense sometimes."

Ezra laughed at that, feeling an unexpected warmth that JD had trusted him with such a personal thing. "Mr. Wilmington doesn't always think about things as deeply as some of us."

"Have you read it before?"

"Yes," Ezra replied. "But not for a long time." It was the truth. It was one of the stories he had read with his Aunt Grace when he was younger, and he had always enjoyed it, both for the story itself and for the experience of reading it with his aunt. It was a lonely young boy's fantasy of heroism and adventure... and of having good friends to stand by his side. He understood the appeal of the book to his fellow agent – more than he cared to admit.

"Want me to read it to you?" JD asked, noting how Ezra's hands still shook while trying to hold the book.

Ezra opened his mouth to refuse, but then saw the earnest, open expression on JD's face and decided he couldn't refuse such a sincere offer. "I'd like that."

JD grinned and took the book from him, reading aloud, "On the first Monday of the month..."

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Vin glanced over at the man in the passenger seat of his jeep when they stopped at a red light. "You doin' okay, Ez?"

Ezra sighed. "I'm fine, Mr. Tanner."

"Just checkin'," Vin said placatingly. "You're bein' awful quiet over there."

Ezra sighed again and shook his head. "There is no need to hover, Mr. Tanner. I am quite all right." Vin laughed, much to Ezra's surprise. "What is so funny, Mr. Tanner?" Ezra sent him an annoyed glare.

"Sorry," Vin said, smothering the last of his laughter. "It's just that you ain't seen hovering 'til the guys pull their mother hen act on ya."

"They've already done that," Ezra said, eyeing him doubtfully.

Vin snorted. "That? That ain't nothin'. I got shot in a takedown, 'bout a couple months before you came on board, and they didn't leave me alone for a minute. Hell, Larabee dragged me off to his ranch for a whole week after I got out, so you're gettin' off easy."

"I see," Ezra said, his forehead wrinkling in confusion at such behavior.

"You're just lucky I convinced 'em to let me take you home," Vin added. "They just about drove me nuts, so I figured I'd better butt in before they started in on you. They mean well, but they can be a bit much to take when they're worried about you."

"I appreciate your intervention, Mr. Tanner," Ezra said, a hint of relief in his voice. Just the thought of the six men fussing over him made him shudder.

Vin nodded and continued to watch the silent agent during the rest of the drive. Ezra didn't speak again until they had arrived at his apartment and gotten him settled comfortably on the sofa.

"Thank you, Mr. Tanner," Ezra said tiredly. The trip home had taken more out of him than he expected.

"No problem, Ez," Vin replied as he sat in the comfortable overstuffed chair next to the couch. "Glad I could help."

"There is no need for you to stay," Ezra said, noticing that Vin had removed his jacket and seemed to have settled in for a lengthy visit. "I'm sure you have better things to do than sit around here with an invalid on New Year's Eve."

Vin looked at him steadily. "Ain't much bother to keep a friend company, 'specially when he ain't feeling well."

Ezra stared at him, unsure of how to respond to that. Vin had called him a friend. He could count on one hand how many times he had heard that in his life, and there were fewer still that had actually been sincere. He absently fingered the book he had received from JD. He was good at reading people's true intentions, despite how well they tried to camouflage them, and he was seeing nothing but truth in the man sitting next to him. Maybe this time, he could trust the words, take them at face value.

Vin watched the emotions flicker over Ezra's face, knowing how hard it was for the man to trust. "It ain't easy to trust other people, is it?" he asked.

Ezra looked away, suddenly uncomfortable with the direction of the conversation.

"I've been in the same position, Ez," Vin continued. "I worked alone for a long time. Nearly got kicked out of the Marshals because of a frame-up, so I know how it feels to have people you thought were your friends turn on you and leave your ass hangin' in the breeze."

Ezra looked back at Vin, shocked by this revelation. He had no idea that the sharpshooter had experienced such a similar betrayal.

"I didn't know what to make of Chris and the boys at first." Vin leaned back and ran a hand through his hair. "I trusted Chris right off, for some reason, but it was real hard to believe that all these fellas suddenly wanted to be my friends. Hell, I kept wonderin' what they wanted from me, waitin' for the other shoe to drop." He shrugged. "Hard as it is to believe, they're for real. 'Bout knocked me on my ass when I realized it." He looked suddenly self-conscious. "Ain't never had anyone who gave a damn... 'least, not since before my ma died."

Ezra sat silently, stunned by what Vin had revealed. For the second time in two days, he felt that warmth that came with the knowledge of what it had cost his teammate to make such a personal admission. He felt privileged to be deemed worthy of such trust, and also uncertain as to what was expected of him in return. Everything had always come at a price.

"Mr. Tanner, I..." Ezra trailed off for a moment as he gathered his thoughts. "You are correct. It is difficult for me. I have not had the best of luck in my relationships with others." He looked at Vin tentatively. "It will take... time for me to get used to this."

Vin nodded his understanding. "Took me a while, too. They ain't always the easiest bunch to talk to."

Ezra smiled. "That is quite true."

"Just take it slow," Vin advised.

"I will attempt to do so. Mr. Tanner... Vin... I... thank you," Ezra said quietly, stumbling slightly over what he wanted to say.

"S'okay, Ez," Vin replied. "You'd do the same for me."

Ezra smiled. "Perhaps I would," he answered softly. He held up the book in his lap. "Mr. Tanner, have you ever experienced the film rendition of this classic book?"

"The Three Musketeers? Nope, I guess I missed that one," Vin answered.

Ezra pointed at the cabinet containing his videos. "In there."

Vin retrieved the video Ezra requested and put it in the VCR.

"I think you'll enjoy this one," Ezra said confidently.

Vin smirked at him. "If you say so."

"Trust me," Ezra said, locking eyes with his... friend.

Vin smiled and nodded, settling in to watch the movie.

Ezra leaned back and looked at the small ceramic Christmas tree. It had been an unexpected and revealing Christmas and, oddly enough, it was turning out to be one of his best ever. He ran his fingers along the binding of the book once again. Maybe JD was not so far off in his literary comparisons after all. One could only hope.

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