

Chris Larabee looked sideways at the man sitting in the passenger seat, slouched untidily against the door, a look of disbelief on his face.

"Jesus, Vin! Why didn't you go before we got all the way downtown? Where the hell am I going to find a place to park?"

Tanner looked unrepentant.

"I only just remembered I needed to go. Besides it'll only take a minute. No big deal. Double park for Christ's sake, just flash your badge if the cops cruise by."

Larabee glanced in the rearview mirror at his second passenger sitting in the back seat.

"You cool with this, Ezra?"

The Southerner shrugged easily and glanced at his watch.

"The flight doesn't leave for another two hours yet. Time enough for Mr. Tanner to do whatever he has to do."

Larabee drew savagely into the kerb with a screech of tyres, attracting a chorus of abuse and blasting horns.

"Make it quick, Tanner. Five minutes and I'm outta here."

The Texan was out of the Ram at a run.

"Be back in two!"

Standish watched in amusement as the agent ran up the steps and into the bank.

"Mr. Tanner I believe may be a little optimistic in his estimation in how long a banking transaction is likely to take on a Friday afternoon."

Chris tapped impatiently on the steering wheel still glaring after the errant agent.

"Well, he'd best make it snappy or he'll be dragging his own sorry ass over to the airport. Thinks I'm a goddamn taxi driver!"

"Well, Mr. Larabee," acknowledged the undercover agent, "you certainly have the right attitude."

The icy glare that was directed at the Southerner through the rear view mirror only served to reinforce his claim.

Barely five minutes elapsed before Ezra's hand sought the door handle and slipped the catch.

"Mr. Larabee, in order to spare you the horrors of a premature coronary I will endeavour to secure Mr. Tanner's immediate return."

Chris whipped round in his seat.

"Ezra!"

No use. The Southerner was already on the sidewalk and moving fast.

Goddamn! Why did those two always turn the simplest of errands into a multimedia production? He'd be lucky if Tanner and Standish ever made it to the conference. If getting out of Denver was so hard, how could he expect them to get all the way to Washington and stay out of trouble, never mind actually make the return trip unscathed. Larabee turned at the sudden blast of a horn and glared at the motorist giving him the finger for obstructing the traffic, planning Vin Tanner's payback.

Ezra straightened his jacket, snaring the centre button as he jogged up the steps. People in banks tended to get nervous around concealed weapons and he had no intention of putting his shoulder rig on display inadvertently or otherwise. Head down he unexpectedly collided with an equal and opposite force as two bodies tried to occupy the same space at the same time, both men rebounding off one other but successfully maintaining their footing on the steep steps. In the confusion the man dropped his briefcase, frantically grabbing for it as it started to skid down the steps. The Southerner deftly retrieved it, passed it over and muttering a quick apology kept going, quietly amused by the grumbled: "Asshole!" aimed at his back as he pushed open the door which proclaimed in gold lettering West Texas Mutual. A certain symmetry in that particular choice he felt; indeed where else would Tanner choose to deposit his funds?

The bank was doing a steady late afternoon trade and Ezra quickly scanned the crowd, groaning inwardly when he located Vin -- still in line. The Southerner checked his watch; two minutes had already turned into ten and looked like turning into twenty. By his own calculation Chris would achieve meltdown in around another five. He eased his way through the lines and sidled up to the Texan, ignoring dark looks that suggested retribution if he should try to avoid waiting in line.

"Mr. Tanner, there is a limit to the patience of our illustrious leader and I believe the needle has already swung into the red." He held his wrist in front of Vin's face, the hands of the gold Rolex indicating quite clearly that he was into the danger zone.

"I know! I know. He's going to string me up."

Ezra leaned closer, his words meant for the lean ATF agent alone.

"And might I suggest Mr. Tanner that it won't be by the neck."

Ezra nudged him helpfully forward as the line moved and another teller became free, before stepping aside and strolling to the rear of the bank to wait. Continuing to lament Tanner's lack of organisation and definite aversion to forward planning, he cast a practiced eye around the modest establishment and wondered how much cash the bank would handle on a given day. While not Bank of America he decided it would amount to a not inconsiderable sum given the nature of some of the transactions he was witnessing. *Good Lord, had these people never heard of cheques? Probably kept their life savings in an old sock under the mattress too.* Delighted that he rarely had cause to set foot inside any sort of bank, Ezra silently thanked the gods for electronic banking and offshore accounts, then glanced at his watch once more before apprehensively switching his gaze to the double glass doors framing the entrance. The familiar front of the Ram was just visible and while he thought it was unlikely that Larabee would make good on his promise to abandon them he was enough of a gambler to recognise that, knowing Chris, it was hardly a sure thing.

Several minutes later Vin finally hurried across the floor, tucking his billfold into his jacket pocket.

"Sorry. Goddamn line was a mile long then some jerk was dicking around changing traveller's cheques in nine different fucking currencies..."

"Mr. Tanner, in case it escaped your notice this *is* a financial institution, albeit a very small one; and I suggest you reserve your apology for Mr. Larabee."

Vin shot the Southerner a glare, unappreciative of either the undercover agent's sarcasm or his reminder of Chris' predictable reaction to his unplanned excursion into the financial nether world, and started towards the door.

"Come on. We've got a plane to catch."

"Really, Mr. Tanner," Ezra responded drily, "That small fact doesn't seem to have caused you too much concern so far."

In spite of his intention to hasten their departure, Ezra suddenly slowed and caught the Texan by the sleeve tugging him gently back, an alarm tripping somewhere in the back of his mind. There was something wrong.

"There's something going down here, Vin. Check out the guy with the briefcase."

Tanner, his forward movement abruptly arrested, rapidly scanned the open area and focused on a nervous-looking, thirty-something white male glancing anxiously around the bank.

"Looks juiced to me," responded the Texan, preoccupied with making an escape, "now let's get out of here, or I'm history."

The Southerner kept a hand on Tanner's arm and swept the bank with a practiced and suspicious eye.

"Wait, this is..."

The guns appeared before Ezra could finish articulating his fears and he heard Vin groan audibly.

"Aw, shit."

There were three of them. One had already neutralised the security guard; the second trained his weapon on the customers. Someone screamed and the rising panic was palpable as the reality of being part of an armed hold-up filtered through to the shocked citizens.

"Down on the floor! Everyone down on the floor! Now!"

"Wanna try for it, pard?" whispered Tanner, "There's only two of 'em."

Standish pulled the Texan to the floor and shook his head briefly.

"Not now. Don't want a firelight. Let's sit it out 'till the odds swing in our favour."

The panic had swelled into a collective wail of terror as the crowd obediently dropped face

down to the floor. One of the gunmen started to walk aggressively through the room, pumped from the adrenaline and spooked by the rising noise, while the man with the briefcase -- the one Ezra had bumped into on the steps -- who had initially drawn his attention grinned ferally at the room of cringing, subdued customers and allowed the briefcase to fall to the floor as he lifted an Uzi sub-machine gun into view.

"I said, get down and SHUT UP!"

The Southerner sighed.

"Well Mr. Tanner, I'd say that changes the odds rather dramatically."

Vin briefly closed his eyes.

"I'd say we're fucked."

A pause.

"Yes, well, that would also describe the situation fairly succinctly."

"SHUT UP!"

A boot connected with Standish's ribs and he grunted. He was going to kill Vin.

Chris debated the alternatives and his first instinct was to make good on his threat and drive away, leaving the two wayward agents to make their own way to the airport the best way they could. The option was tempting, but he eventually dismissed it on the grounds that ultimately it would be more trouble than it was worth. The Dodge was already presenting a major problem in traffic flow but to move meant a cruise around the block until Laurel and Hardy finally deemed it necessary to make an appearance. He pulled his cell phone out of his pocket and quickly thumbed in Ezra's number only to hear the corresponding ring emanate from the back seat of the Ram; Standish had left his phone in his briefcase.

"Great," muttered Larabee, redialling a new number. *Pick up Vin or you're a dead man.*

It rang just once then on impulse he cancelled the call, hesitating only a moment before he killed the engine and against his better judgement left the Dodge double-parked to actively pursue the two men. As he jogged up the steps he actually smiled; making those two squirm would be a pleasure he could truly anticipate.

The shrill ring sounded unnaturally loud in the now silent room and Vin almost groaned at the electronic beep issuing from his breast pocket not relishing the attention that he suspected was about to be lavished on him. He exhaled noisily as the sound abruptly cut off but the Uzi carrying man was already looking in his direction trying to pinpoint the intrusive noise. Vin kept his eyes on Standish, concern written quite plainly across his tanned features.

"Geez, Ezra. Chris?"

The Southerner understood his anxiety and risked a glance at the entrance. No one covering the door. Was it even locked? How he detested dealing with amateurs! He shifted his focus

slightly. The security guard had already been disarmed and handcuffed to a steel rail running around one of the pillars; about as much use now as a one armed archer. Wonderful. He hoped fervently that someone had tripped the silent alarm.

"I can almost guarantee it, Mr. Tanner."

"Gotta do something, Ezra," he whispered fiercely, "or Chris is gonna come rolling in here like the Seventh Cavalry."

"Indeed, and we all know what happened to General Custer."

A pair of booted feet appeared in front of his face.

"I thought I told you to shut-the-fuck-up! Mouthy bastard aren't you?"

Vin's almost imperceptible shake of the head, a mute appeal not to react, merely served to mirror his own strategy. He was hardly about to start something he had no hope of finishing and a blood bath had not been part of his plans for the day so he remained silent.

"I asked you a question!"

Fortunately, he anticipated the next move correctly and the boot caught him a glancing blow on the cheek as he jerked his head back rather than smashing full into his face. He shook his head and tasted blood but a quick check reassured him that all his teeth were still intact. *Be thankful for small mercies, Ezra.*

"Sorry," he mumbled, the left side of his face suddenly feeling numb.

His contrition must have sounded genuine because the man moved on, circulating, terrorising the subdued crowd with curses, kicks and threats. Vin's eyes had narrowed dangerously and Ezra understood that should the opportunity arise that particular man had been marked by Tanner for special attention.

Ezra, one eye tearing, watched as the Uzi carrier herded the bank staff into one room, an internal office with no windows to the outside and no potential for escape. Before barring the door he ripped out the phone line and methodically smashed the computer terminal. Eight people neutralised, fifteen remaining. He scanned the floor area again, calculating, absorbing minutiae that may be useful, working every angle in the scant hope that an occasion would present itself for Vin and himself to take action. His visual sweep halted as he made eye contact with a fellow hostage a few feet away; a woman. Unlike the others, rather than appearing anxious or afraid she looked decidedly bored, even a little irritated. He wondered if she had a plane to catch too.

He heard a harsh voice from the other side of the room -- the one who had kicked him he thought -- yell with a rising inflection of underlying panic: "Someone get the door for Christ's sake!"

The two ATF agents exchanged a brief but despairing glance as they both focused on the door, seeing their worst fear realised. Oblivious to any danger Chris Larabee was no more than five paces from walking in on an armed hold-up and neither Vin nor Ezra could do anything about it.

Chris glanced one last time at his watch as he pushed through the doors of the West Texas Mutual Bank. Then time stood still. That something was wrong computed in the first

microsecond, that he was in danger took a moment longer, the automatic reflex of going for his weapon to counter the threat sealed his fate. The gunman who had unsuccessfully raced the clock to get to the door before Larabee, knew he had made a mistake when the SIG Sauer appeared in the man's hand. Instinctively he moved to raise his own weapon to fire but his right wrist was captured in a grip that kept his hand low. In retaliation he initiated a counter move which saw the two men grapple for supremacy, each struggling to bring their weapon successfully to bear.

Chris' own automatic was crushed between the two struggling bodies of little use unless he could put some space between himself and the gunman, but he was being held in a desperate bear hug from which he could not extricate himself without putting himself in a vulnerable position. His left hand still gripped the man's right wrist fighting to keep it down but he could feel his own strength being eroded by the bigger man and the gun slowly being brought up. *Damn those two!*

The gun discharged with a muffled crack and for a moment both men clung to each other in mute surprise. Chris jerked reflexively, hips thrust back and eyes widening slightly in shock as he continued to cling to the man who had shot him. The gunman took a step back releasing his grip and Larabee doubled over, both hands immediately seeking to contain the blood flowing from a wound in his left groin. He looked down in amazement. He had been shot. God! So much blood. Too shocked to register pain at first he stumbled forward a few steps barely noticing that his assailant deftly plucked his SIG from his hand, his thoughts centred on stopping the blood from pouring out of his body and down his leg. Christ, he only had eleven pints in circulation and he was certain he had already lost several of those! How long did it take to bleed to death anyway?

At last the pain came, a wave rolling over him that left him gasping for air, then he was falling, crashing to the floor and rolling into a defensive ball with both knees drawn up into his belly and his fist pressed against the flow of blood. *This wasn't happening! He was going to the airport. How the hell had he gotten shot? It was Friday for God's sake!*

Ezra swore under his breath. Damn it. Chris was down! Vin's expression had changed from dark to murderous and the Southerner knew it was taking a superhuman effort of will on the Texan's part not to react in some way. The whole incident had taken but a few moments to play out, from the second Chris had stepped through the door to the instant he fell to the floor yet for the two agents it seemed like an eternity. Now Larabee was making small movements and was obviously conscious but Ezra was concerned at the steadily growing pool of red surrounding the fallen man. Even given the fact that a pint would look like a veritable flood on the hard surface, Chris had lost and was continuing to lose a considerable amount of blood. The gunman who had put Chris out of action had already searched roughly through the agent's pockets, quickly found his ID and badge then with a sneer held it up and skittered it across the floor to his boss.

Shit! No time for procrastination, Ezra. Taking a deep breath he pushed himself up from the floor, ignoring Vin's frantic hiss of protest, hands held up in the universal gesture of surrender and immediately found three weapons trained on him. His gut clenched involuntarily in anticipation of his imminent demise but he calmly addressed the Uzi-wielding leader.

"It may be of interest to you that the man you just shot is my partner. We are federal agents. I insist that you allow me to attend to this man before he bleeds to death unless you plan on adding murder to your catalogue of misdeeds."

The man with the Glock, who had so kindly left him with the raging headache and the bruised cheek from their last altercation, came forward and relieved him of his weapon, badge and spare clip for the SIG before quickly patting him down for other concealed weapons and stepping back.

"Clean boss." He glanced back at the Southerner. "Knew there was a reason I didn't like you, aside from the fact that you talk too goddamn much. Fucking Fed."

Ezra thought it wise to refrain from observing aloud that the feeling was entirely mutual. The man with the Uzi casually waved him forward.

"Ain't no skin off my nose. Just don't try any tricks, and get him away from the door. Don't want him getting hurt now do we if the situation should turn ugly?"

Ezra avoided looking at Tanner trusting he would understand why he had voluntarily given over his weapon. There was no doubt he would be facing disciplinary action come Monday over this one -- that is if he was still around to take the reprimand that would most certainly be coming his way. *Special Agent Standish, you are aware of course that this incident will be entered into your formal record.* Yes, indeed.

Chris was making a sound somewhere between a grunt and a sigh as Ezra dropped to one knee beside him avoiding the slick surface where Larabee's blood had pooled beneath him.

"Chris, you with me? Got to move you, man." The brevity of his speech was an indicator of his sense of urgency.

Larabee rolled his head to one side, obviously in pain and suffering shock but entirely lucid, and nodded.

"Do it."

Ezra dragged the quietly cursing senior agent to one side, alarmed at the trail of blood their passage was leaving but equally concerned with getting Larabee out of sight of the stunned and staring hostages. Having done so he quickly tried to estimate the damage, coaxing Chris to allow him to look at the wound in his groin. The blood was flowing darkly and rapidly but at least not in spurts -- *something to be thankful for* -- and the exit wound, in the upper part of his left buttock was bleeding just as freely. *Damn!*

He peeled off his jacket only momentarily regretting the criminal abuse of the expensive fabric and wadded it up, wedging it under Chris' hip and allowing him to roll back onto it. *Pressure, pressure, pressure.* The litany ran continually through his head as he took his perfectly folded handkerchief and using the heel of his left hand covered the bullet wound then transferred his weight onto that arm, pushing down with all the effort he could muster. Larabee grunted forcefully at the sudden increase in pressure, his bloodied hands instinctively trying to push away a new source of pain but Ezra had the advantage of leverage and Chris finally heaved a shuddering sigh, submitting.

