

## Road to Nowhere

The road was empty. Not a soul was in sight as he walked along its side under the early morning sky. The rays of light just peeking over the lush tree line did little to cut through the chill that had settled deep in his bones. Ezra Standish was at complete loss as to exactly how he ended up there. He plodded along, keeping his eyes semi-closed in hopes of dulling the throbbing pain in his head. It didn't work, resulting only in his missing the big rock in his path. Ezra's foot caught on the protruding stone and he stumbled, arms flailing as he tried to stay on his feet. His sense of balance, usually exceptional, failed him as well, and he tumbled gracelessly into the icy ditch along the side of the rutted and snow-covered dirt road.

Ezra lay still, staring up at the pinkish gray sky that spun slowly above him. A faint memory stirred and he started to remember....

\* \* \* \* \*

~~ the previous day ~~

Friday had begun like any other day. Ezra strolled into the office at nine-thirty, his usual time, despite the efforts of his team to persuade him to conform to the official start time of eight AM. He did not immediately notice that anything was amiss, and it wasn't until he greeted Vin in the break room that he realized something was wrong.

"Good morning, Mr. Tanner," Ezra said as he prepared a fresh pot of coffee.

Vin said nothing, but shot him a glare that would have frozen a lesser man in his tracks.

"Is something wrong?" Ezra tilted his head in question at Vin's hostile response.

Vin ignored him, turning his back and quickly leaving the room.

Ezra sighed, wondering what he had done to irk his usually-affable teammate. He searched his memory, but could think of nothing that would account for Vin's aberrant behavior. Of all of his teammates, Vin had been the one who was the most friendly toward him – the first to welcome him to the team when he had joined six months earlier. It wasn't like him to act so antisocial. Pursing his lips, Ezra pensively completed his task before returning to his desk.

Passing by Buck's desk, Ezra asked, "How is Mr. Dunne today? Not too bored, I hope?" Team Seven had assisted Teams Two and Three in a bust earlier in the week, and JD had taken a bullet in the leg. He had been released from the hospital the day before and wasn't scheduled to return to work for at least two weeks.

"What the hell do you care?" Buck growled, his fists clenching at his sides.

"Excuse me?" Ezra's eyes widened, stunned at the implication that he did not care about his young teammate.

"You heard me," Buck said, his eyes flashing with restrained fury. "You're the reason he got shot in the first place."

Ezra's eyes narrowed suspiciously. "I most certainly am not."

“We saw the surveillance tape this morning, Ezra,” Nathan interjected, his voice laced with disgust. “If you’d been covering him like you were s’posed to, he wouldn’t have been hurt.”

Ezra gazed around at his teammates and saw nothing but accusation in any of their faces. Clenching his jaw tightly, he turned toward his desk, knowing that nothing he said would matter. He had been in this kind of situation before and always came out the loser.

“Standish!” Larabee poked his head out of his office. “Get your ass in here!”

Taking a deep breath, Ezra wiped the emotion from his face and strode confidently into his leader’s office.

Larabee said nothing as Ezra sauntered into his office and stood in front of his desk.

“What can I do for you Mr. Larabee?”

Chris swiveled his chair around and reached out toward the television that sat on a wheeled cart by his desk. Pushing a button on the attached VCR, he threw a glare at Ezra and said simply, “Watch.”

Ezra moved toward the chair, but changed his mind after his boss’s eyes narrowed in anger. Straightening his posture, he remained standing and fastened his eyes calmly on the TV screen. The view was of the side of the huge warehouse where the bust had taken place – the side where he and JD had been stationed. Ezra watched himself, positioned behind a tractor trailer with his gun firmly trained on the side door. JD held a position on the other side of the door, carefully concealed behind a rusty green dumpster.

As the tape continued, Ezra suddenly realized what had made his teammates so angry. He sighed inwardly when he saw himself turn around and leave his position. Moments later, a window above JD opened and a gun barrel poked out, firing at JD while three other men barreled out the side door. Had he been in his position, Ezra would have seen the movement and might have been able to warn the younger agent of the danger.

Chris stopped the tape and turned back to his agent. “Well?”

Ezra returned his glare with a bland expression. “A man crawled out a window behind me. He was taking aim at Agent Matthews, who was otherwise occupied with the men attempting to escape via the loading dock. I left my post to prevent the miscreant from shooting Agent Matthews, since my warning apparently went unheard.”

“So what happened to this mystery man?” Chris demanded. “I don’t recall you bringing in any suspects and no one else saw you while you were supposedly off chasing him.”

