

"I sought my soul, But my soul I could not see

I sought my God, But my god eluded me.

I sought my brother, And I found all three." (Anonymous)

Chris Larabee again swiped his keycard through the scanner and punched in his code. *Dammit! It was harder accessing his bank account than getting through security at the Bureau!* He impatiently completed the transaction and pocketed the bills ejected from the chute before jogging back to where he had double-parked the Dodge. As he turned the key in the ignition he remembered that he owed Vin fifty and would have to withdraw more cash from the ATM. Swearing, he cut the engine and crossed back to the cash point to repeat the entire process which had so irritated him on the first occasion. By the time he finally gunned the Ram away from the bank he suspected his day was rapidly going down the tubes. Already his intended early start had become just a fantasy.

He swung the vehicle into a vacant bay in the underground parking garage, more than a little surprised to see that Ezra's XJS Jaguar was already in its customary spot. In passing Chris put his hand to the hood -- still warm -- the Southerner had not beaten him by much. That he had beaten him at all was something of an achievement for the habitually tardy undercover agent. Summoning the elevator, he wondered what had drawn Ezra to the office at, what was for him, an indecent hour of the day. The elevator doors remained firmly closed, the indicator light static, in spite of Larabee's repeated jabbing of the plastic push-button on the wall. At this point the senior ATF agent came to the conclusion that he was the victim of an electronic conspiracy to screw his day entirely. He glanced at the door concealing the stairs. Eight floors. Sixteen flights. Hell, he could use the exercise.

Ezra Standish once again logged on to his computer terminal and sat down, carefully placing a styrofoam container of double espresso at his elbow. He yawned expansively and asked himself what he was still doing sitting at his desk at seven in the morning. Still being the operative word; rather than an early morning this was essentially the mother of all late nights. Not that he was a stranger to late nights but generally he reserved the all night sessions for social occasions, preferably involving a gaming table, a deck of cards, good whiskey and if he was lucky, a female companion. Finally, he had been driven to abandon the computer just long enough to leave the building and fetch a take-out coffee and croissant in the scant hope that the caffeine and carbohydrate would fuel him for just a few hours more. Now he focused his bloodshot eyes on the information before him and sent the file to the printer.

Chris pushed open the door from the stairwell and stepped out into the empty foyer on level seven making a mental note to call maintenance as soon as he reached his office. Once up those stairs was enough for anyone in a day. He chuckled wryly to himself. *You're getting soft, Larabee.* The bull pen was in semi darkness with just a few lights still burning, one of which he knew would be Standish although he was curious to find out why.

The agent was indeed already working, his attention fixed on his computer terminal as his fingers flew across the keys. Ezra was one of the few agents who could touch-type -- a talent, Chris guessed, that was a side benefit of his incredible dexterity with a pack of cards -- and he imagined that at that moment he was churning out eighty words a minute. He did not appear to have noticed Chris approach but if he was taken by surprise when Larabee spoke he certainly showed no sign of it.

"Early start, Ezra? That's not like you."

"On the contrary, Mr. Larabee. I am presently at the wrong end of an extremely late night."

He paused in his data entry for a moment to remove the lid on his coffee and drink down a full third of the strong Java. Chris shook his head; he was permanently at a loss to understand what made Ezra tick. He started to walk away to his own office content to leave Standish to whatever case he was engrossed in, then turned back.

"Were the elevators working when you came in?"

Ezra didn't look up.

"I went out for coffee around six-thirty. They were working fine then."

Chris shrugged eloquently and crossed the bull pen to his own office. It was going to be one of those days.

Inside the disabled centre elevator car stalled on the sixth floor two thirty pound liquid petroleum gas cylinders lay against each other head to toe. Beside the cylinders sat a gallon container of gasoline with a detonator attached to a fuse wire dangling inside. The timing device -- two batteries -- were crimped to the detonator. The steady hiss of gas filled the empty car as one cylinder vented into the other. As the timer ticked over to 0715 the batteries sent a charge to the detonator igniting the gasoline which in turn sparked off the escaping LPG creating an expanding gas explosion which ripped the elevator from its moorings and tore the heart out of the sixth and seventh floors of the building.

Chris slowly lifted his head. *Jesus!* He blinked grit and smoke out of his eyes, tasted blood, smelled the rich odour of gas and felt the pressure of fallen masonry across his body. Deafened, his head filled with an incessant ringing, and his stomach churning with the resultant nausea he instinctively struggled to free himself from the debris. Pain flared in his shoulder, his knee, his wrist but he recognised them only as minor distractions as his mind operated on the most basic level responding to immediate danger. Kicking and crawling belly-down over chunks of cement, broken fittings and furniture he finally freed himself from the rubble and sat, his chest heaving, in the midst of the destruction of his office. *Fucking hell!* Blood dripped steadily onto his shirt from a gash on his forehead but was ignored as Larabee concentrated on finding his bearings, his only thought one of escaping before the rest of the ceiling collapsed and buried him. Scrambling to his feet he spat concrete dust from his mouth and carefully negotiated his way through the devastated office to what remained of the bull pen. There was nothing recognisable. No particular object that Chris could focus on; the room had collapsed in on itself like a house of cards. A slow, cold sensation of dread crawled slowly upwards from the pit of his belly to take hold of his heart. *Ezra!* Moving slowly, hearing -- feeling -- the building settle around him, he began to search feeling the claustrophobia of knowing that at any moment the entire unstable structure was likely to fall in on him. Impatiently he dashed the blood out of his eyes and suppressed the shock and horror that was starting to build in him only to have it replaced by a simmering rage.