"It's okay, Chris," panted the Southerner, his own breathing ragged after his exertions, "you'll be okay."

Larabee had his eyes closed; the tense facial muscles the only sign of his distress.

"Hurts like hell," he forced out finally, "How bad?"

Ezra sighed.

"You've probably lost more blood than is good for you but I'd be guessing at anything else."

"Then guess."

"In layman's terms, Mr. Larabee, you have a fucking big hole drilled through your ass and I hope to God that you don't dress to the left or you may have lost more than a great deal of blood."

Larabee rested his arm across his forehead and smiled briefly.

"Reckon I'm safe." His face tensed again and he opened his eyes levelling a hard accusatory stare at the undercover agent. "You gave up your gun, Ezra."

Standish looked away. It was not a question. Chris had heard him do it; Vin had seen him do it. Whatever his reasons, there was no acceptable defence and he would have to face the music alone. *Another Atlanta fiasco?*

"Chris, I..."

Larabee reached up and gripped Ezra's free hand, the ice in his cool gaze suddenly thawing.

"Thanks."

Josiah thoughtfully put down the phone and turned to Buck at the neighbouring desk.

"That was Jack Sullivan."

Wilmington temporarily switched his attention from the game of minesweeper he was playing on the computer to the older man.

"What have you been doing to interest the local PD, Josiah?"

"Not me. He's had a report that Chris' Ram is obstructing traffic downtown. Double parked, engine off. No one in sight."

"That's not like Chris. Besides he's supposed to be at the airport now. Must be someone else."

Josiah stood up.

"No. He's run it through the DMV computer and it's definitely Chris' Dodge."

Buck picked up the phone.

"Easy way to find out." He frowned as Larabee's cell phone number rang out. "Not answering. I'll try Ezra." Same result. Vin. Nothing.

Wilmington stood up and grabbed his coat with a sigh.

"Houston we have a problem." He quoted dramatically wondering how three agents on their

way to the airport could wind up in downtown Denver creating a traffic obstruction. "Come on, Josiah. How 'bout we check it out? Nothin' else doing."

Josiah looked at his watch.

"Did they have to wait until knock off time on a Friday afternoon to get into trouble?"

"Who says they're in trouble?"

"Are you telling me they're not?"

"I'm just saying let's go take a look see."

"Okay, let's go."

Buck hesitated.

"Better get Nathan and J.D."

"I thought you said we were just going for a look?"

"Well, you never know...better be safe than sorry."

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Vin had finally exhausted his extensive vocabulary of curses, each and every one of them directed at the Southerner. *Damn him!* Tanner's emotions were torn between his genuine concern for Chris and his own increasingly unfavourable situation. He knew he was being unfair and that Ezra had done the right thing -- for God's sake Chris had been shot -- but he still felt vulnerable without the undercover agent to back him up. In his estimation the odds were starting to get very slim indeed and the fact that he was now the only armed hostage, unless one of the other customers was strapped -- *yeah, right* -- did not give him any reason for optimism. His biggest fear was being fingered as another federal agent and the consequences if, no when, he was discovered, doubting that any of them would hesitate to off him if push came to shove. He surreptitiously checked his watch. Fifteen minutes. No sirens, no alarms, no police, no anything. By now the place should have been crawling with cops, feds, EMTs, press, fire department and anyone within shouting distance that could respond to a bank robbery, which lead him to believe that no one had tripped the silent alarm. That was standard operational procedure for bank employees so what the hell had gone wrong? He eased his hand towards his left armpit and the SIG nestled there. *You're on your own Tanner.*

The one with the Uzi had started rounding up the remaining hostages; containing them and Vin finally understood that this was no ordinary bank robbery. No one had approached the cash drawers, there had been no demands for the safe to be opened, no hurry, no obvious purpose and that worried him. He lowered his head again and hoped they would not reach him too quickly. This was not going to be over any time soon.

The cell phone in his breast pocket rang shrilly, insistently, and he felt the first stirrings of panic in his gut. It persisted, ringing on and on, drawing the gunmen as surely as iron filings

to a magnet to his position. *Jesus! This is not happening.* He cursed whoever was on the other end of the phone a thousand different ways but the phone continued ringing for another three cycles before abruptly cutting off. He became aware of the booted feet beside him and contemplated going for his gun under the premise of reaching for the offending cell phone and if it had been the gunman with the Uzi he might have seriously considered it but he did not relish the idea of being cut down by automatic fire while he nailed a guy with a Glock. He had been shot before and had decided that one bullet at a time was quite enough for anyone.

"Fucking yuppie!" The snarled accusation was accompanied by a vicious kick to the lower spine and Vin involuntarily arched backwards as white hot pain lanced down his back. "Gimme the phone!"

The Texan fumbled for the Nokia, his hand brushing the butt of the SIG as he finally hooked his fingers around the plastic case and retrieved the damning item, thrusting it at the gunman. The sheen of sweat that appeared on his forehead was hardly feigned and his heart thumping madly against his ribs could it have been heard outside his body would have convinced the most cynical that he was afraid. He was. The man grinned, feeling sufficiently superior to snatch the phone before dropping it with a clatter to the floor and crushing it underfoot. Vin had to admit at that moment he felt no regret at its loss. He let out a deep sigh and winced as his back reminded him he was going to be sporting a spectacular bruise at the base of his spine. *I owe you one.* Then he remembered that he still owed him one for Ezra. *Make that two, you bastard.*

He had counted eleven women and six men remaining in the main floor area, including Ezra, Chris and himself. The women had now been rounded up, searched, purses confiscated and were being ushered into the manager's office. The place was stripped of any means of communication and the door closed and wedged. *Divide and conquer. But for what purpose?* The odds were getting a little better in that the innocent bystanders were being removed from the equation. The security guard was already immobilised and cuffed to a pillar; Chris was in no shape to do anything much although Vin guessed if he could get a gun to him he'd still make a fair accounting; Ezra was unarmed but functional, which left just two pawns on the board.

The Texan considered the three gunmen: Uzi, Glock and Browning, a fair amount of fire power in anyone's language without the addition of the two confiscated SIGs. Vin had just his own SIG with a full clip. Ten shots. *Forget it.* Didn't need to be Ezra to figure out those were suicidal odds. He was good -- but not that good -- and he was set on the idea of having all his body parts in full working order.

The gunman who had taken down Chris had taken up station towards the door where he could cover Ezra, Chris and the security guard without moving from his position. Turning his head, Tanner could see the ape with the Glock forcing the two business men up from the floor, patting them down then directing them to sit with their backs against the counter. The youngest of the two would have been close to fifty, the second man was a good few years older than that and Vin knew without a doubt that he had been isolated simply because he was young, obviously fit and as such a possible threat; and his turn was coming. Yet in setting him apart and removing the other elements of the equation they had made a bigger tactical error than they could ever imagine. They had given him an open playing area in which to work and when he only had himself to consider he would take chances that he might not have done with innocent bystanders around to get caught in the crossfire. He smiled. Three was just right; he owed them one for Chris, one for Ezra and one for himself. At that moment if any of the gunmen had chanced to look at him they would have had good reason to be afraid.

"What's happening?"

"Nothing."

Ezra risked a reduction in pressure on Chris' groin and reinforced his own sodden handkerchief with a clean one he had plucked from Larabee's pocket. The blood had slowed to a sluggish trickle but had not yet clotted, so the Southerner switched hands and pushed back down onto the wound. He had not dared check the exit wound for fear of moving the senior agent and starting the bleeding again.

Larabee grunted again and exhaled sharply.

"Christ, Ezra, did you have to do that?"

"No, but I now have the perfect opportunity to exact my revenge for any number of slights I may have been forced to endure in the past and this is my way of doing just that." The concern in the green eyes made the words a lie.

Chris closed his eyes, comfortable with the Southerner's familiar sarcasm.

"Remind me never to piss you off, Ezra."

The Southerner chuckled but in truth he was worried. Chris was in shock from blood loss and he could do nothing more than he was already doing but the pale, cold, clamminess of his skin alarmed him. He looked out onto the street and wondered not for the first time how a downtown city bank could be under siege and no one know about it. He turned his wrist to look at his watch. Could it only be twenty-five minutes since they had walked into the bank? Surely he had been kneeling here holding in Larabee's life for half of his own.

"You know, Mr. Larabee, if we leave now we could still catch that plane."

Chris took a deep breath before he spoke.

"Talk to Vin. His fault."

Ezra glanced up and watched as the floor area was systematically emptied of hostages, leaving only the Texan and two other men. *Looks like it's up to you, Vin.*

"I might just have to do that, Mr. Larabee."

Buck walked slowly round the familiar Dodge and tried the driver's door. Unlocked. *Not like Chris.* Josiah similarly opened the passenger door and glanced around the interior spying Ezra's briefcase on the back seat. He gestured to Buck with a jerk of his head and the mustached agent reached across and pulled the expensive leather case towards him before thumbing the catches. Locked. *Shit!* Without hesitation he dug in his pocket and brought out a pocket knife.

"Ezra will kill you for that," warned Josiah, carefully checking the remainder of the cab as Buck made short work of the delicate mechanism securing the briefcase.

"I'll take that chance."

Ignoring the airline tickets and a variety of documents inside he immediately picked up the cell phone. Two missed calls. Wilmington quickly worked back through the menu, relieved that the Southerner had not locked his keypad as well, reading off the call information displayed. He recognised and dismissed his own number then thumbed the key to scroll

back to the call before. Chris' cell phone number. Not that unusual except at the time the call was made the two men, along with Vin, were supposed to have been well on their way to the airport. He frowned pondering the conundrum.

"Josiah, tell me why Chris would need to phone Ezra when they should've been together?"

The profiler leaned on the roof of the cab and stared up and down the street.

"Should have but obviously weren't. We just need to find out what the hell the three of them are playing at."

Buck turned as Nathan's Suburban pulled sharply in front of the Ram adding to the congestion and attracting a round of abuse from motorists already caught in the bottleneck which had developed into a monumental traffic snarl. The agent ignored the shouted obscenities and gestures being aimed in his direction and looked again at the cell phone as J.D. jogged up to stand beside him.

"Trouble?"

Buck shrugged.

"Seems Chris, Ezra and Vin are playing hide and seek. Does that mean trouble?"

Dunne scanned the busy street.

"Guess it depends who's doin' the hiding and who's doin' the seeking."

Josiah slammed the passenger door shut and walked around to join Wilmington.

"Let's get this thing moving and at least free up the traffic, then we can talk about where we go from here. You got a spare key?"

Buck nodded and separated a key from the rest on his key-chain.

"J.D. you want to get this off the road before this mob turns into a lynching party. I'll stick around here in case they come back. Meet back here like two minutes ago."

J.D. took the key and swung into the cab, firing up the engine and slamming the door shut, forcing Buck to jump back as he gunned the engine and joined the flow of traffic with total disregard to the oncoming cars, resulting in another barrage of verbal abuse directed at Dunne and the Ram. Shaking his head, Buck retreated to the sidewalk and watched the Suburban and the Explorer move forward and follow the Ram down the street at a more sedate pace. Sighing he looked at Ezra's cell phone again. Maybe he should try Chris just one more time.

Vin made a conscious effort to slow his breathing, to clear his mind and to focus on the sound of the approaching footsteps, keeping his body loose and resisting the urge to react too soon. All the time he was conscious of the weight and solidity of the SIG nestled in his armpit, knowing that the weapon was more likely to cause him grief than be of any use.

A foot nudged him in the hip.

"Come on, gorgeous. Move it!" Tanner hugged the floor wondering just how far he would be allowed to resist before he started taking punishment; the one with the Glock had already shown he liked to put the boot in and he hardly needed an excuse.

“Get up!”

The next move was so predictable that the Texan would have laughed if he had not been so intent on evading the kick aimed at his ribcage. The booted foot that scraped along his side had lost most of its power by the time it actually connected but he grunted explosively, suggesting that he had been hurt. He was aware that the gunman had dropped to a crouch beside him and felt the unmistakable sensation of a gun barrel being thrust against the back of his neck.

“You deaf, boy? I don’t want to have to ask again.” The implied threat was that Vin was not likely to enjoy the results if he did have to repeat himself.

The ATF agent moved slightly, shifting his weight onto his left hip and holding his right arm across his chest as if to protect his ribs from further abuse then rolling a fraction to the right he looked up into the man’s face.

“Go fuck yourself.”

Feeling incredibly light-headed, Chris started to wonder just how much blood he had lost. Considering the question he decided that it was probably no more than a couple of pints otherwise he would hardly be in any shape to be making such an analysis in the first place. Lucky. Very lucky. The bleeding had finally been controlled. He knew that because he no longer had Ezra’s full body weight pressing down on a single square inch of his groin, instead he could feel the Southerner’s hand maintaining still firm but not excruciating pressure. He had succeeded in finding a position of reasonable comfortable by raising his left knee, that simple flexion of his hip easing some of the pain. *Christ, he was thirsty.* He was also breathing too far quickly he knew but his body’s compensatory mechanisms had taken over and he was powerless to control those responses.

“What’s going on? And don’t tell me ‘nothing,’” he warned, breathlessly, “because I know that’s bullshit.”

“Do you want the good news or the bad news?” drawled the Southerner laconically as he surveyed the ongoing activity in the bank.

“What’s the bad news?”

“I believe that Mr. Tanner is about to be exposed for want of a better word.”

“And the good?”

“Well, I’m not sure it’s all that good but he still has his gun.”

Chris tried to rise, supporting himself on one elbow.

“Damn it, Ezra, he’s going to fucking well get himself killed.”

Standish easily pushed him back, wondering how someone already as pale as a ghost could achieve yet another degree of pallor.

“That is a distinct possibility, Mr. Larabee, however it’s an unfortunate fact that you are in no condition to do anything about it.” He glanced ruefully at the scene unfolding before him as the gunman who had earlier kicked him in the face approached the prostrate Texan. “However, I shall endeavour to redress the balance at the first opportune moment.”

Chris gripped the Southerner's wrist with surprising strength.

"No risks, Ezra. Don't do anything stupid."

Standish gave a lopsided grin.

"Rest assured I shall carefully weigh the odds before considering raising the ante."

The senior ATF agent nodded, satisfied, then suddenly released Ezra's arm, a look of surprise flitting across his face, before he reached out and grabbed a fistful of the Southerner's shirt dragging him closer.

"Cell phone," he muttered, "Get it."

For a moment Ezra looked confused, then Chris took his free hand and placed it against his chest. Chris' phone, forgotten in the crisis, was still in his pocket, vibrating silently and demanding to be answered. With a surreptitious glance at the gunman who was ostensibly guarding them Ezra slid his hand into Larabee's jacket and palmed the small phone, quickly sliding it into the folds of his own now blood-soaked coat wedged under Chris' hip. He fussed over the senior ATF agent, concealing his actions and brought his lips close to Chris' ear.

"The pen may be mightier than the sword, but I can guarantee that that the cell phone in the right hands is more powerful than a Glock."

Chris sighed, dragging much-needed air into his oxygen depleted system.

"How about an Uzi?"

Ezra straightened and scanned the now almost deserted bank.

"That remains to be seen, Mr. Larabee, however if you would care to make small wager..."

Vin wondered if he would ever breathe again. The man had a fist of granite and it had landed just under his ribs in the centre of his chest with the force of a jackhammer; now his heart was deciding if it was going to start beating again. After a long moment of uncertainty it finally fluttered, kicked in and he gasped, sucking in a lungful of air. *Goddamn! That wasn't supposed to happen!* He hunched his shoulders and prayed that the man would not deliver a second punch. Another hit and he would probably go into full cardiac arrest. *Smart move, Vin.* He curled into a foetal position, protecting his chest and trying to regulate his breathing.

"Asshole! Now get up before I do something you might regret."

Vin got up thinking he had regrets enough already, his hand going to his chest, feeling the tender spot below his breastbone. *Shit! It felt like he'd connected with the business end of a baseball bat.* Keeping his hand in place he gently rubbed the spot but even that light pressure made him wince and he chalked up another mark against Cro-Magnon man.