“I ordered the man to freeze, but he fired at me instead,” Ezra explained calmly. “I pursued him, but he eluded me by disappearing amongst the numerous vehicles parked in the loading area. I returned to my position, since the man was fleeing toward the front of the building, where most of Team Two was stationed.” He shrugged. “I assumed they would apprehend him.”

“You left your post and you didn’t notify anyone,” Chris stated evenly.

Ezra frowned. “I informed everyone of my movements via my microphone.”

“Then why don’t we have you on tape?” Chris pointed an accusing finger at Ezra. “You left your assigned position and did not keep in contact, placing a fellow agent in danger. JD could have been killed while you were off doing god knows what!”

Ezra stiffened at the accusation. Chris had apparently not believed a word he said. “And what else would I have been doing?”

“You ‘assisted’ in rounding up the money and weapons during cleanup, and Lawrence is claiming that our inventory is thirty grand short,” Chris said curtly, watching Ezra closely for his reaction.

The statement hit Ezra like a punch in the stomach. Alfred Lawrence was the weapons supplier for a number of drug gangs, and he had been at the warehouse to make a large purchase. The briefcase that had been found at the scene had contained nearly half a million dollars.

Ezra bristled at the thinly-veiled accusation that he had absconded with the money. “I will not even dignify that with a response.”

Chris stared at him for a full minute before saying in clipped tones, “You’re suspended pending an investigation. Leave your badge and gun here.”

Slowly, without displaying any hint of what he was feeling, Ezra withdrew his badge from his pocket and tossed it on his boss’s desk. He removed the government-issued service weapon from his shoulder holster and set it quietly beside the badge. Turning on his heel, he left the office without another word.

The hostility was almost tangible in the air of the bullpen as he returned to his desk. Ezra collected his briefcase and coat, feeling the weight of his teammate’s stares on his back as he quietly walked away. His confident stride never faltered, revealing none of the pain he was feeling.

Ezra drove home in a daze, wondering how it had all gone wrong. He berated himself for thinking that these men were actually different; that they would actually stand behind him when something went wrong. As he climbed the stairs to his apartment, Ezra consoled himself with the thought that at least the majority of his belongings were still packed in moving boxes. He had a feeling he wasn’t going to be living here for much longer.

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It was the shrill chirping of a cell phone that woke him. Gazing blearily about the room, Ezra levered himself off of the couch, cursing as he tripped over the empty Scotch bottle on the floor. He grabbed his cell phone off of the table and clicked it on, frowning when the ringing continued. His eyes widened when he realized it was his other cell phone – the one he used while working undercover – that had awakened him from his alcohol-induced slumber.

Quickly, Ezra snatched the phone off of the end table, answering it with a careful, “Hello?”

“Mr. Stanley? This is Ron Blanchard.”

Ezra unconsciously straightened and slipped easily into his undercover persona. “Ah, yes. I assume our mutual associate informed you of my interest in acquiring some of your merchandise?”

The man on the other end of the phone laughed. “Yeah, Carlos told me what you were looking for. I think I can accommodate you, if you’re still interested.”

“Of course,” Ezra replied smoothly. “Shall we meet? Say, tomorrow evening?”

“I’m afraid I have an out of town engagement,” Blanchard said apologetically. “I have some time available this evening, however. Is that acceptable?”

“Certainly,” Ezra answered.

“Excellent! Meet me in an hour at this address.” Blanchard dictated an address that Ezra recognized as part of an industrial area on the edge of the city.

“I’ll be there,” Ezra promised. Clicking off the phone, he sank back into the sofa with a groan, noting with some surprise that it was already past midnight. This was definitely *not* how he had planned to spend his evening. His lips twisted in a smirk as he pictured Larabee’s reaction to this turn of events.

Team Seven had been attempting to get close to Blanchard for weeks, putting the word out that there was a buyer interested in his wares. Now, the man himself had made contact, giving them their best chance to take him down. Suspended or not, Ezra knew he had to follow up on this contact. Grimacing, he picked up the phone to call Larabee.

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Ezra stared out the window of the taxi, absently chewing his lip. He had been unable to reach any of his teammates, even after trying every phone number he had, including the Saloon, where they usually spent Friday nights. Inez had answered, informing him that they had left a few minutes earlier in the company of some other ATF agents. She hadn’t said it aloud, but Ezra guessed from the tone of her voice that the men of Team Seven had needed assistance to leave the bar. He had left a message with her, just in case, but he didn’t expect to hear from any of his associates until the next day at the earliest, when they were coherent enough to listen to the messages he had left on their various answering machines.