"Okay, move it." The muzzle of the Glock ground into his spine convincing him of the wisdom of compliance.

The leader with the sub-machine gun kept the weapon trained on the Texan giving him no choice but to stand and be searched, or be shot. He felt slightly sick from the punch but the rolling sensation in his gut came more from the certain knowledge that he was about to be disarmed. Hell, he might as well have given up his gun for all the good it had done him - or

Ezra, or Chris, or any of the hostages. The gunman stepped up and pushed him, his gesture intended to be intimidatory, but Vin folded with a sharp intake of breath as the man's hand unerringly went to the already painful mass in the middle of his chest. The reaction, as unexpected as it was genuine, caused both men to take a step back as Vin hunched forward clutching his chest, fighting for breath and retching. In a moment of clarity that owed more to instinct than good sense Tanner went for his gun. *Now or never*. The pain was real but he forced himself to straighten only as his gun hand cleared his jacket the leader brought up the stock of the Uzi and clipped the Texan under the chin. Head snapping back, brilliant flashes of colour dancing across his field of vision, he staggered off balance trying desperately to bring the SIG up on target. Pain exploded in his wrist as the barrel of the sub-machine gun smashed against his extended arm and then he was on the floor as the two men wrestled him to the ground and relieved him of his weapon. The larger of the two men, the one with fists of stone, quickly searched him his grin turning ugly as he flipped open the ID wallet and shook his head in disbelief.

"What is this? A fucking ATF convention?" He grabbed a fistful of the agent's jacket and threw him roughly back, almost onto the two stunned businessmen already sitting against the counter before standing up and aiming the Glock at the Texan. "I've just about had a gutful of you, asshole. One more move and you're wasted."

Vin levered himself up on one elbow, still groggy and looked down in surprise as warm blood splattered the back of his hand. The older of the two businessmen on whose legs he was almost resting leaned over and pressed a pristine white handkerchief to the Texan's chin.

"Looks like you'll need a couple of stitches in there, son," he muttered, then: "Are you all right?"

Vin struggled up, holding the handkerchief against his lacerated chin with his left hand while trying to ignore the dull ache in the centre of his chest and the numbing pain in his wrist.

"I'm fine," he lied, "Just fine."

With a sigh he closed his eyes wondering what in hell kind of situation they had stumbled into.

Ezra started forward as Tanner hit the deck but a strong hand, sticky with dried blood, gripped his forearm and with a nod indicated the third gunman who still had his eye and the Browning Hi-Power fixed unwaveringly on the undercover agent. From his position Chris was unable to see exactly what was happening but he understood that Vin had finally been rumbled.

"Let it ride, Ezra. He's just waiting for an excuse to have a go." The Southerner relaxed slightly but his expression was anxious as he watched the activity taking place halfway across the room. "What's going on?"

"The last man standing has just hit the deck."

"Vin? Get me up!"

Standish gave his boss an even stare.

"I assume that you are joking, Mr. Larabee."

Chris glared angrily at the undercover agent, a slight flush colouring his pale cheeks.

"I've been shot, Ezra, and it hurts like a bitch but I'm not fucking-well dead! Just give me a hand to sit up."

"If you insist, but we do this my way, Chris or you do it on your own."

Larabee hesitated for a moment then nodded.

Standish lifted his hand and, satisfied that the bleeding had stopped slid his hand under Larabee's hip ostensibly to check the bleeding but in reality retrieving the phone from the folds of his ruined jacket.

"The bleeding has stopped but if you go moving around it's going to start up again. You sure you want to do this?"

"Gotta do it, Ezra. We have to come up with a way out of this."

"My own instincts are to give them whatever they want and get them -- and us -- the hell out of here as fast as possible."

"But what do they want? We've been here half an hour or more already and no-one's made a move. They're waiting for something."

"Time delay locks?"

"That's my guess."

"We don't have long then."

Standish glanced around the room and palming the cell phone tucked it down the bloodied front of Larabee's pants. In response to Chris' quizzical expression the Southerner gave a wry smile.

"Believe me no-one's going to be checking down there, Mr. Larabee, and if anyone does by chance get close enough to notice anything untoward I'm hoping that they will merely believe you to be rather well-endowed."

The senior ATF agent grinned.

"You suggestin' something, Ezra?"

"I value not only our friendship but my life, Mr. Larabee, and nothing on this earth would induce me to make further comment on that particular subject. Now your mission, Mr. Larabee, should you decide to accept is to alert our colleagues thereby summoning assistance and possible retribution for our illustrious hosts."

"Well, you've got the right idea."

Ezra raised a questioning eyebrow.

"Quoting Mission Impossible," he continued, "Seems pretty apt if you ask me."

Ezra moved behind the senior agent preparing to drag him the few feet to where he could lean against the pillar.

"Freudian slip, and no one asked you," the Southerner muttered, "Now put some pressure on that wound before you bleed all over everything again."

oooOOOooo

Buck looked at Ezra's cell phone as if it had played a trick on him. The call had been answered and instantly terminated, so at least he knew there was someone else on the other end of the phone but whether it was Chris or not remained to be seen. Whoever it was obviously did not want to answer the call.

"Something wrong?"

Wilmington looked up to find J.D. watching him with a slightly puzzled expression on his face.

"You mean aside from the fact that Chris left his truck parked in the middle of the street when he was supposed to be at the airport with Vin and Ezra? Or that three ATF agents have suddenly disappeared off a goddamn public street?"

Dunne chewed his lip and glanced up the sidewalk.

"I'll start looking up this way. Someone must've seen something."

Buck nodded, annoyed with himself that he'd taken his frustration out on the kid.

"You do that. Josiah and Nathan you take the other side of the street and I'll go this way. Give it fifteen minutes then we come back here. I'll call the airport, see if Ezra and Vin checked in."

The four men split up and started checking the various establishments lining the sidewalk, none of them believing that they would find any of the three in the immediate area but knowing not only the value of groundwork but the necessity of talking to people who might hold a clue to the agents' whereabouts.

Buck started making calls. The airport. The police. The Bureau. Chris' ranch. Ezra's place. Vin's apartment. Inez' bar. Nothing. He covered a 50 yard stretch of businesses with the same result; a few had seen the Ram double parked, no one had seen who got out of it or where they had gone. He wandered back to the meeting point and called the section supervisor at the Bureau apprising him of the situation; three agents were missing,

He paced out a circle waiting for the others to return, trying to piece together the puzzle. Why had Chris even stopped here? What would be of great enough importance for Larabee to delay getting to the airport when Vin and Ezra had to catch a plane to D.C? What had happened to cause three of them to abandon the vehicle? J.D. came back at a jog shaking his head before he even got close enough to Wilmington to speak. Buck had expected no more. Within three minutes the four of them again stood in a huddle on the footpath, the foot traffic splitting to flow around them and merge together again on the other side completely oblivious to the growing concern consuming each man.

Buck glanced up the street looking minutely at each building: restaurant - clear, bakery - clear, dry cleaners - clear, fashion boutique - clear, legal offices - clear, bank - bank? He walked slowly and thoughtfully forward. West Texas Mutual Bank. Texas. Vin?

The agent looked back at his three companions and indicated the facade of the financial institution.

"Does Vin use this bank?"

Six pairs of eyes turned in unison to the small building.

"Looks like a Vin kinda place," commented J.D. "But I don't know for sure."

"Sure isn't somewhere Ezra would be depositing his cash," quipped Nathan, "Doesn't he have a secret Swiss bank account?"

Josiah laughed in spite of the gravity of the moment.

"Not quite, but he does bank offshore."

"I know Chris goes with Bank of America," offered Buck, "But I keep wondering why the hell Chris would be stopping right here. If he double-parked he was in a hurry and not expecting to be long. The bank is the only logical explanation I can think of. Anyone else got an idea?"

"You could be right," agreed Josiah thoughtfully, "But that still doesn't explain why they all left the Ram. It's not like Ezra to leave his briefcase and phone in an unlocked vehicle."

Buck's frustration finally overflowed.

"Goddamn! How can three people just disappear? This is Chris for God's sake! He's not that fucking irresponsible even if Vin and Ezra are."

Nathan put out a hand.

"Hey, come on, be fair. None of them are irresponsible, Buck. Something happened here and we just have to find out what it was."

"We haven't been able to raise any of them by phone," continued Buck, "I know Chris picked up when I made the last call but the call was terminated right away."

"Or someone with Chris' phone," interjected J.D. reasonably, "It's Chris' phone but it doesn't mean Chris is the one answering."

Buck shot the younger man an impatient glare.

"Thanks, J.D. I really needed to be told that."

Dunne turned away and started walking, not willing to provoke an altercation with Buck, recognising the signs in the older man of a short fuse burning quickly down. The West Texas Mutual had a modern chrome and glass frontage raised from street level and reached by a steep flight of around a dozen steps. Jogging to the top of the steps he checked out the facade but the smoked glass reflected only his own image back at him and the office had been closed for some fifteen minutes. He moved slowly to one side and took out his phone. The bank may be closed to the public but it would be business as usual for the staff behind locked doors. If he could talk to the staff he might just be able to find out if Vin, or indeed any of the three had been in the bank at all.

The call rang out. He tried again. No answer. Frowning he ran down the steps and back to the three agents who were still deep in conversational debate.

"Hey, guys. I just tried to call the bank. Thought we could check if Vin had been in there but there's no answer."

Wilmington's head snapped around to stare at the building.

"Try again."

J.D. redialled then shrugged after several minutes.

"Maybe they all left early," suggested Josiah, playing Devil's advocate, "It is Friday."

"No way the entire staff would leave early," countered Buck, "guess this is one we need to check out. So let's move with a purpose, hey?"

oooOOOooo

Tanner decided that he'd had better days. He had been disarmed, punched, kicked and generally abused and had been unable to retaliate with anything more than words. Score one for the bad guys, nil for the good guys. The Texan's head was pounding from the blow to the chin but he consoled himself with the fact that had the leader decided to use the sub-machine gun in a more conventional way, he would not be around to complain. *What a fuck up!* He closed his eyes and rested his head against the wooden panel behind him, his fingers straying again to the tender spot in the centre of his chest. The pain was much less but a huge mass seemed to have taken up residence beside his heart, filling up his chest cavity and leaving no room for anything else. He thought his wrist might be broken if the swelling and the pain were any indication, so he kept his right hand resting on his thigh in the most comfortable position he could find and decided that whatever happened from hereon in he was going to sit it out. They didn't pay him enough for this shit.

The relative silence was shattered by the ringing of a phone. The insistent tone moved from station to station as it went unanswered until finally it rang out. After a brief pause -- just long enough to redial thought Vin -- the ringing began again. The continuous ringing became an intrusion and then a concern as the gunmen began to look nervous. Even Vin jumped a little, his eyes flying open, when in the next interval of silence a smooth, Southern-accented voice broke into the calm.

"You know, someone really should answer that. This continued non-response is going to start alarm bells ringing somewhere very soon and as I assume your ultimate goal is to escape from this little enterprise unscathed it would seem unwise to continue to ignore incoming calls unless you wish to have a number of different authoritarian agencies descending upon this little slice of heaven."

Vin almost laughed. The expression on the face of his personal nemesis quite clearly read: what did he just say? The leader calmly turned his attention and the Uzi to Standish.

"Who asked you?"

Ezra spread his hands in a negatory gesture that at once admitted the truth of the comment but suggested to the man that had been warned and the consequences would lie with him. The Southerner maintained eye contact with the leader, trading stares and Vin was gratified to see that the gunman dropped his gaze first. He turned to the man covering Ezra and Chris.

"Fix the phones. I'll watch them. Not that we're gonna be here much longer anyway," he checked his watch and switched his attention to the man with the Glock, "Get the manager. Time to rock and roll."

Chris nudged Ezra with his knee.

"Don't push it, Ezra. These guys are twitchy enough."

The Southerner leaned back against the pillar, shoulder to shoulder with Larabee, sensing the man's increasing anxiety. He was not sure if he was imagining the bluish tinge to the man's lips or if it was the poor lighting but the reality was that the senior ATF agent was losing the battle against blood loss and shock, in the light of which the gunshot wound itself was of minor concern.

"Feelin' any better?"

"Reckon I'll live." The terse reply was no less than he would have expected from Larabee.

"That's not what I asked."

"What do you want for Christ's sake? A detailed analysis?"

"Back in taxi driver mode I see, Mr. Larabee," Ezra muttered, sarcastically, "Remind me to use another cab company next time."

"Ezra, I swear you'll..." Chris stopped abruptly and sighed, too exhausted to be angry, his irritation dissipating as he focused instead on slowing his suddenly too-rapid breathing, "If you really want to know I'm cold, my heart's going like a trip hammer and I feel like I'm about to pass out."

"You really should be lying down," advised the Southerner, his first-aid skills enough to understand the mechanism of shock and the effects Larabee was experiencing, "you're not going to be much use to anyone if you keel over." He adjusted his own position and took Larabee by the shoulders. "Here lean on me. I guarantee you won't miss a thing."

Chris gratefully eased down, allowing the younger man to position him with his head resting in his lap, and for a moment closed his eyes forcing himself to relax. *Time to rock and roll. Sure thing.*

"Any ideas, Ezra?"

"The main objective as I see it is for all of us get out of this alive, and I'm willing to do whatever it takes to see that happens. Never doubt Mr. Larabee, that I can shut up or suck up with the best of them, and I don't really care if Mr. Uzi and his henchmen waltz out of here with a million dollars."

"Sound like a plan to me."

"However," continued the undercover agent, "it would be remiss of us as law enforcement officers not to at least attempt to prevent the success of this operation. So, I propose to initiate a diversion at the earliest opportunity which will then allow you to complete your part of this mission."

"You're the boss. It's your call."

Ezra flicked a surprised glance at the blond man and understood that he was being given the responsibility for the game plan. Larabee was handing over the con. The Southerner looked down at his hands, covered now in Chris' blood, and gave a slow nod. His call.

Buck ran a hand through his hair and rolled his eyes as he continued to talk on the cell

phone.

"No I can't be any more specific! I don't know for sure than anything has happened...Yes, I understand that..No. That's fine. If you would just check that for me. Thanks." He terminated the call. "Fucking idiots!"

"No luck?' Josiah was staying close to Wilmington, endeavouring to keep a lid on his temper.

"No one wants to know. I've been transferred around four different departments already and that's just the local PD. They suggested -- wait for it -- that we knock on the door. Phone company's going to check out the lines for us."

"You do know we have no authority to be doing this, Buck?"

"Tell me about it. I've pulled in every favour I was ever owed in the last ten minutes."

"You really think the answer is in that bank don't you?"

Wilmington stared at the ground for a long moment.

"Josiah, I know Chris. I know he wouldn't just leave the Ram in the middle of a city street. Something is going down here and I don't know what it is. I just know that I have a real bad feeling about it. We've been up and down this street and I have a gut feeling that the key is right here. Ain't normal that we can't raise the bank even at this time, goddamn it, it's locked up tighter than a village virgin's chastity belt!"

"Point taken, Buck. I guess what I'm asking is what are we going to do about it?"

Buck stroked his mustache.

"I've got a guy coming out with a thermal imaging scope. I want to see what the hell is going on in that place."

Josiah raised his eyebrows.

"I hope you know that comes under the heading of misappropriation of public monies."

"No, Josiah, that comes under the heading of a fucking big favour."

Vin watched as the three gunmen started to move around, trying to keep tabs on each of them. The sub-machine gun was still the biggest threat, firing 650 rounds a minute and with an effective range of 50 meters meant there was a fair chance of being hit if the bullets started flying. The two with the sidearms were less of an immediate threat unless they were marksmen and in his experience armed robbers were usually not in that league but he had found out already that it was a mistake to underestimate their capabilities but a fist was one thing, a 9mm round was something else entirely.

The bank manager had been unceremoniously dragged from the locked office and taken to the vault at the rear of the bank by the Glock wielding gunman, leaving the bulk of the firepower in the hands of the two still guarding the floor. So far, mused the Texan, the whole thing had gone entirely in their favour; no alarm sounded, all potential threats neutralised, no resistance and no gunfire except the shooting of Chris which had gone unnoticed by anyone

outside of the bank. Complete success. They could just walk out, cash in hand and disappear into the distance. For once, in spite of being on the right side of the law, he really hoped that they would do just that. The success of the robbery or the ultimate apprehension of the criminals meant far less to him than the well-being of not only his friends but all the innocent people being held hostage and he knew that if the situation became difficult the chances of everyone escaping unscathed decreased proportionately. So far only Chris and himself had suffered injury and he wanted it to stay that way. He sincerely hoped Ezra and Chris were thinking along the same lines.

Tanner looked at his watch. Just over an hour. Sorry Chris, no trip to D.C. this time around and while conferences were an imposed torture to him he knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that right now he would rather be there than where he was now. He could see Larabee saying a few choice words to him over this one and he would certainly have every right to haul him over the coals, then kick his ass every which way from Sunday. As for Ezra, he would never hear the end of it from the Southerner. After all, it was his fault that were not now getting ready to board the flight to Washington and that man could be like a starving dog worrying a bone when he got his teeth into something.

He coughed and wished he hadn't, wondering if he might not have broken a rib, then resumed his continuous scanning of the room. For the first time since they had been separated he made eye contact with Ezra and found himself looking away from the intense green-eyed stare, feeling above all else the awful responsibility for getting Chris shot.

oooOOOooo

"I make it seven, maybe eight people. Looks like one on the right - no make that two, one's lying down, one's sitting; three standing - those three are the only ones moving; there's two maybe three, yes three on the left sitting on the floor. See there. Maybe one here too."

"Is that the best you can do?"

"This is thermal imaging not x-ray vision."

Buck squinted over the man's shoulder and looked at the pink and red shapes in the frame.

"So what's happening?"

The man looked at Wilmington as if he'd asked him to fly.

"Buck, I'm not clairvoyant. I can tell you how many are in there, I can even blow 'em away if you want me to but I can't tell you what's going on in there. Might be an after hours party for all I know; maybe that's why this one's lying down."

Wilmington leaned on the man's shoulder.

"Jack, now tell me, do they look like they're humping? Even I can see that nobody in there seems to be havin' fun!"

"Okay," laughed Jack, "so it looks like we have a situation. What're you going to do?"

Buck sighed.

"I don't know."

Ezra watched the money as it went from hand to hand, filling the briefcase and idly dreamed of early retirement. A million would do it - he was not greedy. A few wise investments and he could live on the interest and still manage to adopt a more than satisfactory lifestyle. He looked again at the group of men sitting against the counter. Tanner's body language was sending out a message loud and clear. The man had given in. He sat with his head down staring at the floor between his legs, not just hurt but hurting in other ways and if Ezra knew the Texan as he thought he did, Vin was by now consumed with guilt for having brought them all to this point. Damn it, that man would blame himself for the invention of gunpowder if he thought he could get away with it!

Chris had gone quiet and Ezra worried constantly that he might lose consciousness but he was loathe to disturb him if he was just resting. For one thing there was no point in it; like picking at a scab just to see if it would still bleed. He shifted his leg, enough to re-establish circulation but not enough to disturb Larabee unduly.

"Want me to move?" Chris' voice surprised him but he was relieved to hear it nevertheless.

"Are you comfortable?"

Larabee paused to tug fretfully at his collar and Ezra leaned over to take the senior agent's tie off altogether before undoing another button.

"As a matter of fact I am," answered Chris, sounding tired, "Getting pretty shaky though and I'm so fucking cold!"

Ezra felt Larabee's skin -- cold and clammy -- and looked across at Tanner.

"Vin! Gimme your jacket!"

His raised voice drew every eye in the room. The Texan looked surprised but without hesitation he awkwardly stripped off his coat and bundling it into a ball with his good hand lobbed it across the room to the Southerner. The undercover agent sketched a quick two fingered salute in Tanner's direction and covered Chris with the jacket. He leaned down close to Larabee's ear.

"Give me the phone, Chris."

"You sure?"

"As I'll ever be."

Larabee drew up his knees and turned half onto his left side, as if seeking a more comfortable position but in reality concealing his retrieval of the cell phone from its hiding place. A moment later he slid his hand behind his back and waited for Ezra to take the Nokia from him. As he felt the compact unit leave his hand he relaxed again and closed his eyes, exhausted by that small effort.

"Do it right, pard. You've only got one chance," he whispered.

Vin held his right hand close to his body. Damn, taking his jacket off had started his wrist

throbbing again. He closely watched the two men across the room and understood on a purely instinctive level that something had subtly transpired during the last several minutes but was unable to hazard a guess as to what it might be. One thing was clear, Ezra was up to something.

The Texan switched his gaze to the leader who was alternating his own surveillance between the money, Ezra and Vin, sweeping the Uzi in a continuous arc from right to left and back. Every now and then he looked at his watch and Tanner guessed the heist had been planned to a particular time frame. Whatever was next on the agenda was about to happen soon if the gunman's behaviour was any indication. He hoped this wasn't going to be the part where the shit hit the fan.

His gut clenched as the man started to move towards Ezra and Chris. *No! Not now.* The leader took another step forward, suddenly alert and Vin inwardly groaned. Taking a deep breath he stood up and stepped forward, immediately facing the single eye of a gun barrel as the Uzi swung towards him.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?"

"I need the john," he demanded belligerently.

"Tough."

"Come on," he tried a wheedling tone, doing his best to emulate someone in urgent need of the men's room, "I'm not going to try anything. I just need a piss."

"Sit down!"

It was obvious that no negotiations were going to be entered into. Vin ducked his head wondering if the nausea he felt was a result of the mass gradually filling his chest or what he was about to do. Slowly he turned his back on the gunman and started walking away towards the staff area in the back of the bank, waiting for the stutter of the semiautomatic, while thinking that if the churning in his guts continued he really would need the bathroom.

"One more step, mister and you'll never need another piss again."

He halted not prepared to push any further in case he wound up with one or more bullets in the back. He heard the heavy footsteps behind him and waited expectantly but did not turn around. The butt of the submachine gun struck him sharply over the left kidney and he stumbled forward a step his face a mask of which Ezra would have been proud.

"You arrogant prick," hissed the man, the fury in his voice evident, "Goddamn feds are all the same. Maybe I should just make the world a better place and take you out of it right now."

"Not unless you want murder one on your rap sheet."

"What makes you think I don't already?"

Vin shrugged.

"Then you've got nothing to lose have you."

The gunman grabbed him by the shirt and spinning him round shoved him back towards the two businessmen, literally throwing him back into his former position.

"Next time..." the gunman stopped, his threat incomplete and he stalked away.

"Don't worry," muttered the Texan, "There won't be a next time."

He twisted and settled himself into a sitting position, beginning to suspect he was a masochist at heart. Finally, he risked a glance at Standish and the undercover agent smiled meaningfully in his direction to which the Texan responded with a grin of his own. Anyone watching would have been baffled by the exchange but it was enough that the two men understood.

Buck snatched his phone out of his pocket at the tone that indicated he had a message. With so many irons in the fire it could be any one of a half dozen callers. His jaw dropped as he read the screen. Chris? He scrolled the message:

WEST TEXAS ON 8 ST HOLD UP HOSTAGES CHRIS SHOT ES

Wilmington looked up and stared slack jawed at the West Texas Mutual building before finally kick starting his brain and moving into action.

"Josiah, J.D. I want this street sealed off now. Nathan, get an ambulance here pronto -- no siren. Chris has been shot. They're in the bank. Now let's fucking well do something about it!"

oooOOOooo

Chris was becoming uneasy, his distress increasing as his breathing was getting faster and less effective, punctuated at frequent intervals by deep sighs -- the signs of a body starved of oxygen. Ezra watched the blond head toss restlessly from side to side, and felt the shift of his shoulders against his leg as he moved, his anxiety obvious. He began to massage the older man's shoulder and neck, hoping the contact would offer some small reassurance that at least he was not alone and for a moment Chris relaxed.

As long minutes dragged on Ezra was beginning to wonder if his hastily despatched message had even been received. While he was certain that Buck would never deliberately ignore a call, he recognised the reality that he might not be in a position to answer it immediately and as Chris' condition deteriorated he questioned his decision in choosing Wilmington as the recipient. In a silent argument with himself he debated the alternatives, then berated himself for not trusting his own instincts and finally chased the thought back to its beginning and wondered if Buck had received the message.

"Won't do any good, Ezra."

The sound of Chris' voice pulled the Southerner out of his momentary abstraction and he looked down into steel blue irises that bored into him with such intensity that he instinctively and guiltily drew back.

"What?"

"Beating yourself up." Chris paused to catch his breath. "You got word out. Nothing more you can do now."

Ezra continued to gently knead the man's shoulder muscles, disconcerted by the fact that he had obviously allowed his worry to show enough for even Chris to notice. *Losing your touch, Ezra?* He was conscious of the cell phone now tucked in his pant's pocket and considered

trying to make contact again but he knew that if he chanced another attempt he risked not only detection but retribution and while he was prepared to accept the consequences for himself he would not expose Chris to any further possibility of harm. Last time Vin had selflessly given him the diversion he needed, now the Texan looked as if he was all but done in himself. He watched as the gunman supervising the transfer of money from the vault finished filling the last of the bags and waved the bank manager into the vault with his weapon. This was it then.

"Forgive me my scepticism, Mr. Larabee but I believe we are running out of time." The Southerner switched his attention back to the senior ATF agent. "And I have a feeling that the fun has only just begun."

Chris' face creased in a wan smile.

"You're having fun?"

"Figure of speech."

"Figure we're in trouble."

Ezra was inclined to agree but refrained from putting his thoughts into words.

This was it then. Vin could sense the sudden change in the atmosphere and the body language of the gunmen gave off signals as clear as a flashing neon sign; the tension in the muscles, the heightened awareness, the increased nervousness -- every sense alert for danger and for action. The Texan adjusted his position, determined not to be caught unawares and... *Jesus!* A crushing pain gripped his chest in a vice and he was forced to lean forward in an effort to ease the unrelenting spasm, his hand pressed to his sternum as he fought for breath. Then just when he thought he could stand no more it passed as quickly as it had come leaving him gasping and feeling as if he had just run a marathon. He straightened tentatively, apprehensively, afraid the pain would come again but apart from the shortness of breath there was no residual effect. Wiping his left hand across his forehead he realised that he had broken out in a sweat. *Damn. He didn't need any of this shit now.*

"You three. Get up."

Vin swung his head up and squinted at the gunman who was aiming a 9mm Browning at him. The gun that had shot Chris. He was not completely sure that he could get up, at least not without falling down again but the gun made a convincing argument that he should at least try. Awkwardly because of his damaged wrist he struggled to his feet, feeling every niggling ache in his body and thinking how well a couple of percodan would go down right at that moment.

"Move it. We don't have all day."

Vin moved. He had no choice.

"Over there." He waved him over to where the security guard sat uncomfortably handcuffed to the pillar. "Sit down."

The leader produced a second set of handcuffs while the man with the Browning covered him, and set about immobilising the two men by cuffing their wrists together around the circumference of the pillar so they sat with their backs against the unyielding surface and

their arms pulled at full stretch behind them linked by the metal cuffs. As the cuff snapped tight around his injured wrist and the pressure on the joint increased he pushed back against the cold marble column in an effort to gain some slack, his right shoulder almost popping with the strain.

"Hey, man." One of the gunmen was speaking. "Should've thought of this earlier. Woulda kept the fed out of trouble."

Tanner thought he might be sick but the nausea passed as the pain subsided to an insistent throb and as he allowed his head to fall back against the solid pillar behind him he decided that his only consolation was that while the gunmen had been focusing on him, no one else had been hurt.

The Southerner moved his hand from Chris' shoulder and allowed it to rest in an almost protective gesture across his chest.

"I have grave reservations about the next phase in this singularly unimaginative scenario, Mr. Larabee."

"If you mean we're in deep shit, Ezra, say so."

"I'd say you're already there. My concern is that I might be joining you. In case it has escaped your notice we are the last unsecured hostages."

Larabee licked dry lips gaining no relief from a tongue already stripped of moisture.

"Insurance." Not a question but a statement of fact.

"Indeed Mr. Larabee. It's unlikely that they will attempt to walk out of here without some form of security and, don't take this personally but in your present condition, you would be more of a liability than an asset to them."

Ezra watched the approach of the leader with no change in expression -- *que sera sera* -- trying not to look too concerned that a sub-machine gun was being pointed directly at him. He knew what it was like to be shot; he did not want to add being shot multiple times with a semiautomatic weapon to his list of experiences. He mulled over the fact that Vin had faced the same risk and had acquitted himself admirably, now it looked like it was going to be his turn in the spotlight but he had no intention of being a hero, firmly believing in the tenet of live cowards being better than dead heroes. But the expected command did not come instead one of the other gunmen shouted in sudden protest.

"Hey, boss. There's somethin' wrong here. There's no one out here."

The Uzi carrier had not taken his eyes off Ezra.

"Good. We can make a clean getaway."

"No, boss. I mean no-one. Street's empty. No cars, no people, no nothin'. We've been stitched up."

The Southerner chewed the inside of his lip as he allowed his gaze to slowly travel between Chris and Vin. He had no illusions about their vulnerability, his own included, and no matter how much manpower might be concentrated outside the three of them were still on the inside, still hostages and still very much at risk. If anything the danger was probably greater

now than at any time over the past sixty minutes as the gunmen came to realise their untenable situation. This was the very time when men became desperate and actions were dictated by emotions rather than sense; the time when errors in judgement were made and people died.

Ezra eyed the leader keenly as he backed up several steps and stared into the street. As his underling had so rightly pointed out there was no activity beyond the doors, creating the distinct impression that the city had suddenly emptied and they were the only ones left. The certain knowledge that Buck and the others were out there provided a link of solidarity but he also knew that this could easily mean the start of a prolonged siege and Chris needed medical attention sooner rather than later.

The leader slowly fixed his eyes back on the Southerner, his eyes almost black with anger.

"You! Get over here."

Ezra did not hurry but eased his leg from under Chris' head as gently as he could, trying not to disturb the injured man.

"Gotta go, Chris. I have been summoned."

Larabee's eyes opened for a second and he reached up to clasp Ezra's hand.

"Keep it frosty, Ezra. No heroics," he whispered hoarsely.

The undercover agent smiled.

"Who me? You've got the wrong man, Mr. Larabee."

Standish stood up and took several steps towards the gunman before being stopped by the barrel of the sub-machine gun being thrust hard against his chest. The fact that the man's finger was curled around the trigger did little to alleviate any concerns he might have about his immediate safety and telling himself that he was of no use to them dead did not stop the sudden increase in his pulse rate or the familiar tightening in his gut.

"Looks like you've drawn the short straw, asshole."

"As I seem to be the only man capable of independent locomotion at this moment that's hardly surprising."

The weapon was drawn back and jabbed into his side; a prompt to move with which the Southerner readily complied given the probable alternative.

"Do me a fucking favour and shut up."

The gunman pushed Standish forward and in a manoeuvre that would have impressed the undercover agent had he not been on the receiving end, grabbed the agent in a half nelson that effectively immobilised him. In other circumstances he would have struggled but he submitted, all too aware that he had become trade goods -- a ticket to ride right out of town for the three felons.

"Stay close boys. This fed bastard is going to buy us a way out of here."

The Uzi stuttered into life and the glass doors shattered under the onslaught of bullets, the air filling with flying shards that cascaded around the men like a crystal shower as they ran awkwardly through the remains of the entrance and into the street. The Uzi fell silent and Ezra heard the clatter as the man discarded the empty weapon, then felt the equally intimidating pressure of a handgun pressed into his right ear. Now that, he thought, would be a perforated eardrum indeed. The steps proved a challenge to negotiate. Having one's neck and shoulder in a vice was hardly conducive to ease of movement and Ezra felt the strain on his shoulder joint increase as his captor worked to keep them both on an even keel.

It took several moments for the Southerner to realise how quiet it had become and that the loudest sound was that of his own breathing in his ears. They had stopped moving and Ezra pushed back against the man's hand to try and see what was happening but the strength of the grip was too much and the undercover agent found his head forced forward once again. The sound of a hammer being cocked so close to his ear eliminated any further thought of resistance; he was a few pounds of pressure away from extinction. He considered for a moment whether his brain would have time to register pain before it exploded.