The taxi arrived at its destination and Ezra paid the driver, reassuring him that he was indeed in the right place. Shaking his head, the cabbie drove away, leaving Ezra standing alone in the dark parking lot. A shaft of light illuminated the stairs in front of him when a door in the building slowly swung open.

“This way,” said a gruff voice.

Ezra followed, pasting a confident smile on his face, ready to assume his role as an arms dealer. He stifled the strange uneasiness he felt at not having his teammates waiting behind the scenes as backup in case things went wrong. He was truly alone this time.

“Mr. Stanley.” A tall man with salt and pepper hair, wearing a suit that cost more than Ezra’s own, walked forward to greet him.

“Mr. Blanchard, I presume,” Ezra said, offering his hand in greeting.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you,” Blanchard said with a smile that sent a shiver down Ezra’s spine. “Come with me. I have something you’ll find interesting.”

Blanchard led Ezra to an office in the back of the building. It was dimly lit and fairly utilitarian in style, but what drew the undercover agent’s attention was the man who was slumped over in a chair in the center of the room. Carlos, his informant, was unconscious, supported only by the ropes that bound him to the chair. His face was bloodied and bruised, evidence of a fierce beating.

Swallowing hard, Ezra turned to Blanchard with a puzzled frown. “I don’t understand. What is Carlos doing here?”

“It seems Carlos overindulged in some of his vices last night,” Blanchard said nonchalantly. “He started bragging about how connected he was. How he gave information to his good friend the

federal agent so he could arrest some very important people.” He moved next to Carlos and lifted his head up. “Cocaine and alcohol tend to loosen the tongue, you know.” He smiled coldly at Ezra. “He was working very hard to make introductions with a new buyer in town, so I put two and two together.”

Ezra chuckled. “You believe I am a federal agent?” He started to laugh harder, fueled by the events of that morning. Technically, he *wasn't* a federal agent at the moment.

Two large men entered the room, one of them shaking his head at Blanchard. “No one out there, boss.”

“Feds never work alone.” Blanchard frowned, then turned to Ezra. “Where’s your backup?”

Ezra just kept laughing. “My... apologies, Mr. Blanchard.... I just find this... terribly amusing. Federal... agent. Good lord.”

Unamused, Blanchard jerked his head toward Ezra, spurring his two henchmen into action. They moved quickly to restrain the undercover agent, grabbing his arms tightly and pulling him toward the door.

“Mr. Blanchard,” Ezra protested, his amusement fading with the threat of violence. “This is an insult! I am *not* a federal agent of any kind and will not tolerate being treated in this manner.”

“That’s just too bad, Mr. Stanley... if that is your real name.” Blanchard eyed him critically. “This is a dangerous business. I cannot afford to take unnecessary chances.” He nodded toward the taller of his two men. “You know what to do.” With that, he walked away.

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~ present time ~

The time after Blanchard had left was something of a blur. Ezra remembered little more than flying fists and pain. Judging by the aches and pains he was feeling throughout his body, the two thugs had dispensed quite a beating before dumping him in this remote location... wherever the hell it was.

Running a hand wearily through his hair, Ezra winced when he encountered the long, swollen gash along the side of his head. The stiffness of the surrounding hair told him that he had been bleeding heavily at one point, and the injury explained why he was so muddled. With a groan, Ezra eased himself to a seated position, clutching his aching ribcage tightly. He shivered, pulling his coat tightly around himself. While the expensive cashmere coat was usually warm enough for his normal daily activities, it wasn’t meant to keep out the cold for long periods of time. It was also wet, which diminished its thermal capabilities substantially. Ezra sighed, wondering how he was going to get his somewhat damaged self back to civilization.

Ezra hauled himself to his feet and climbed up the snowy incline back to the road, grimacing at the slush that seeped into his loafers. The pricey Italian footwear was not designed for rough, snowy terrain, which seemed to be the only thing in the immediate vicinity. Squinting into the rising sun, Ezra started walking, following the tire tracks in the road and hoping they would soon lead him out of this wilderness.

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“Goddamn sonofabitch!” Chris slammed the phone down in frustration.

“Guess you got a message from Ezra, too,” Vin remarked, holding up his cell phone as he strolled into Chris’s living room. He had stayed over the night before, since he and Chris were planning to do some necessary repairs on his horse barn today.

“Damn fool idiot,” Chris growled. “What the hell’s he think he’s doing? He leaves me a message like that, then doesn’t answer his phone.”

“Prob’ly just tryin’ to aggravate ya,” Vin said.

“Well, it’s working,” Chris complained.

“Hell, you know Ezra doesn’t wake up ‘til noon on the weekend.”

Chris snorted. “Lazy bastard.”

Vin shook his head and started toward the kitchen. “I need some coffee.” He turned his face away, not wanting to reveal the myriad of emotions there. When he had viewed the surveillance tape, he had felt hurt and betrayed by what Ezra had done. He had trusted the man and believed in him, only to have that trust thrown in his face by the southerner’s actions. Now, Ezra had gone and done something foolish, making Vin revisit his own actions. Would someone who had betrayed them risk such a dangerous meeting without backup? It was a question only Ezra could answer.

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The sun was starting to sink below the horizon by the time Chris and Vin returned to the house. They shed their coats and kicked off their work boots, padding into the kitchen in their stocking feet.

“What’s for dinner, cowboy? I’m starving,” Vin said with a grin.

Chris shot him a dirty look before pointing to the refrigerator. “Make yourself useful. There’s a couple of steaks and some salad fixings in there. I’m gonna see if I can reach Ezra.”

Vin looked up from the salad he was making a short time later when Chris came back into the kitchen. “You talk to him?”

“No,” Chris said with a sigh. “No answer at his place. The rest of the guys called while we were out. Seems Ezra left messages with them, too, and none of them have been able to get ahold of him.”

Vin frowned, the knife in his hand stilling while he considered the situation. “Ain’t like him to stay out of touch when he’s doin’ anything undercover.”

“Maybe he hasn’t returned yet,” Chris postulated. “These guys sometimes do the wine and dine thing to impress potential clients. The message he left was after midnight, so it could be they went out for some late-night entertainment.”

“Yeah,” Vin said, not entirely convinced. “I think I’ll run by his place on the way home, just to make sure.”

“Josiah said he went by earlier this afternoon, but he wasn’t home,” Chris said.

“Probably bunked wherever Blanchard is keeping himself these days,” Vin said thoughtfully. “Wouldn’t be the first time he’s had to hang out with the bad guys for a couple days at a time.”

Chris met Vin’s eyes, noting the same sense of disquiet in the blue gaze as was probably reflected in his own. Something was not quite right, but neither wanted to voice such thoughts aloud, for fear of bringing them to life.

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His shoulders were hunched against the frigid air and the biting wind that had begun almost the moment the sun went down. Ezra was moving on automatic pilot and was startled to find that night had fallen. He had not even noticed how much time was passing as he trudged along the lonely road – something that disturbed him more than he cared to admit. Control was very important to him, and he made sure never to do anything that would impair his faculties and take it away from him. Reaching up, Ezra gently touched his damaged head, guessing that he probably had a concussion.

Weariness seemed to hit him all at once, like a wave crashing over his head, and Ezra stumbled to a stop, swaying slightly in the icy night air. The moon was just starting its journey across the sky, turning the trees into dark, shadowy shapes that danced and twisted in the wind. He squinted the one eye that would open all the way, but gave up the attempt to discern details, knowing that his vision was not at its best.

“Rest,” he said aloud, his hoarse voice disappearing into the wind. His body was leaden with weariness, but his mind was clear enough to know he couldn’t continue without some sleep. Shuffling carefully off of the road, Ezra made his way into the woods, looking for some kind of refuge from the cold. He searched his fuzzy memory, trying to recall the things that Vin had told him about finding shelter in the wilderness. Common sense told him he needed to get out of the wind and find someplace reasonably dry – which was going to be difficult on the snow-covered ground.

After tripping over unseen obstacles for the fifth time, Ezra finally found a spot that looked acceptable. He eased himself painfully to the ground, groaning aloud at the thought of inflicting more damage upon his apparel. Forcing himself to ignore the dirt, he burrowed under the tangled mass of bushes, curling into a tight ball to conserve his body heat. It wasn’t a four-star hotel, but Ezra was beyond caring. With a tired sigh, he drifted off into a restless sleep.

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Tap. Tap. Tap. Chris drummed his pen against the surface of his desk as he stared at the computer screen, the words blurring as his focus turned inward. He was supposed to be reviewing information in preparation for the initial investigation into the missing money from the bust, but his thoughts kept returning to Ezra... and the fact that no one had seen or heard from him since Friday.

His worry had increased after each negative report from the rest of his friends. They had all tried calling, and Vin, Buck, and Josiah had all gone to Ezra’s condo, with no luck. Vin had even picked the lock, breaking into the apartment to ensure that Ezra was not lying there injured – or worse. But there was no sign of the missing man.

“Hey.” Vin walked into the office without knocking and plopped into the chair across from his boss.

Chris lifted an eyebrow in question.