"Jesus Christ!"

Buck instinctively grabbed JD and the two of them dived to the ground as a hail of shots ripped through the air, peppering cars, walls and windows with a lethal rain of bullets. The mustached agent heard the frantic instructions to hold fire from the SWAT leader and hugged the ground waiting for the barrage to end. He could hear Dunne breathing heavily, from a combination of excitement, fear and adrenaline with which he could readily identify.

"Goddamn!" breathed J.D. "A fucking machine gun!"

"I'll see they're arrested for illegal possession of firearms," cracked Wilmington drily.

In the silence that followed the two men risked raising their heads, Buck immediately searching for Josiah and Nathan and getting the thumbs up from both of them. He heard an awed voice behind him whisper: "Holy shit!" a sentiment echoed up and down the line of men in several variations on a similar theme. Buck turned his head to exchange a glance with J.D.

"That sure got our attention wouldn't you say?"

"You're not wrong." The younger man jumped athletically into a crouch and peered over a decorative stone balustrade which now showed several distinctive gouges. "Oh, shit."

Wilmington understood the tone well enough to know that something had gone down and he felt a fluttering in his stomach as he pushed aside the dread that threatened to consume him. *Get a grip, Bucklin!* He followed Dunne's fixed stare and groaned aloud. Ezra.

"Aw, hell! That's all we need."

Chris inched slowly onto his side, wondering how such a simple task could become so difficult. Right now he had about as much strength as an overcooked strand of spaghetti. He looked at the expanse of floor between himself and Vin; about thirty-five feet. *Might as well be thirty-five fucking miles!* He debated whether he should make the attempt, after all he had a handcuff key. Kept a spare on his key ring -- just in case. He considered this was one of

those cases but he was acutely aware that he was in no shape to be getting active. He had told Ezra no heroics, now he was contemplating risking a potentially fatal haemorrhage to make a gesture. Goddamn it, this was Vin -- from the look of him hurting bad -- and Ezra who had just saved his life. Or he could just wait.

The decision was made in the space of a heartbeat. He had never been one to wait. Digging his hand into his pocket he hooked his keys with bloodied fingers then pushed aside Vin's jacket which had been covering him and grunting with the effort, turned onto his stomach. Thirty-five feet? No sweat.

It was the hardest thing he could ever remember having to do; each precious foot he gained a lesson in humility. Light-headed and hyperventilating he came to the conclusion that for once his mental strength might not be enough to overcome physical weakness and he pressed his cheek to the cool marble floor almost ready to weep with frustration. *Too hard.*

Overcome by a sense of hopelessness he started to draw up his knees again, lying on his injured side and shivering as progressive waves of chills washed over him, too drained of energy to do anything but surrender. One hand instinctively went to the source of the pain that burned now with greater intensity through his hip and thigh and he felt the warm stickiness of oozing blood. Was this how it was going to be then? *Christ, he was going to die in the middle of a goddamn bank in downtown Denver, his life slowly seeping out onto the polished floor while he let it. Fuck that!* Drawing in a deep breath, he steeled himself and forced himself forward again, oblivious to the smear of dusky red that he was leaving in his wake.

Soon movement became mechanical, an unconscious and primal survival instinct that bypassed reality and kept him functioning long after he should have submitted. A simple mantra kept him going -- move or die.

"Chris." The voice came from far away and was repeated, echoing in the far reaches of his brain, gradually becoming more urgent and insistent. "Chris!"

*Jesus! He must have passed out.*

"Chris!"

Larabee succeeded in opening his eyes and found himself almost in Vin's lap with a familiar pair of concerned blue eyes looking down on him.

"I know, I know," he managed, voice thick and slurred, remembering why he was there, "Gimme a minute."

Tanner breathed again.

"Don't want to rain on your parade, pard but I don't think a minute is going to be enough."

The blond man worked fingers that suddenly seemed too big around the keys in his hand and tried to isolate the cuff key, failing miserably as his concentration wavered and the necessary skills to perform fine motor movement deserted him. He fell back against Tanner's leg and focused for a moment on just getting some oxygen to his brain. *Breathe you stupid fuck. Now what was it he was doing? That's right -- keys.* He fumbled through the individual keys until he found the smallest one, the one he was looking for, and reached up to unfasten the cuffs, losing his grip on the smooth metal more than once. Getting the key into the lock proved an almost insurmountable undertaking as his clumsy fingers refused to co-operate and a strangled sob rose in his throat. *Goddamn!* He was so tired. With a last effort he rammed the key home and he twisted his wrist to disengage the lock, barely having time to tug the bracelet open before he sank to the floor gratefully yielding to the darkness that at last

overtook him.

Vin had been watching Chris as he struggled with first the keys then the cuffs, every nerve jangling in anticipation, afraid to speak and risk distracting the blond man who was obviously having great difficulty in undertaking even such a basic operation as fitting a key into a lock but dreading more that after all his efforts he might not be able to complete the task. If he were to fail, then all he had achieved by his actions was to doom himself to a slow death. The trail of blood following Chris across the room told its own story. The Texan bit down on his lip and stifled a groan feeling bone grating against bone as Larabee again dragged down on the damaged wrist joint in his effort to get the key into the lock. *For Christ's sake, come on, Chris.*

His gut had lurched sickeningly as Chris slumped to the floor but then he felt the bracelet slacken around his wrist and ignoring the bolts of pain that radiated from the abused joint he worked his hand free, immediately reaching to take the keys from Larabee's unresisting hand. He felt the strain on his left arm relax as the security guard, once freed, quickly scuttled around the column and knelt beside the Texan waiting to be released from the remaining cuff that still joined them together. Tanner passed the keys to the guard.

"You do it. I think my wrist is broken."

The man, whose badge stated he was Boyd Noonan, quickly opened the cuffs.

"You know something," he said quietly, massaging his wrist, "You guys are nuts!"

Vin nursed his own wrist for a moment before giving the faintest of smiles.

"I'll take that as a compliment."

Tanner focused his attention on the blond agent. Whatever was transpiring outside was someone else's responsibility now. He couldn't help Ezra but he sure as hell intended to do whatever he could for Chris. It was the first time he had seen Larabee close up since he had been shot and he was genuinely afraid for him. Hesitantly he pressed his fingers to the pulse in Chris' neck to reassure himself that he was even alive but as he felt the frantic flutter of a struggling heart he wondered how long he would remain so.

Stalemate. Mexican standoff. Whichever way one chose to look it at the situation was not looking good for Mrs Standish's only son. If the gunmen were allowed to leave, he would no doubt be going with them to whatever end fate chose to dictate; on the other hand if the gunman's hand was forced he could see two possible outcomes: he would be executed by his captor, or he would end up in the middle of a fire fight, neither option of which particularly appealed to him.

A nudge in the back and increased pressure to his right ear from the SIG suggested that he should start moving again.

"Let's see just how much your life is worth, motherfucker."

The words were meant to intimidate but the effect was completely lost on Standish. Nothing the man could say had any power to induce the agent to action or reduce him to inaction, he had spent enough years trucking with the bad element, especially during his years with Vice, to ignore such puerile banter. He had already heard it all.

He knew the net would be closing and although his head was being forced forward by the hold the gunman had on him he could still see men moving into position. For him that could either be good or bad; with any luck one of the marksmen who were sure to be out there somewhere would get off a shot and the story would end happily ever after, in his opinion at least. Of course he could not speak for the gunman. The light was starting to fade and full dark would descend quickly at this time of year, adding still another factor to the already complicated equation. He heard the sound of a plane passing overhead and wondered if it was the plane he and Vin should have been on. If Tanner had been a little more organised he could be sitting back now with a drink in hand, headphones on blocking out the rest of economy class and relaxing - even the in-flight movie would have been better than this although, he had to concede, probably not by much.

He spared a thought for Chris. No heroics the man had said. *Hardly likely under the circumstances, Mr. Larabee.* He had considered every possibility and decided that someone else would have to be the hero this time around, he did not want to play. A few bars of the old song Beach Boys song Heroes and Villains ran through his head and he wondered where his brain had summoned that particular gem from. This was not the time for reminiscing and he had never really liked the Beach Boys anyway. His captor jerked his arm back and the sudden change in pressure transferred itself to Ezra's neck and shoulder, a signal to stop again and a movement which snapped him out of his trance. *Focus, Ezra.*

He contemplated what would have happened if Vin had not decided that he needed to go so urgently into the bank that afternoon, if they had cruised off to the airport as originally intended and boarded their flight to Washington. These men would have been walking away with the cash. No one would have been hurt. They would have been rich and no doubt very happy until the money ran out. No wonder they were pissed. *Blame it all on Mr. Tanner, my friends.*

A shouted exchange had taken place but Ezra did not pay attention to details. It was the usual offer and counter offer and the long and short of it was that neither side wanted to yield an inch. While the rules of engagement dictated that the prime objective in such a situation was to ensure the hostage's safety - something for which he was truly grateful at that moment -- in reality the aim was to achieve a successful outcome for the good guys and put the bad guys away. A successful outcome as far as he was concerned was that he would still be breathing at the end of it and preferably intact. He sighed. Washington had never looked so good before.

Buck thought he would have a nervous breakdown before the day was out. How the hell something as simple as getting Vin and Ezra to the airport had turned into a siege was beyond him, but it was happening. The Southerner was at least in view and he looked okay although he had blood on him, but he was an effective shield for the gunman holding him hostage. Bastard was staying under the awning so no chance of getting someone around behind him and taking him out that way. He would be quite happy to send them on their way if he could be sure they would release Ezra but he knew whatever they promised that it was a risky business. If they let them go with Ezra still hostage the undercover agent's life would likely be forfeit. Unacceptable odds. No, it had to be resolved here and now. The SWAT commander had already mooted taking a distance shot at the ringleader, assuring the ATF agent that with a laser sight he could snap off a shot that would have the man dead before he could even think about pulling the trigger on Ezra. His alternative plan was to shoot Ezra. Buck had believed him to be joking but the man was in earnest. It had worked before; peg the hostage first and it left them with no negotiating power. Wilmington had just stared at the man.

"You've been watching too many movies," he accused, shaking his head in disbelief, "You can't shoot a goddamn federal agent just to eliminate the bargaining chip."

The SWAT leader's expression was telling him something entirely different and he shook his head again, this time in denial.

"You can't do that to a man. Where in hell would you shoot him that doesn't put him out of action for a few weeks. I've already got one man down in there. No. I'm telling you no!"

"Fine. We'll go for the gunman. As soon as my man gets a clear shot he's history."

Buck grabbed the man's arm.

"If you're wrong about this. If anything happens to Ezra, I'll fucking well kill you. Is that clear?"

"As crystal Agent Wilmington. Now if you'll let me do my job we might just be able to wind this up before it gets too dark to see anything."

J.D. moved up beside his best friend, aware that he was strung out but unsure of what he could do.

"What was all that about?" He gestured to the SWAT commander who was now directing his men through his communicator.

"He wanted to put a shot into Ezra. Eliminate their negotiating power."

Dunne glanced quickly from Buck to Ezra and then to the SWAT leader.

"You're joking, right?" He saw Buck's dark expression and knew he wasn't. "They're not..."

"No." He sighed. "They're going to pop the guy with the gun on Ezra."

J.D. was unsuccessful in hiding his own doubts. Theoretically it was achievable. A brain shot and the hand that was holding the gun was never going to pull the trigger whatever people said about reflexes, but believing it was another matter.

"Jesus!"

"Amen to that, J.D." He started to move away, turning his back on the scene. "Tell me when it's over."

Ezra felt as if he had been standing out on the steps of the bank for an age, he had lost all sense of time and his neck was starting to ache from the awkward position it was being forced to sustain. He was cold and he just wanted to be somewhere else. Anywhere but standing in the freezing wind with a loaded gun shoved in his ear ready to scatter his brain to the four winds. He did not want to think of the destructive force of a nine millimetre parabellum slug at contact range but his mind kept returning to the same point. He hoped if the worst came to the worst he would at least die with dignity. Would there be any warning?  
*Christ! Somebody do something.*

Tanner had done all he could. Chris was not going to come round until he had some blood pumped into him and some oxygen feeding his system, and Vin had neither of those to offer. Instead he had managed to control the bleeding again by shoving wads of paper towels from the men's room down Chris' pants and making him as comfortable as he could. His own discomfort seemed insignificant in the face of the blond man's condition. The pain in his chest had settled to a sensation of fullness behind his breastbone although he still had some slight difficulty in breathing which he put down to his reluctance to take anything but shallow breaths because of the pain a deep breath invariably triggered. Still, compared to Larabee he was looking mighty fine.

He realised that Boyd, the security guard, was looking at him and he stopped guarding his chest.

"Are you okay? You're looking a bit green."

Vin gave a single nod.

"Fine. Took a punch in the ribs that's all."

Boyd nodded in understanding as he took his turn watching over the unconscious ATF man.

"Better be careful, man. You might have a busted rib."

The Texan carefully got to his feet and skirted along the edge of the counter then along the wall towards the gaping hole blown through the doors. Glass crunched under his boots and he halted flattening himself against the wall in the foyer, not wanting to risk being popped by one of the bad guys with an itchy trigger finger.

Well, Ezra was well and truly in the hot seat now. His sense of guilt returned in full force. They should be in the air now. Ezra making bad jokes about his dislike of flying, him keyed up and just waiting for the flight to end, Ezra relaxing and either tuning out completely with his eyes closed and his headphones on or inducing him to play a few hands of poker depending on his mood. Ezra would have a couple of drinks, he would stick with Coke having discovered that for him alcohol and planes were an interesting combination -- a source of amusement for everyone else and a source of chagrin for him. He snatched back his wandering thoughts feeling his spirits sink as he tried to make sense of what was going on with Ezra and the three gunmen and right now he would gladly board a Concorde if it meant that he could change what was happening.

Vin was never able to say what registered in his mind first. He only recalled the shock of seeing Ezra's head snap back, an arc of blood spraying from the side of his head as the force of impact threw his body sideways, seeing the man behind him stagger, his gun arm thrown up in the air then falling limply to his side as the two men crashed down the steps. He heard the gunfire then, shots being exchanged between the remaining gunmen and the combined law enforcement agencies involved in the operation, but his mind was still focused on the white-shirted body lying at the foot of the steps, a rapidly expanding puddle of blood forming under his head.

"Jesus Christ! They shot, Ezra." The young Dunne was openly distressed, beside himself with agitation as he sought his friend and partner, running his hands distractedly through his hair, "Oh, my God! He's down, Buck. Fucking head shot!"

Buck's body was having difficulty keeping up with his brain, one was madly racing the other, paradoxically, seemed to be unable to function at all. He was shocked into immobility, his

blood freezing in his veins, as Dunne's words echoed again and again in his mind. Ezra. Shot in the head. No. There must be some mistake. It finally computed that J.D. had not waited for him, assuming he would follow, and was already charging across the road. Finally he prompted his muscles to action, suddenly aware that Josiah and Nathan were beside him. Flanked by the two agents Buck followed Dunne across the road at a sprint, his brain still reeling, two words repeating themselves over and over in his head as he ran: *not dead, not dead, not dead!*

They were not the only ones swinging into action and Buck had never been more relieved to see two ambulances draw to an abrupt halt only feet away. The crews hit the ground running and immediately dispersed to tend the fallen but the only casualty Wilmington was concerned about at that moment was the Southerner. Chris was shot. Ezra might well be dead. For now that was all that mattered.

Dunne was leaning over the undercover agent who was sprawled face down on the sidewalk, blood pooling on the cement around his head. Buck's stomach roiled uneasily and he thought he was going to be sick but he forced himself to kneel beside the young agent, dread cloaking his spirit like a shroud. With a conscious effort, he maintain an appearance of outward calm that was totally at odds with his tattered emotions.

"J.D.?" The two syllables were loaded with a multitude of questions that demanded only one answer.

The agent looked up, haunted eyes two dark pits in a white face. Buck knew exactly how he was feeling.

"He's breathing Buck," gasped Dunne, voice shaking, "He's still alive."