“Tracked down the cab company he used,” Vin explained. “The driver remembered him ‘cause he dropped him off at one ‘a them office parks south of town. He thought it was strange, considerin’ how late it was.”

Chris thought about it for a moment, then nodded decisively. “Check it out.”

Vin stood and left without another word, his silence evidence of his increasing concern over their missing teammate. The rest of the team had been somewhat more subdued than usual, reflecting their uncertainty. Despite the hostilities of the previous Friday and the accusations regarding the earlier bust, Ezra was still his responsibility and Chris would do whatever it took to find him.

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Ezra hadn’t thought it possible, but this day had dawned colder than the one before. His head also hurt more, throbbing in time with his limping footsteps. He had long since lost all feeling in his feet, and was

wondering if this road he was traveling would ever end. Ezra shoved his hands deeper into his pockets, searching for additional warmth that was not forthcoming.

His head bowed, Ezra kept his focus on the road, carefully placing his feet so as not to trip and fall, as he had done far too many times already. His brain was still muddled and he had lost track of how many days he had been out in these woods. A hoarse chuckle escaped his dry lips. Larabee was going to be pissed.

It was almost noon when Ezra suddenly realized that the terrain had changed. Bringing his head up, he squinted into the sunlight, a slow grin spreading across his face at the sight of the two-lane highway stretching out in either direction. He wasn't sure which direction would take him to Denver and his head hurt too much to try to figure it out, so Ezra just shrugged and turned right, figuring that he would come across a telephone eventually. All he had to do was keep walking and try to come up with an explanation that wouldn't get him into deeper trouble with his boss.

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JD Dunne was bored. Bored, bored, bored, bored, bored. He shut off the television, fed up with the dull daytime programming. Medical leave, in his opinion, sucked. He didn't understand why he couldn't at least do some desk work this week. He didn't need his leg to work on the computer, after all. And he hated missing what was going on at the office.

Buck had told him about Ezra getting suspended and JD was furious at his teammates for believing that the undercover agent had done anything wrong. Hell, he had been there. He knew exactly how the bust went down, but they hadn't bothered to ask him, basing their opinions on the limited view from the videotape instead. Arguing with Buck had gotten him nowhere, so he couldn't wait to get back to the office to set the rest of them straight. JD shook his head in disgust. And they wondered why it was taking the southerner so long to trust them.

The ringing of the phone interrupted his bored contemplation and JD scrambled to answer it. He was so desperate for a distraction that even a telemarketer would have provided welcome conversation. It wasn't a telemarketer that had his jaw dropping in shock, however. Ezra's tired voice was an unexpected, but welcome surprise.

"Ezra! Where are you?" JD asked.

"I-I, uh, I don't know, Mr. Dunne." Ezra said, sounding confused and unsure.

His worry for his friend increasing, JD calmly inquired, "Where are you calling from?"

"It's a diner, of sorts," Ezra replied hoarsely.

"Is there someone there you can ask?"

"I have not ventured inside the establishment. I am not presentable at the moment."

JD fought the urge to roll his eyes. Ezra sounded distressed, and the younger agent knew that it would do him no good to upset the man further.

"Can you tell me the number of the telephone you're using?" JD asked patiently.

"Of course." Ezra rattled off a number, then said in a weak voice. "I have to go now, Mr. Dunne. I'm not feeling very well."

"Ezra? Are you hurt?" JD called anxiously into the telephone. "Ezra?" There was nothing but dial tone, as Ezra hung up the phone.

“Shit!” JD all but threw the handset back into the cradle and hobbled to his computer. It didn’t take him long to locate the address of the telephone Ezra had used to call. It was out in the middle of nowhere, along a small highway in a sparsely-populated area of the state. How the hell Ezra had gotten all the way out there was anybody’s guess, but JD’s top priority was to alert the rest of his teammates so they could bring their missing agent home.

Limping back to the phone, JD called the office, frowning when Buck’s voicemail picked up. Hanging up, he tried Chris’s phone with the same result. After unsuccessfully trying the rest of his teammates at the office, he called their cell phones with the same result. Frowning, he slumped back into the sofa. The only time his friends were so hard to reach was when they were participating in an operation of some sort. JD sighed, realizing that he was going to have to handle this himself.

JD lifted his car keys out of the ceramic hula dancer ashtray on the small table by the door, chuckling wryly to himself. This wasn’t exactly what he’d had in mind when he wished for something to dispel the boredom.

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The warm sun felt wonderful on his skin, and Ezra closed his eyes and leaned his head back against the wall of the truck stop restaurant, letting the heat soak into his chilled body. His stomach gurgled, and he swallowed delicately, hoping to keep the nausea at bay. Sitting quietly beside the pay phone, Ezra did not see the patrol car that pulled into the parking lot. It wasn’t until a shadow blocked the pleasant warmth he had been enjoying that the southerner cracked an eye open in annoyance.

The state trooper stood in front of him, arms folded and a disapproving expression on his face.

“Good afternoon, officer,” Ezra said, forcing his cracked and swollen lips into some facsimile of a smile.

“Can you tell me what you’re doing here, sir?” the trooper asked politely.

Ezra looked around in puzzlement. His memory was still fuzzy and he couldn’t remember why he was at this particular location. “I don’t recall,” he told the officer.

“May I see some identification?”

Ezra reached into his pockets, unaware of the officer’s sudden tension. Frowning when he found nothing, Ezra looked up at the man. “I’m afraid I can’t locate my wallet.”

“I’m going to need you to come with me, sir,” the trooper ordered. “On your feet.”

Ezra tilted his head in confusion. “I really do not feel up to moving right now. Could you return later?” He closed his eyes again and leaned back against the wall. A moment later, he felt hands on his arms and was suddenly hauled to his feet. Ezra struggled in vain against the steely grip, growing dizzy as he was spun around and shoved into the concrete wall. His hands were yanked roughly behind him and restrained in handcuffs before he could voice any protest.

The abrupt movement made his stomach churn, and despite his best efforts, Ezra could restrain it no longer. He turned his head, vomiting violently down the front of the trooper’s uniform.

Enraged, the officer shoved him away, cursing loudly at the mess he had made. “Goddamn fuckin’ drunk! You’re gonna pay to clean this, asshole!”

Unable to maintain his balance, Ezra fell over sideways, landing hard on his shoulder, which promptly popped out of its socket. With a strangled gasp, the injured agent rolled to his other side and curled up into a ball, trying to find a position that wasn’t painful.

The rough hands grabbed his arms once again, jerking him upright. Ezra let out a yell as a bolt of pain shot through his dislocated shoulder. His vision grayed and he was on the verge of passing out when he heard a familiar voice.

“Hey!” the voice called out. “What are you doing to him?!”

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It had taken him over two hours, but JD finally found the location from which Ezra had called him. He pulled into the truck stop and climbed out of his car, scanning the area for a pay phone. There were none in front of the building, so he headed around the side, freezing in his tracks at the sight of his friend being manhandled by a police officer. Running as fast as his injured leg would allow, he yelled, “Hey! What are you doing to him?!”

The trooper turned to him. “This is police business, sonny. Get back out of the way.”

JD sighed and pulled out his badge. “I’m Special Agent Dunne, of the ATF. That man is one of my teammates.”

Without turning around, the officer snorted. “Sure, kid. And I’m the Easter Bunny.”

Clenching his jaw, JD thrust his badge in the trooper’s face. “Let him go, officer.”

The trooper frowned, studying the badge intently. He lifted an eyebrow in disbelief when he eyed JD up and down, finding it hard to reconcile the young man dressed in torn jeans and high-top sneakers with the badge in front of him.

“Call it in if you need confirmation,” JD said angrily. “My boss’s name is Larabee. Chris Larabee.”

The man froze when he heard that name. There were very few members of law enforcement in Colorado who had not heard of Chris Larabee. The man had a reputation as someone you didn’t want to cross, if you valued your skin. Blowing out a frustrated sigh, the trooper let go of Ezra, who crumpled bonelessly to the ground.

“Look, I’m sorry,” the trooper said. “I got a call about a drunk sleeping next to the building. I was just tryin’ to take him in ‘fore he froze to death out here.” He gave JD an earnest look. “Happens more than you might think.”

The officer turned and JD got a good look at – and whiff of – the front of his uniform. He winced in sympathy, knowing first-hand how unpleasant that was to deal with. He shook his head and grinned. Leave it to Ezra.

“He’s one of yours?” The trooper eyed the dirty, dishevelled man on the ground skeptically.

“Yeah,” JD said, eyeing Ezra worriedly. “He had a meet with some lowlifes on Friday – been missing ever since. He called me from here a few hours ago.”

The trooper sighed. “He looks like hell.” He bent down and gently removed the handcuffs. “You want a hand gettin’ him in your car?”

“Yeah, I think I’ll need a little help.”

“What’d you do to yourself?” The trooper asked curiously, noticing JD’s obvious limp.

“Got hit during a bust last week,” JD explained simply.

“Damn.” The trooper looked at the young man with new appreciation. He might be young, but he had to be good if he was working for Larabee.