Buck put out a steadying hand and gripped the younger man's shoulder, not sure if that usually most welcome news was going to prove a blessing or a curse, but he hoped to God that if the bullet had entered the Southerner's brain, that he would not live. He recoiled at the thought of Ezra being brain injured. *Lord, anything but that.*

"Easy, J.D."

Nathan and one of the EMTs shouldered past and jockeyed for position that would allow them access to the wounded agent, presenting their backs to the other two men and effectively shutting them out. They had a job to do.

Vin could not catch his breath. The crushing pain in his chest had returned with a vengeance and he stumbled forward, his left hand pressed against his sternum, as he fought to make his lungs work. He needed to get to Ezra. Drawing in a shuddering breath at last, he leaned his shoulder against the metal door frame before lurching forward into the cold evening air. People were charging up the steps and into the bank and he knew that Chris would be alright. He had to be. Someone would take care of him now.

The Texan negotiated the steps, avoiding broken glass, blood and other some other substance the nature of which he did not care to dwell on but which he already knew was brain matter. *Jesus, how had this all gone so wrong? So sorry, Ezra.* He made it down to the foot of the steps, but could go no further, instead he stood sweating and trembling like a blown horse. It suddenly became the most important thing in the world for him not to fall down so he shakily lowered himself onto the steps. His left hand tugged at his tie and loosened his collar while he threw back his head and tried to keep up with his body's demand

for air. If the searing pain in his chest would just go away he knew he would be alright.

Josiah's familiar bulk loomed before him and he stared mutely up at the profiler unable to form the question that was uppermost in his mind. He needed to know if Ezra was dead. With a struggle he finally managed to gasp out the word: "Ezra?"

Sanchez dropped into a crouch in front of him and put both hands on his shoulders, steadying him.

"Ezra's in good hands, Vin, but it's not Ezra I'm worried about right now, son. It's you."

Tanner shook his head, pressing the heel of his hand against his chest.

"Tell me," he demanded, urgently, "Is he dead?"

Josiah lowered his head.

"No, Vin. He's not dead."

Tanner sighed and closed his eyes, willing the pain away.

"Can't breathe. Jesus! The pain..."

By the time the vicelike grip that had squeezed his heart began to subside and he opened them again, he was being lifted onto a stretcher.

Nathan supported the Southerner's head as the EMT probed the wound in the unconscious man's head with his gloved fingers, putting pressure against a small artery that was still geysering blood in a steady, pulsing arc.

"This guy must be the luckiest son-of-a-bitch in the world," muttered the man as he traced a groove along the right side of the skull that would easily accommodate the tip of his little finger, "if the angle had been more acute he'd have had himself another ear-hole."

Jackson was forced to agree with that observation. Instead, the potentially lethal bullet had reamed a deep channel in the bone from just behind Ezra's right temple to behind his ear where the skull started to curve again, splitting open the scalp and nicking an artery in the process. The end result was that there had been an impressive amount blood, a loss of consciousness, a certain concussion with the possibility of long term residual effects but Ezra was alive. Lucky indeed.

The EMT put a pressure bandage on the scalp wound and got an intravenous line going while Nathan slipped a temporary airway into the Southerner's mouth to prevent his tongue falling back and blocking his airway. That done he fixed the oxygen mask over Ezra's face and the two men lifted the inert form onto a stretcher and transferred the unconscious man to the waiting ambulance.

There was something very important that he had to do and he was distressed that he was having trouble remembering what it was. Each time the elusive thought came within reach, it immediately slipped away again. In the background an annoyingly persistent voice was talking to him -- no, about him -- and he wanted nothing more than for them to go away and leave him in peace. He had at last found a comfortable place, the pain in his groin had faded

and he was more than happy to remain just where he was and sleep but they would not leave him alone.

He struggled briefly but he had no energy and finally he was forced to accept that whoever it was, could and would do as they pleased with him. In a detached way he realised that it was becoming a little easier to breathe but as sounds began to filter through to him with greater clarity he found that he was also more aware of the pain throbbing through not only his groin, hip and thigh but his backside as well. *Jesus!* He tried to curl into a ball as the pain intensified and suddenly he was rising through layers of consciousness becoming increasingly lucid as he approached full wakefulness. *Shit!* He remembered. *He'd been shot.* The bank. Vin and Ezra. They needed him.

His sense of panic dissipated as quickly as it has arisen as he focused on the people around him, recognising familiar uniforms if not faces. Paramedics. *Chill out, Larabee. You're out of the equation now.* He suddenly groped for the mask over his face and pulled it aside.

"Ezra," he croaked, through dry lips remembering how the Southerner had been taken hostage by the gunmen.

A firm hand replaced the mask and he sank back with no strength to do more as a faint voice filtered through the noise.

"Ezra? Isn't that the ATF guy who took a shot in the head."

With an infinite feeling of sadness Chris slipped back into semi-consciousness, suffused with an overwhelming sense of loss.

Nathan locked the backrest of the stretcher at thirty degrees and settled the mask over the Texan's face, adjusting the flow rate of oxygen in the hope of relieving some of the agent's respiratory distress.

"Better?"

Vin nodded weakly but Jackson could detect no obvious improvement; Tanner was still fighting for every breath, the veins in his neck standing out and his movements becoming increasingly restless. The Texan's shirt hung open to the waist, the electronic leads trailing from the portable cardiac monitor to adhesive disks on his torso. Nathan flicked a concerned glance from the livid bruise on Vin's exposed chest to the EKG tracing across which an abnormal pattern of peaks and troughs was being described, the first significant indicators of a heart in trouble.

"Shit," he muttered, under his breath.

This time putting two and two together definitely came up with four but it was an answer he did not want. All the evidence was suggesting that the blow to Vin's chest had caused a contusion to the heart and from the symptoms, it was now steadily being compressed as blood leaked between the membrane that surrounded the organ and the muscle itself. The pressure on the heart had been progressively increasing since he was hit and eventually, when enough blood had accumulated, the heart's action would be compromised and it would stop functioning.

Nathan grabbed the EMT's stethoscope and quickly listened to the distressed Texan's chest

before checking the pulses -- first in his wrist then in his neck -- his eye fastened on the cardiac monitor. The EMT finished setting up the intravenous line and looked expectantly at the ATF agent.

"Cardiac tamponade." Jackson kept his voice steady and low. "What's our ETA?"

"Ten maybe fifteen minutes."

Nathan looked again at the man on the stretcher; he was not certain Vin had ten minutes.

"Too long. We need to do a needle aspiration before he flat lines."

The paramedic looked uncomfortable.

"You can't do that," he started to protest, "It's against procedure."

Nathan gave the man a hard stare.

"We don't have much time."

"I'm not qualified to do that. I'll lose my job."

Jackson started searching through the equipment for what he needed.

"I am. I'll take responsibility."

"You have no authority to..."

The ATF agent grabbed the EMT by the arm, his usually even countenance an angry mask.

"Then fucking sue me! You want this man to die? No? Then get out of my way or give me a hand."

The EMT hesitated then nodded just once.

Tanner barely understood what Nathan was trying to explain to him, having lost all interest in reasons or details, just wanting the pain to go away and to be able to breathe. What he did understand was that he was in serious trouble. One thing that had filtered through was that Jackson was about to stick a goddamn needle straight into his heart. The idea, he knew, should be of concern but he had other things on his mind that were, at that moment, of greater importance and one of them was just to stay alive. If that meant someone pushing a needle through his chest then so be it and he trusted Nathan enough to know he would do whatever was right. Closing his eyes, he felt a brief stinging in his chest wall as Nathan injected a local anaesthetic, then a few moments later a sharp fleeting pain followed by the sensation of pressure pushing up under his ribs, not exactly painful but unpleasant; certainly nothing like the pain he had been experiencing. His heart stuttered, skipping a beat and his eyes flew open in momentary panic. *Jesus, no!* The fact that he was in an ambulance with a doctor and a paramedic did nothing to reassure him as the absolute certainty that he was about to die took hold of him.

"Easy, easy. Vin, it's okay." Nathan. "Just try and relax."

Tanner heard the words, but could feel himself losing touch, slowly slipping away as Nathan's voice receded and his consciousness faded from grey to black.

Nathan slowly pulled back on the syringe and watched it start to fill with dark blood. *Jackpot!* The back of a speeding ambulance was the last place he would have chosen to perform this particular procedure but he had been left with no alternative. Without such drastic intervention he was certain that Vin would have arrested before they could reach the hospital. Now praying that the driver could keep the vehicle on a smooth and even course, he held the needle in relaxed fingers and keeping up a steady tension on the plunger, spared a moment to check the cardiac monitor. *Nothing too sinister there - a few irregularities.* As the chamber of the syringe continued to fill Jackson kept his eye on the Texan. Vin had lost consciousness -- not the best of signs -- but as the fluid around his heart drained, relieving the pressure, his respirations gradually eased and his colour started to improve. In a moment he would thread a fine catheter through the wide-bore needle allowing the pericardial sac to drain continuously and prevent any further build up of fluid. At least the immediate danger was over.

The EMT let out a quiet sigh and Jackson allowed himself a moment of sympathy for the technician, after all in the end the paramedic had put his job on the line. Nathan allowed his gaze to travel back to the ATF agent knowing that for him the stakes had been much greater than that - Vin's life had been on the line.

oooOOOooo

Buck dropped bonelessly into the chair in the waiting area, closed his eyes with a huge sigh and allowed his head to fall back in a posture of utter weariness. *This was not happening.* He felt a sharp nudge against his leg and cracked open an eye to see J.D. standing over him with a container of coffee in either hand, using his knee to rouse the mustached agent.

"Here. You look like you need this. I've put three sugars in it. How's Chris?"

Wilmington pushed himself upright in the chair and accepted the styrofoam cup from the younger man.

"Still in Recovery." He sipped the sweet, scalding coffee and stared into the distance, thoughtfully rotating the cup in his hands. "You know we nearly lost him this time? Nearly lost all of 'em. What about Ezra?"

"No change. They were just taking him for a CT scan when I was there about ten minutes ago. Josiah stayed with him." Dunne gulped his own coffee. "And before you ask, Nathan's with Vin. Intensive care. No visitors."

"Goddamn it, J.D. they weren't even on a job! Just three guys in the wrong place at the wrong time."

"Does anyone even know what happened yet?"

"No and right now I don't give a rat's ass." Buck crumpled the cup in his hand. "But I might yet take a personal interest if the circumstances change. Fact is, I still owe that SWAT guy a punch in the mouth for Ezra."

The younger man reached out and took the destroyed container from Wilmington's hand.

"Jesus, Buck. It was that close. When I saw he'd been hit -- that spray of blood. Scared the shit out of me," J.D. confessed, ditching the trash in a nearby bin with a flick of his wrist, "I really thought he was a dead man."

"Makes you think doesn't it, kid?" He looked embarrassed as he spoke again. "You know at first I was terrified he was dead, then I was more terrified that he wasn't."

Dunne's expression reflected his horror.

"Buck!"

"I couldn't handle the thought of Ezra being brain damaged," he admitted quietly, "That's no future for any man and if that was the alternative then, yes, I would have rather seen him die out there on the street."

J.D. abruptly walked away, obviously upset, his body movements an indication of his agitation.

"Well, he's not!" he snapped, his anger welling over, "He's gonna be okay. So just shut up about dying, Buck! I don't want to hear it."

Wilmington hung his head, sorry that he had caused J.D. any distress but feeling no remorse for the very personal sentiments he had revealed to the younger man. He could not help the way he felt any more than J.D. could. They were all feeling the strain. The last thing they needed was to start turning on each other.

"Sorry, J.D. Shouldn't have said anything." He stood up and put a hand on Dunne's shoulder. "Come on, let's take a walk. I'm sick of seeing the inside of this damned room."

Sanchez was a patient man. No stranger to watching and waiting, sitting beside a hospital bed was no chore but rather an opportunity for reflection and meditation. He considered how many times this particular scenario had been played out with one or another of the team over the last three years and decided it was far too many. Odds were that one day it would not be a bedside, but a graveside at which he kept vigil and the thought saddened him immeasurably. This one had already been too close.

The profiler marked his book with his index finger and carefully studied the undercover agent. If it had not been for the white strip of bandage around his head and the bruise on his cheek, Ezra might have been asleep, but he was deeply unconscious. Concussed. The Southerner had come within millimetres of having a high velocity bullet through his cranium but once again luck -- or God, whichever way you wanted to look at it -- had been with him. Josiah allowed himself an amused smile. On second thoughts given that this was Ezra maybe it was the Devil he had on side rather than the Good Lord.

Ezra sighed, a momentary hitch in his otherwise regular breathing, and Josiah leaned forward closing a large hand over the younger man's forearm, making contact to let him know someone was there. Just in case. The undercover agent stirred, the barest movement at first. A restless adjustment of his position followed by a subtle alteration in his breathing pattern then a brief flutter of his eyelids. The familiar emerald eyes opened wide for a just moment, unfocused and staring -- registering nothing -- then too-heavy eyelids closed and he slipped away again. Josiah squeezed the Southerner's arm.

"Welcome back, son," he breathed softly, and with a smile returned to his book.

Chris could not remember when he had last felt so goddamn awful. He had no pain, and for that one small detail he was extremely grateful, but in addition to the fact that his energy metre was registering zero he was unable to think of anything but Ezra. He knew he had not imagined it. *Ezra Standish. Shot in the head.* If someone would just talk to him. Tell him. Even if it was the fact that the Southerner was dead. He could take it. It was not knowing that was tearing him apart.

Lying still, almost afraid to move, he felt like nothing more than a laboratory experiment. Slowly allowing his eyes to scan his immediate surroundings, he was suddenly intimidated by the sheer scope of the equipment to which he was attached. An IV he understood, a catheter he understood but the rest was a frightening array of technology. Hell, he'd only been shot not had a heart-lung transplant.

He did not like hospitals, even as an observer and he liked even less being a patient with its associated helplessness. In hospital he was out of his depth. In hospital he was a victim and it went totally against the grain for him to be so dependent on anyone. The fact that what he was being forced to endure was in all probability responsible for saving his life only served to emphasise his ambivalence. It was enough for him to know that he was alive. He just needed to be told that Ezra was alive too. He closed his eyes shutting out the acute feelings of loss that suddenly filled him unaware of the single drop of moisture that leaked from the corner of his eye and rolled onto the pillow.

Nathan smiled into the blue eyes that flickered into life above the oxygen mask.

"Jesus, Nathan," rasped the Texan between breaths, "What the fuck happened?"

Jackson perched on the edge of the bed, keeping an eye on the wave forms rolling across the screen of the cardiac monitor that mirrored the activity of Vin's heart.

"You want the short or long version?"

Tanner took a deep breath, his chest still feeling uncomfortably full.

"Short."

"Something hit you in the chest, right?"

"A fist," confirmed the Texan. He fully understood Jackson's reaction as his eyebrows raised in surprise.

"Well, that blow was hard enough to bruise the heart muscle and cause localised bleeding. What happened to you was that blood leaked between the heart and layer that covers it. As more blood filled up the space the pressure stopped the heart pumping as it should."

"Thought I was going to die."

Nathan did not think he should tell Vin that it had been a distinct possibility that he might.

Vin looked ruefully at the fracture brace immobilising his right wrist.

“Guess I’m off active duty for a while, huh?” It was still an effort for him to talk without getting short of breath.

“A few weeks,” agreed Jackson, “Got to get the old ticker in order first. You’re not going to like this, Vin, but you have to rest up for a couple of weeks. It’ll be at least another week before they even let you out of here.”

Tanner groaned.

“I should’ve gone to Washington.”

He sat up suddenly, wincing slightly, his bruised body complaining at the movement.

“Chris? Ezra?”

Nathan put a hand out.

“Settle down, Vin. Ezra’s got concussion. The bullet gouged a decent chunk out of his skull but you know Ezra -- too damn hard-headed for even a bullet to get through. Chris just came down from Recovery. They’re both going to be okay.”

“S’m my fault, Nate. The bank.”

The monitor alarmed as Vin’s pulse rate jumped.

“Right. You organised the robbery I suppose?”

Vin let his head fall back on the pillow, ignoring Jackson’s sarcasm.

“Chris will kill me,” he murmured quietly, “If Ezra doesn’t get to me first.”

“You know how Ezra hates going to conferences,” countered the doctor, “He’ll probably buy you a drink.”