The two men got Ezra buckled into the front seat of JD’s car. The trooper tossed a wave as he pulled out of the parking lot, heading in the opposite direction from the two agents. JD started back toward Denver, tossing concerned glances at his unconscious passenger. “Ah, Ez. What did ya get yourself into this time?”

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It was almost nine PM by the time the men from Team Seven returned from the raid. Team Six had needed some backup due to an unexpected change in schedule – the bad guys had a bad habit of changing their minds. The weary agents made their way to their desks, intending only to gather their belongings and head home for the night. A shouted curse from their leader’s office put a sudden halt to those plans.

“Chris?” Buck called as he approached the team leader’s office.

“Got a message from JD,” Chris said absently, grabbing his coat from the hook behind his door. “He found Ezra.”

“What?” Buck gaped at him. “Where?”

“Don’t have the details yet, but they’re at Mercy General.” Chris stepped out of his office to find the rest of his men already heading out the door.

“Let’s go.”

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JD looked up from his newspaper as the door pushed open, smiling when his teammates spilled inside. “Bout time you guys got here.”

“How is he?” Josiah asked, studying the pale, bruised man in the bed.

“He’s pretty beat up, but the doc says he should be fine,” JD replied.

Nathan moved closer, expertly examining the visible injuries. “What happened to his head?” he asked, pointing to the bandage encircling the undercover agent’s head.

“He got shot,” JD answered simply. “Bullet just grazed him, though. The doc says he’s got a hairline fracture.”

“Damn,” Vin remarked, wincing in sympathy.

“Lucky bastard,” Buck said with a snort. “Doubt they intended to miss.”

“He tell you anything?” Chris asked.

“Not much.” JD shook his head. “He called me from a truck stop out on route twelve. Sounded kind of confused.” He laughed suddenly, drawing frowns from his teammates. “When I got there, a state trooper was tryin’ to arrest him – thought he was drunk. Ez barfed all over him.”

“Figures,” Nathan said, chuckling dryly while his teammates snickered.

“He looks like shit,” Chris commented unnecessarily.

“Wonder what he did to piss off Blanchard and his buddies?” Buck mused.

“It’s Ezra,” Nathan snorted. “Doesn’t take much.”

JD bristled at the unflattering comment, sending a dark look toward Nathan. “Ain’t his fault, Nathan. He was just doin’ his job, despite you guys bein’ assholes.”

Chris looked at his young agent in surprise. JD was not usually so blunt.

“Now, kid,” Buck began placatingly.

“Don’t ‘kid’ me, Buck.” JD shot a heated glare at his roommate. “You guys weren’t there.”

“What are you talking about, son?” Josiah asked, confused by the sudden animosity.

“Buck told me what you guys said to Ezra on Friday,” JD replied.

“What about it?” Nathan asked.

“Ez didn’t do anything wrong during the bust. You shouldn’t have said that stuff to him.” JD turned to Chris. “And you shouldn’t have suspended him.”

“JD,” Buck said in a warning tone.

“Why do you say that?” Vin asked quietly, after sending a look to Chris to prevent him from lashing out at the younger man.

“I was there, dammit!” JD brushed his bangs out of his face in frustration. “I saw him go after that other guy. Matthews would’a been toast if he hadn’t done something.”

“Why didn’t he tell us what was going on?” Nathan asked doubtfully. “That’s why we wear microphones, you know.”

JD shrugged. “I don’t know. I saw him talking, but I was kind of busy with my own bunch’a bad guys.”

“Maybe his mike was broken,” Vin suggested quietly.

The rest of the men frowned, wondering why they hadn’t considered that before.

Chris sighed and rubbed a tired hand over his face. Nothing was ever easy when it came to Ezra. Why did they always jump to conclusions when things involved the contrary southerner? He shared a look with Vin and could tell that the sharpshooter was thinking the same thing. Shifting his gaze to the man in the bed, Chris took in the dark bruises and the bandaged head. Ezra lived for his job. If that had not been apparent before, it was definitely obvious now. Despite being suspended, he had willingly gone to a meeting with a dangerous man, knowing that he would have no backup. He was willing to risk his life to put another gun dealer behind bars, even knowing that his efforts were likely to go unappreciated.

Chris chuckled to himself. Ezra was a mass of contradictions. He could rip you apart with a few well-placed words, and in the next moment, jump in front of a bullet to save your life. It was no wonder they had such a hard time understanding the man.

“JD,” Chris said softly, after a few minutes of silence. “Tomorrow I want you to check the comm equipment we used at the bust. Find out if Ezra’s mike was malfunctioning.”

Grinning, JD nodded his head eagerly.