“Sure, Nathan. The man nearly gets his head blown off, he’s really gonna thank me.” He paused to take a few deep breaths. “And Chris was pissed before he got shot!”

“I don’t think any of you are in any shape to slug it out just yet, Vin. Forget about it and be thankful you’re all still here to be able to tell the tale to your grand kids.”

Vin closed his eyes and nodded slowly, suddenly weary and minutes later he was asleep.

oooOOooo

Ezra groaned and decided he should refrain from drinking quite so much in future; he had not had a hangover of this magnitude in years. Oddly enough he could not recall having had anything to drink, but then again his memory was being curiously uncooperative. He rolled with some urgency onto his side, panic-stricken as he realised he was about to throw up, grateful that someone had been thoughtful enough to provide a receptacle for that eventuality as his stomach heaved convulsively and emptied itself.

He sank back onto the bed, deciding then that he could put an entirely new construct on the definition of misery. He would be happier if he could remember the cause of his current

suffering but apart from the fact that he recognised his location as being a hospital room, and the fact that he was garbed in a particularly garishly patterned gown which revealed more than it covered, he could not even begin to hazard a guess as to what circumstances had brought him to this particular point in time.

Closing his eyes against the dull throbbing in his head and the light that viciously speared his eyeballs with white lances of pain, he attempted to order his scattered thoughts into some cohesive whole. *Think Ezra!*

A flood of images suddenly filled his mind, tumbling in confusion over one another. Chris had been shot; he remembered that much. So much blood. The bank. Vin and the bank. Washington. Lord, yes. *What a damnable mess.* He struggled to put the pieces of the puzzle together, but he could manage only an incomplete picture at best. Rising frustration merely served to muddy the waters and he found himself going around in circles getting nowhere.

His stomach roiled unpleasantly and without warning he was vomiting again. The only lucid thought passing through his mind as he was wracked again by shuddering spasms was what he had done to deserve such punishment.

*He glanced one last time at his watch as he pushed through the doors of the West Texas Mutual Bank. Damn Vin! This was absolutely the last time he was going to make an exception for the disorganised Texan. Something wrong. Shit! He reflexively drew his gun but as he saw the Browning come up to fire, he grabbed the gunman's wrist with his left hand. Neutralise the threat before the bastard can shoot! He crashed heavily against the other man, grappling for supremacy, trying not to get shot while manoeuvring for an opportunity to disarm him. Fuck! His own weapon was crushed between his own body and that of his assailant. Christ, the man was strong! He fought to keep the man's gun hand down but his strength was no match for the bigger man. Slowly he could feel the gun coming up towards him. He jerked back, still grappling with the man as the gun exploded against him. Jesus! He was hit...*

No! Chris woke in a lather of perspiration, eyes flying open in panic, his breathing ragged and his pulse pounding in his veins. Too real. *Scared you Larabee didn't it?* The memory was intense; worse than the reality of the experience, which in truth he barely remembered. Even the pain was magnified tenfold.

"Bad dream?"

Chris focused on the figure at his bedside. Buck? He brought his hand up to his face to wipe the sweat from his forehead but the IV line fixed in the back of his hand got in the way and he swore in irritation.

"Not enough to be shot once," he grumbled, voice still thick with sleep, "Got to have a replay of the edited highlights every time I close my eyes."

"I won't ask how you're doing then."

"Best not. I might just tell you."

Buck laughed and Chris had to admit it was a good sound. A welcome sound.

"I see your disposition hasn't improved. Still piss and vinegar."

"You expected different?" He shifted his hips and winced. "A simple trip to the airport. That's all. Explain to me what the hell happened, Buck!"

Wilmington shrugged.

"I was hoping you could tell me."

Chris frowned.

"What does Vin have to say? It's his fault we all ended up in the fucking shit!"

The mustached agent pursed his lips thoughtfully, not answering immediately and Chris homed in on the silence like a heat-seeking missile.

"Buck?"

"Vin hasn't been in any shape to say anything, Chris," said Wilmington slowly, "Truth is he nearly died. Something to do with his heart."

Larabee turned his head away and struggled to digest the information. Not Vin too.

"Ezra?" He forced the words out. "I heard he...he was shot in the head."

"You wouldn't read about it, Chris. Gotta be the luckiest fucker in the world. Reamed a sizeable chunk out of his skull, knocked him out cold but Nathan reckons he'll be fine. Well, as fine as Ezra ever will be."

Chris was having a hard time sorting out his feelings. He had wanted to be pissed at Vin, anticipated it, needed someone to blame for what he thought had happened to Ezra; for what had happened to him, but that had all changed with two words. *Nearly died*. He was having extreme difficulty deciding if he should laugh or if he should cry, both emotions were bubbling close to the surface. Eventually he settled on a profound sense of relief; once again, and against all odds, they had somehow cheated the grim reaper of his harvest. Sighing, he looked thoughtfully at Wilmington.

"Am I bastard to work with, Buck?"

Wilmington's brows drew together in a deep frown.

"Shit, Chris. Where did that one come from?"

"Just give me an answer."

Buck leaned forward resting his elbows on his knees and looked evenly at the blond man.

"Define bastard."

Chris could not suppress the weary smile that came to his lips.

"You never could give a straight answer."

Buck laughed.

“Okay, you really want to know? You’ve gotta be the meanest son-of-a-bitch I ever had the misfortune to work with when you want to be; you are without doubt one tough, uncompromising bastard and I wouldn’t want to have anyone else at my back when the shit starts flying.”

Chris closed his eyes.

“I would have happily roasted Vin’s balls over an open fire for this whole sorry mess, Buck, now it just doesn’t seem that important.”

“Maybe ‘cause it’s not. Doesn’t really matter rightly how something starts, Chris, the important thing is how it finishes.”

Larabee stared for a moment at Wilmington before nodding.

“You’re a good friend, Buck.”

“Yeah, right!” he grinned, “Just remember that next time it’s my balls on the line.”

oooOOOooo

Ezra slowly sifted the cards between his fingers and looked pensively into the far distance, eyes focused on infinity. He had tried playing solitaire to pass the time but had found he could not concentrate long enough to finish a game and the very fact that he was unable to complete that simple task made him irritable and short-tempered.

The gaps in his memory troubled him to the point of distraction and he spent long, frustrating hours trying to fit the pieces into a cohesive whole but his recollection of events still came out like a badly edited movie. He had already been told that it was unlikely he would remember anything that happened immediately before or after he had been shot and in some ways he considered that a blessing, not particularly wanting to recall being shot in the head. His last memory was of sitting on the hard floor of the bank with Chris’ head in his lap mulling over the advantages of being a live coward rather than a dead hero; of course at the time he had not considered the third and very distinct possibility of being a dead coward.

“Ezra?”

He turned quickly at the sound of his name, not having heard the door open and was rewarded with a wave of dizziness that started his head aching again. *Damn! He had to remember not to do that.* Reaching to put the deck on the bedside locker he misjudged the distance and the cards tumbled in a colourful cascade to the floor. J.D. took a step back at the sheer intensity of the profanity which issued from the Southerner, although he was quietly impressed by Ezra’s virtuosity. He bent to pick up the scattered cards.

“It’s okay. I’ve got them.”

“My apologies, Mr. Dunne. I seem to be having spatial difficulties at present.” He leaned back against the pillows and rubbed his eyes between thumb and forefinger. “Fortunately, at the moment I am expected to do little more than sleep, eat and...well, I’m sure you get the picture.”

J.D. set the now neatly stacked deck on the locker and looked at the undercover agent with a slight frown.

“Everything okay?”

“Given the circumstances, I’m perfectly fine Mr. Dunne, although I have to say that Mr. Tanner has a lot to answer for.”

The younger man suddenly laughed.

“Chris is already gunning for him, Ezra. I don’t think there’ll be much left over for you.”

Ezra shifted his weight and sighed.

“Yes well, Mr. Larabee certainly has good reason to be put-out, he did get a little more than he bargained for.”

J.D. swept his unruly hair back with his fingers.

“Yeah. So did Vin.”

Standish, alerted by the tone of Dunne’s voice, turned his head to stare at the young agent.

“Something happened to Vin?” The last time the undercover agent had seen him he had been handcuffed to a security guard, looking definitely ill-used but apart from his obviously injured hand essentially unharmed.

“He’s in intensive care. Cardiac something-or-other. Nathan says he could’ve died. He’s got this tube stuck in his heart...”

“What?”

“Some guy punched Vin in the chest,” he continued, “bruised the heart muscle and started it bleeding.”

Ezra suddenly found it hard to catch his breath. The three of them had escaped death by the narrowest of margins and the thought chilled him to the core. A whim, a last minute change in plan instigated by the Texan, had almost turned out to be the most costly exercise of their lives. Chris had every right to be miffed; after all the senior agent had very nearly exsanguinated all over the floor of a nondescript financial institution when all he had expected to do was deposit two of his agents at the airport, see them safely away to Washington D.C. and go home for the weekend.

“Is Chris really pissed?” he asked, tentatively.

“Very, but I think he’s fairly harmless right now.”

Ezra found himself smiling at the thought of a harmless Chris Larabee.

“Something for which Mr. Tanner should be extremely grateful I should think.”

Tanner was grateful for one thing, and one thing only; that he was still alive. Anything Chris might have planned for him paled into insignificance beside the fact that he had almost died. He knew it was his fault that Ezra and Chris had come equally close to death, and would not blame either of them for wanting a piece of his hide but how was he to know that a quick trip

to the bank would end up with them all in hospital? Hell, he couldn't be held responsible for something like that! Could he?

His memory replayed the key scenes; Chris bleeding like a stuck pig, the marble floor reminiscent of an abattoir rather than a bank, Ezra's head snapping back and the pulse of blood arcing through the air, his own struggle to breathe and the terrifying sensation of his heart slowing, no longer able to pump.

His left hand instinctively went to his chest, careful not to disturb the fine catheter still draining the accumulated blood that had collected around his heart or the leads to the cardiac monitor. He hated being under such close scrutiny, strangers privy to every intimate detail of his body's functioning, measuring every drop of fluid that went in and every drop that came out, watching exactly what his heart was doing at any given second and worst of all, not allowing him to do anything for himself. He had been stuck with more needles than he cared to count; he had given blood samples, urine samples and had tubes stuck in almost every place imaginable. Sighing he suddenly realised that Larabee would no doubt be suffering similar indignities and his sense of foreboding deepened. Chris was never going to let him live this one down. Never.

Larabee was not a happy man. He had not slept well in spite of the medication he had been given and now he was tired and irritable. He was also worried about Vin and Ezra, not entirely sure that anyone, including Buck, was telling him the absolute truth. What if they were just trying to spare him? He pushed that thought aside -- Buck would never do that to him -- and tried to get comfortable but he still had various tubes, catheters and electronic leads in place which limited his movement and only increased his discomfort. The pain from the wounds in his groin and buttock was again manifesting itself and he hoped his next medication was due soon.

He swallowed, his mouth dry and felt the irritation of the fine gauge tube running down the back of his throat and into his stomach. *Damn, you Vin Tanner.* He sighed and eased onto his right hip, knowing he did not mean that at all but needing to vent his frustration anyway. Closing his eyes he rode the wave of pain that rolled through his hip and groin. No. Forget that. Vin would have a heavy enough cross to bear without him driving in the nails.

Chris did not notice the nurse arrive and slowly inject his scheduled dose of morphine into the IV port but was immediately aware of its effects as it filtered into his bloodstream and worked its magic. As he drifted into an easy doze he thought he might just buy Vin and Ezra a beer when they all got out.

oooOOooo

They had let him go. He had been given the green light and he was free to leave. His head still ached, he could not concentrate for more than a couple of minutes on end and he barely knew where his body was in relation to his surroundings at any given time but he could walk, talk and function enough to be released. In short, he had been told that he could sleep just as well at home as he could in hospital and had been summarily discharged. Not that he was going home. Buck had taken him under his wing and insisted that he stay with him and J.D. for a few days, a prospect which he admitted was likely to see his blood pressure skyrocket within a relatively short time but he was gentleman enough to accept the invitation without argument.

He finished dressing, extremely grateful that Buck had called at the townhouse to pick up a change of clothes for him. His suit had been ruined during the bank raid and while he spared

a moment to mourn the sacrifice he certainly had no intention of attempting to restore the garment to its former splendour. Blood, he had found from experience, tended to have a detrimental effect on fine fabric and he was certain that Hugo Boss himself would agree that it would be best to cremate the remains.

With a heavy sigh he leaned against the edge of the bed and rubbed his temples, feeling the start of a headache building behind his eyes. Just the simple task of dressing had left him tired and more than a little grumpy, and now his main ambition was to get to Buck's apartment, find a soft bed and lie down. Mustering his energy in a concentrated effort he launched himself from the edge of the bed and moved to the door. The siren's song of sleep was calling again, but before anything else he had to catch up with Vin and Chris.

Vin reclined against a nest of pillows, chest bared and eyes closed, as the monitor beside his bed gave off reassuring signals that his heart was doing exactly what it should. Ezra let the door swing closed behind him and moved closer, thinking how tired the marksman looked even in repose. Still, he had been in a critical condition and by all accounts had escaped the clutches of the Grim Reaper by a mere hair's breadth; he had every right to look tired.

The blue eyes opened then and he smiled in recognition.

"Hey, Ezra. Thought you might be someone else after more of my blood."

The Southerner pulled up a chair.

"No. That's Chris isn't it?" he joked, regretting the words as soon as he had spoken, seeing doubt cloud Texan's eyes.

"Considering you came pretty damned close to having your head separated from your body I figured you'd be standing in line too," he said ruefully.

Ezra fingered the tender laceration above his right ear.

"Yes, well. The less said about that the better I believe. As if it isn't enough to be threatened with having one's skull ventilated by an armed lunatic one then hardly expects to be taken down by friendly fire."

Tanner raised a slight smile.

"Better than what you could have expected if that bastard had've pulled the trigger though."

"Oh, indeed," agreed the undercover agent seriously, "All I could think of was, would I hear the shot before it blew my brains out."

To his surprise the Texan suddenly started to laugh, an amused snort that quickly gathered momentum, pulling the Southerner in as he began to appreciate the funny side of what he'd just said. Finally, after several abortive attempts Vin managed to bring himself under control, still smiling.

"So did you hear the shot that blind-sided you?"

Ezra shook his head.

"I don't know. I don't remember anything about it."

"Probably just as well," murmured the younger man.

The Southerner raised narrowed eyes to meet Vin's.

"You saw it didn't you?"

Tanner took a deep breath, his own memory of the moment strong enough to induce negative emotions although he could see Ezra sitting beside him, alive and well.

"Yes. I saw it."

"Tell me what happened."

Vin frowned, not certain he wanted to describe in detail what he had witnessed.

"I can't bring that memory back for you, Ezra. What do you want to know? That we all thought you were dead? That J.D. went crazy?"

Ezra closed his eyes and ran a hand through his hair.

"No. I'm sorry. It's just driving me mad that I can't remember."

Vin leaned back again, sliding further down into the bed and yawning expansively.

"Hell, if it's that important to you, just watch the news footage. J.Ds got it on tape. That should be enough to satisfy your morbid curiosity."

The undercover agent remained unmoving for several more minutes, watching thoughtfully as the marksman started to drift off again.

"Thank you, Mr. Tanner," he said softly, "I might just do that."

It did not surprise Standish one bit that Chris was being difficult. He could hear the sound of raised voices as he approached Larabee's room and decided that if he had to wager on the outcome he would put his money on Chris over the medical staff any day, in spite the fact that he was the patient. He stepped back as a nurse, a doctor and a physical therapist filed out of the room, all of them flushed and tight-lipped. Chris often had that effect on people.

The Southerner entered cautiously and stood back. Just in case.

"Well, Mr. Larabee. You certainly seem in better form than the last time I saw you."

Chris' scowl did not lessen as he swung his gaze towards his visitor, taking in Ezra's mode of dress.

"You gettin' out?"

Ezra moved forward, silently sympathising with the blond ATF agent's lot. Being in Intensive Care had to be the most dehumanising experience a person could undergo in the name of medical treatment. He'd been there and knew the feeling well.