“The rest of us are going to start looking into who really took that money... if any was actually taken.”

Vin nodded. “Might be that Lawrence is jus’ tryin’ to stir up trouble.”

Buck sidled up to his roommate. “Sorry I didn’t listen to ya, JD. I was just so pissed at Ez for leavin’ you to get shot.”

JD rolled his eyes at his overprotective ‘big brother.’ “It’s okay, Buck, but it’s Ez you should be apologizing to.”

“I plan to, kid,” Buck assured him. “Soon as he wakes up.”

A series of nods echoed that sentiment and JD settled back in his chair, pleased that his friends had finally listened to him.

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Ezra cracked open a bleary eye and took a look at his surroundings. Instead of the frigid wilderness he was expecting, he found four walls painted a neutral color and illuminated with faint, artificial light. It was, unfortunately, a sight with which he was familiar. Hospital rooms all seemed to look alike. Still, it was better than his previous location. At least he was warm.

Moving his head slowly, he noted with surprise that he was not alone. Vin Tanner slouched in a chair next to his bed, intently watching an action movie on the muted television. Ezra shifted slightly, a groan escaping his lips as pain shot down his arm.

Vin came to attention, grinning when he saw that Ezra was awake. “Bout time you woke up.”

“How...” Ezra coughed, his throat dry and scratchy. Vin handed him a cup of water, which he sipped gratefully. “Thank you.”

“You been here since yesterday,” Vin said, answering the question he had started to ask.

Ezra frowned, a faint tendril of memory coming to the forefront. “JD?”

“He brought you in,” Vin said with a nod. “You remember what happened?”

Ezra sighed. “Blanchard. I went to meet with him, but found that my cover had been compromised.” At Vin’s questioning gaze, he explained, “My informant, Carlos, seems to have developed an affinity for recreational chemicals.”

“He ratted you out?”

“Yes.” Ezra rubbed a hand across his forehead. “I don’t recall everything that occurred after that, but I awoke somewhere in the wilderness with a most disagreeable headache.”

Vin laughed. “You got your skull cracked by a bullet.”

“Oh.”

“So how’d you manage to survive in the woods for more’n two days?”

“Two days?”

“Yeah,” Vin said with a smirk. “It’s Tuesday. You disappeared Friday night.”

“Oh.” Ezra was stunned at how much time had passed.

Vin chuckled. It wasn't often that he got to see Ezra speechless.

“I assume Mr. Larabee is somewhat upset about this incident?” Ezra asked quietly.

“Some.” Vin watched the emotions flit across the undercover agent's face. “He's about ready to string Blanchard up by his balls.”

Ezra winced at that image, but allowed a small smile of amusement to grace his lips. “I agree with that sentiment.”

“He left this for you.” Vin tossed something onto the bed.

Eyes widening in surprise, Ezra picked up his badge, turning to Vin in confusion. “I don't understand.”

Looking at his feet, Vin said, “We were wrong to jump on your case like we did. We should'a gotten all the facts before we started makin' accusations.”

“What brought about this... change of heart?”

“JD.”

“I don't understand.”

“JD read us the riot act when he found out what we did,” Vin explained. “Called us a bunch of assholes.”

Ezra grinned. “I would like to have seen that.”

Vin looked Ezra in the eye. “He was right. For what it's worth, I'm sorry I acted like a jerk.”

“Apology accepted,” Ezra said simply, recognizing the sincerity in the sharpshooter's face.

“Chris and the guys will be by after work,” Vin said, a hint of relief evident in his voice.

A calculating look entered Ezra's eyes. “How much of a guilt trip do you think I can get away with, Mr. Tanner?”

Vin laughed. “Oh, you can prob'ly get some good grovelin' out of 'em.”

“I shall have to come up with something to thank Mr. Dunne for coming to my rescue.”

Vin nodded, aware of the double meaning in those words. “The kid did good.”

“Indeed.” Ezra suddenly yawned, wincing at the pain that lanced through his head.

“Why don't you get some sleep,” Vin said. “I'm sure the guys will wake you when they get here.”

Oddly enough, Ezra found he was looking forward to seeing his teammates. After what had taken place last Friday, he had not expected such a sudden change in attitude, but once again, these men had surprised him. It still hurt that they had been so quick to judge him, but it seemed they were also equally quick to admit when they were wrong. Larabee had once given him a second chance, so Ezra decided that he should at least offer them the same courtesy. He groaned as he reclined back into his pillows, but closed his eyes anyway, drifting to sleep with a faint smile lingering on his lips and his ATF badge clutched tightly in his hand.

*finis*