"Just thought I'd drop by before I go," explained Ezra, "The physician for whom the Bureau pays a handsome sum has deemed that I can sleep equally well in my own bed as I can in a hospital one and at a much cheaper rate. His words not mine."

The sound Chris made was half way between a grunt and a snort indicating his thoughts on that particular subject.

"I'm so sick of all this, Ezra. I feel fine. But no, I've still got tubes everywhere but up my goddamn ass and that's only because they haven't thought of a reason for one yet, I'm still pissing through a catheter and when they run out of ideas to make my life a misery they come and stick a needle in me."

The Southerner dared not smile. It would be more than his life was worth and he'd come close enough to losing it already without tempting fate further.

"My sympathies, Mr. Larabee. However, I'm gratified to see you in such fine form."

Chris stopped and stared suspiciously at the undercover agent, then suddenly he relaxed and his frown vanished.

"Aw, hell. Don't mind me. Just venting. You okay?"

Ezra nodded and sat down on the closest chair.

"Just so tired. I could sleep twenty-three hours a day."

The senior agent grinned.

"I'd say what's new, but you don't look as if you'd appreciate it."

"Since when did that ever stop you?" Ezra grumbled, resting his head in his hands.

"Let me see," Larabee suddenly demanded.

The undercover agent raised his head again, eyebrows drawn together in a puzzled frown.

"Excuse me?"

"Let me see where you were shot."

With a world-weary sigh, Standish leaned forward turning his head to display the damage, mumbling petulantly: "I didn't ask to see where you were shot."

Larabee didn't miss a beat.

"Believe me, you don't want to." He reached up to part the reddish brown hair at the side of Ezra's scalp and whistled. "Shit! How close was that?"

The Southerner hastily jerked his head away and leaned back out of Larabee's reach.

"Quite! I'd rather not dwell on the matter if you don't mind."

"Understandable," conceded the blond man, gruffly, "Not sure I want to get that close again"

myself."

For a moment the two men were silent, reflecting on what might have been. Finally Chris broke the silence.

"You've seen Vin?"

Ezra rested his forearms on his knees and laced his fingers together, keeping his head down.

"You know it was a close one for him too, Chris."

"What's that supposed to mean for Christ's sake?"

"Just that he's got enough to contend with without thinking that you blame him for what happened."

"Me? Why me? How the hell did I get to be the bad guy in this?"

The Southerner managed to stop his mouth dropping open, but only just.

"If my memory serves me correctly, Mr. Larabee, you were already exceedingly ticked off with our resident Texan before you even set foot in the bank. One can hardly blame Mr. Tanner for assuming the worst considering the eventual outcome and let's face it, you hardly have a reputation for being the most forgiving of men."

Chris sighed and shook his head, his expression a mixture of sadness and regret.

"It's just not important anymore, Ezra. Things look a bit different from this angle."

Standish fixed the blond man with an even stare and read the truth behind his words.

"Then you need to tell him that."

Larabee returned the stare in equal measure.

"I intend to."

oooOOOooo

The image was startling clear; the moment captured forever on magnetic tape. He had been surprised at his own reaction the first time, the shock as he watched his head snap back with the force of the impact and followed the spray of blood that described a perfect arc as he spun and fell. Driven by a morbid fascination he had rewound the tape and played the clip in slow motion, unable to stop his gut clenching as he pinpointed the exact moment the bullet hit. Finally he had moved frame by frame through the nine seconds of video, again and again, until every movement, every detail, every nuance was etched into his brain yet still he remembered nothing. He was creating a memory to fill a void.

Nine seconds. He picked up the bottle of bourbon at his elbow and poured another shot. No alcohol the doctor had said. *To hell with that!* Ezra downed the fiery alcohol with a grimace and immediately refilled his glass, using his free hand to activate the remote and replay the scene still one more time.

Buck breezed noisily into the apartment, threw his jacket in a chair as he crossed the living room, moved into the kitchenette and buried his head in the fridge hoping to find something edible that did not require any effort on his part to prepare. Grabbing a slice of cheese, a cold chicken leg and a can of cola he kneed the refrigerator door shut and dropped wearily into a chair finally sparing a moment of his attention for the man reclining on the sofa. Hell, Ezra had hardly moved from that spot since he came out of hospital. His eye wandered to the bottle of bourbon on the floor, a good two thirds of which was missing, and flicked to the frozen image on the television screen. The mustached agent sighed, recognising the scene too well.

"D'you think we could change the channel to something a little more lively, Ezra? I saw this gig live and on a scale of one to ten for entertainment value it doesn't even register."

The Southerner's hand moved to the remote and the video played out the scene yet again.

"I'm crushed, Mr. Wilmington. This is a moment of my life you are referring to. And," he continued, his words slurred and his accent as thick as molasses. "Very nearly my death I'll have you remember, sir." He laughed softly and took another drink from the tumbler in his left hand. "Of course, you do remember don't you? I'm the one with the memory lapse."

Buck slowly leaned forward, depositing the chicken leg on the TV guide for want of a better place, and speared the undercover agent with a hard stare.

"Ezra. What is it you're looking for?"

The Southerner hit the pause button on the remote and Buck wondered how many times Ezra had watched the clip to be able to stop the picture unerringly on the same frame each time.

"Nothing you would understand, Mr. Wilmington."

"I understand you've worked your way through the best part of a bottle, and tell me something, Ezra, just how many times have you watched this tape?"

The undercover agent shrugged.

"Too many. Not enough. All about..perspective." His speech was slowing, becoming more fragmented.

"Well, if you ask me you've lost yours."

"No one asked you." He closed his eyes signalling the end of the conversation.

Buck sighed. Ezra in this mood was about as ready to listen to reason as a two year old denied a promised candy bar. He shook his head and resisted the temptation to answer in kind; the man was going to suffer enough come morning -- stubborn, bone-headed mule -- a hangover would be no less than he deserved.

A few moments later Wilmington realised that Ezra had finally succumbed and was asleep. Gently he removed the remote unit and the cut glass tumbler from the Southerner's relaxed fingers and looked down at the sleeping man with a mixture of fondness and sympathy.

"You're gonna regret this come daylight, my friend."

"By all the blessed saints, what does a man have to do to get some peace around here?"

J.D. turned from his position at the stove and favoured the man on the sofa a less than compassionate glance as he continued to juggle between frying eggs and bacon, and making toast, while singing along to the grinding beat emanating from the radio on the bench.

"You could try sleeping in a real bed," he offered unhelpfully.

Ezra groaned, his head pounding, and sat up.

"This is my bed," he replied testily, "in case you had forgotten."

Not wanting to think about what the smell of frying bacon was doing to his unsettled and decidedly rebellious stomach, he sat up preparing for a hasty retreat to the bathroom.

"Well, it's ten o'clock and I've been creeping round since seven. Time you woke up anyway."

"That, my good friend, is entirely debatable." He massaged his forehead and wondered if his legs would support him. It was becoming an urgent demand that he answer the call of nature but the thought of moving filled him with dread.

At that moment Dunne scooped his breakfast deftly onto a plate, grabbed his coffee and shunning the kitchen table, sauntered over to sit in the chair beside Standish. With calculated innocence, he held the plate out to the Southerner.

"Want some breakfast?"

The bacon swam in a greasy pool and the fried eggs moist and slimy-looking, slithered across the shiny surface as J.D. moved the plate closer. The sight and smell was Ezra's undoing. He launched himself from the sofa, gagging, and made a dash for the bathroom, promising retribution for the unrepentant laughter that drifted in his wake from the youngest member of the team.

oooOOOooo

Vin looked down at the fading bruise on his chest and the small puncture wound where the fine gauge drainage tube had been. Not much to show for a brush with death that had probably been the most frightening experience of his life. He rested his uninjured hand almost protectively over the transparent plastic dressing, the panic of not being able to breathe still fresh enough to make him sweat at the memory. He sighed and glanced wearily at the cardiac monitor as it endlessly traced the action of his heart across the small display screen, peaks and troughs regularly spaced at seventy six beats a minute.

Four days and he had still not been allowed any activity more strenuous than going to the bathroom -- something about premature contractions -- and that had been more than enough time for an introspective review of his most recent foul up. He had not made too many in his career but he was beginning to think that this had to be the mother of them all. He had come close to getting two of his friends killed and had escaped only narrowly himself. Ezra had

been circumspect about the whole thing but then again he had been focused on his own problems. Buck had since told him about the Southerner's growing obsession with watching the tape of his own shooting. That was his fault too. He should never have mentioned it. Vin closed his eyes shutting out the cheery brightness of the room. He should never have done a lot of things.

Because of him Chris had almost bled to death. The moment that the blond agent had fallen, blood pumping from the gunshot wound onto the marble floor Ezra had reacted; instinctively, selflessly. The Southerner had been the one to go to Chris, had been the one to risk formal departmental censure by surrendering his gun and had been the one who saved Larabee's life. He had done nothing. Nothing except get them all into the mess to start with. Hell, he had even tried to stop Ezra. It mattered little how many times he went through the alternatives, how many times he re-examined the possibilities, in the end he had failed to act. Had failed. Chris had been the one to free him in the end.

Then Ezra had been shot. His stomach fluttered recalling the horror of watching the Southerner's blood spraying in a vivid splash of colour, of seeing the man fall and the overwhelming conviction that he was dead. His muscles jerked, a reactionary spasm, as the crack of the gunshot sounded again and he snapped awake, sweat beading his forehead. *Damn! If Ezra wanted that memory so badly he could have it.*

"Hey, Cowboy. Were you asleep? Sorry if I startled you."

The voice was so unexpected that Vin stared dumbly for several moments at the blond man resting easily on a pair of crutches beside his bed, as if he was a spectral visitation. *The ghost of sins past, he thought grimly.*

"Vin? Jesus, man, you look like you've seen a ghost."

The Texan finally found his voice, wondering how the man had made it past the nurses station and into his room without being challenged.

"I think I just did."

"Not me I hope."

"No," admitted Vin quietly, "Ezra."

Larabee frowned, his face suddenly serious.

"That's closer to the truth than I'd like to think about."

Tanner turned his head away, not ready to meet the man's eyes -- not yet.

"Thought he was dead. He can't remember it, and I want to forget it."

He heard Chris move closer but kept his head averted.

"Not one of our best days, pard, I'll give you that."

"No." Vin could not think of anything else to say in response. "Not the best."

"Vin?" He heard a deep sigh as Chris struggled to put his own feelings into words. "Vin. It wasn't your fault."

The young Texan took a moment to process the words before turning his head slowly to look at the senior agent.

"Yes, it was. We should have been at the airport, Chris. Not dicking around in a bank. You should have told me to shut up and kept driving."

The sigh again.

"Well, that's my fault then isn't it, for paying any attention to you in the first place?"

Tanner spared a moment to take in Larabee's drawn and still pale features, in part understanding what he had been through. Recognising not only the pain but the mental and physical punishment that such trauma exacted on a human body.

"Christ, I'm sorry, Chris."

The blond man waved a hand in dismissal.

"It's finished." His stern features relaxed but his eyes still drilled into the Texan like twin lasers, demanding truth. "You okay?"

It was Tanner's turn to sigh and he gestured at the cardiac monitor.

"Feel fine. Problems with premature contractions."

Chris grinned.

"Sure you're not in labour, pard?"

Vin snorted dismissively.

"Yeah, right!"

Chris deftly took both crutches in one hand and swung to park himself on the edge of the bed, gingerly lowering himself to rest his weight on his right buttock and looking distinctly uncomfortable.

"So how long have they given you?"

"Another few days. Hell, they only let me out of bed to crap. I'm going nuts here. You?"

"Two, maybe three more days. Would've been sooner but I got an infection."

Vin raised a quizzical eyebrow and Larabee's face flushed as he quickly ducked his head.

"Don't ask."

The Texan didn't.

The pair sat in silence for a few moments then Chris looked up, a lopsided grin on his face.

"Well, this is another fine mess you've gotten us into."

Vin, recognising the Laurel and Hardy catch phrase, raised a slow smile and managed to look contrite.

"Aw hell, Chris. Don't start again. What do you want me to say?"

"Better if you say nothing at all by my reckoning. Wouldn't want you to dig yourself any deeper into the..."

"All I did," protested the Texan, interrupting heatedly, "was go into the bank. How was I supposed to know it was going to be robbed? Jesus, I..." He stopped abruptly realising that Chris was laughing at him and frowned accusingly at the blond man.

"Come on, Vin. Chill out. I already said it's not your fault but damn, it's so easy to get a rise out of you I couldn't resist."

"Thanks a million, Chris, make me feel better why don't you?" Vin responded, sarcasm oozing through the words, but he spoke without rancour. "

Larabee winced and stretched his left leg out, in an attempt to find a comfortable position.

"What the hell, Vin. Look at it this way, we lived to fight another day."

"And that's supposed to make me feel better?"

"It sure as hell should, 'cos in the end it's all that really counts."

Buck was unsympathetic.

"Hell, Ezra, Nobody to blame but yourself. You can't expect to put away the best part of a bottle on top of a concussion and not suffer for it."

The Southerner had retired to the main bedroom, closed the blinds and collapsed on Buck's bed with an ice pack clutched to his aching head.

"Tell me, Mr. Wilmington. Why is that everyone feels the need to pontificate in regard to my current state of health? Mr. Dunne has already shown a callous indifference to my plight and now you seem to be deriving an inordinate degree of pleasure from my misfortune."

"Ezra, has anyone ever told you..."

"Frequently, Mr. Wilmington."

"...that you are a masochistic and obsessive son of a bitch?"

The undercover agent raised himself on one elbow.

"Having met my mother, you already know the answer to the latter." He moved the ice pack to the back of his neck. "Obsessive? Most certainly. But masochistic....?"

"You watched a tape of yourself being shot two hundred times, for God's sake, what would you call that?"

The Southerner dropped back onto the bed again and closed his eyes.

"Being thorough."

Buck rested the backs of his thighs against the window sill and folded his arms.

"Did it work?"

"Work?"

"Did you remember anything?"

Ezra snorted dismissively.

"Buck, right now I can barely remember my own name. And no, I don't remember being shot -- I'm no longer sure that I even want to -- but at least I have a sense of it. Now, if you don't mind, I would appreciate it if you would leave this masochistic son of a bitch to enjoy his suffering in peace."

"Whatever you say, pard. Just don't puke in my bed."

The pillow struck the door frame, narrowly missing Buck, as he hastily retreated into the hall, chuckling softly.

oooOOOooo

The three men sat together in silence, relaxed and enjoying the solitude of the mountain retreat. Perfect. A week's R and R. The most strenuous activity any of them had undertaken in the past few days was to walk as far as the porch and sit. When the mood took them they would play a few hands of poker, sink a beer or two, or just shoot the breeze. These men took their R and R seriously.

The weather was perfect; warm, sunny and still. Heat induced lassitude had kept talk to a minimum but now and then one of them would initiate a conversation which the others would take up, for a while at least.

"Did you really watch that tape two hundred times?"

Ezra raised the bottle of imported beer to his lips and took a long, slow drink, his eye on the Texan.

"Two hundred and thirty four to be exact."

"You don't call that obsessive? What would you call it, Chris?"

"I'd call it fucking insane," the blond agent commented drily, "But then this is Ezra we're talking about."

"Should I consider myself insulted, Mr. Larabee?"

"Is that even possible?"

Vin laughed, choked on his beer and started coughing.

"No less than you deserve, Mr. Tanner," observed Ezra, unsympathetically, "Divine retribution."

"Hell, I didn't say anything!" he protested, holding his chest and trying to bring his breathing back under control. "How come I always get the blame?"

The other two men exchanged a meaningful glance.

"Seems I've heard that somewhere before," muttered Chris wryly, rubbing his hip.

Beside him Ezra thoughtfully fingered the groove in the side of his head.

"Even my powers of recollection, limited as they might be, would indicate that this is not the first time Mr. Tanner has uttered these very words."

Tanner looked suspiciously from one to the other sensing the beginning of a conspiracy.

"Oh, no. Don't start this again!" he warned, as understanding dawned, "You've both had your pound of flesh. You can't make me feel guilty anymore."

Chris drained the last of his beer and crushed the can in his fist grinning wolfishly.

"Wanna bet?"