The silence was absolute. The darkness complete. There was only pain. And fear. He tried to move but a crushing weight had settled across his lower body pinning him to the floor. Pain. *Sweet Jesus!* He controlled the urge to scream, instead panting open-mouthed like a woman in labour while his hands pushed ineffectually at the fourteen inch thick cement slab which rested over him. In the rational part of his brain he understood that should the precariously balanced slab fall the pain would no longer be an issue -- he would be dead. He closed his eyes then, blocking out the potential harbinger of his ultimate destruction. *Does it hurt less if you don't see it coming?* All around him the building sighed and groaned, mirroring his own pain, as it slowly died. He could hear water musically gurgling from ruptured plumbing and faint unidentifiable rustlings interspersed with sudden crashes as overtaxed masonry gave way under pressure. A tear leaked from the corner of his eye and he blinked it away, embarrassed even in his solitude by this display of weakness. *Coward!* He tried again to free himself but the searing agony that consumed him from the waist down drove him to the brink of consciousness and forced an

involuntary cry from his throat.

“Ezra?”

He blinked, surprised. *Chris!* With an effort he brought his rapid breathing under control as a flood of relief and renewed optimism washed over him.

“Why, Mr. Larabee!” He sounded like he just had run a 100 metre sprint. “I do believe we have had the dubious pleasure of being bombed.”

“Are you okay?”

The voice was reassuringly close and Ezra felt movement of the wreckage near his head.

“Unfortunately,” he drew a ragged breath, “I seem to be encumbered by the best part of the eighth floor.”

A weak grey light displaced the darkness and Ezra realised that he had been cocooned within a tent of fallen masonry. Chris’ bloodied face finally appeared as he carefully cleared away the detritus that had concealed the injured Southerner. Dropping to his knees his eyes travelled immediately to the concrete slab suspended bare centimetres above the trapped agent.

“Fuck!”

“Yes, indeed, Mr. Larabee.”

Chris slid closer, his expression intense, his voice struggling to achieve neutrality.

“How bad are you hurt?”

Ezra drew another shuddering breath.

“It does not look promising. I think my legs are broken.” He paused, hoping to gain some control of his voice. “And...my pelvis.”

Larabee squirmed into the confined space and made a visual inspection of the slab and its supports. Taking off his watch he rolled up his sleeve, casting a glance at the tense and still hyperventilating Southerner as he slid his arm into the space between the concrete and Ezra’s abdomen.

“Don’t take this personally, pard, but I’m just going to feel around a little down here.”

He was reassured that Ezra was still able to muster a sardonic smile. He probed with difficulty in the confined space, his fingers finally locating a beam wedged firmly across the younger man’s hips. Adjusting his position he moved his hand along the outside of Ezra’s thigh under the beam, feeling a pang of remorse on hearing the agent’s guarded hiss in response to his touch. A few more minutes of tactile exploration convinced the senior agent that Standish had indeed been lucky to survive. The beam

was wedged on a broken piece of cement, and was the only thing between Ezra and several hundred pounds of concrete. The crossbeam had probably, as Ezra already guessed, smashed the Southerner's pelvis; the concrete would without doubt have killed him.

Ezra stirred restlessly, a barely suppressed moan escaping his lips as he pushed futilely against the concrete pinning him to the floor. Chris reached out and squeezed the bulging upper arm, feeling the muscles trembling beneath his fingers as the man fought against the gut-wrenching pain of his injuries. Then, drained of energy, Standish finally relaxed panting with the exertion, spent but having found no release.

"Hang in there," Larabee whispered hoarsely, frustrated by his own powerlessness to alleviate his friend's suffering.

He rubbed his eyes. Christ! He had spent long years beating himself up over the death of his wife and son, so sure that if he had been there he could have done something to save them. Now he wondered. Had he been fooling himself all along? He was right here with Ezra but for all it was worth he might as well have been standing outside on the street -- an observer. And he would end up letting this man down, the same way he had let down Sarah and Adam. When it came to the crunch he just couldn't deliver.

Ezra blinked slowly and licked dry lips.

"It's so cold," he murmured, "Can't feel my leg any more."

Chris edged closer. He touched a hand to Ezra's now decidedly cold, clammy skin and recognised that the Southerner was sliding steadily into shock. Carefully sliding his thigh under the undercover agent's shoulders he gently positioned the tousled head on his lap. The very real possibility that if help did not arrive soon Ezra might not make it closed like a tightening fist around his insides and he protectively wrapped his arms around the smaller man. If he had to, he'd hold onto life for both of them. He could feel the resistance in him, every muscle rigid, his whole body straining.

"Let it go, Ez." The blond man tightened his hold. "You don't have to fight all the time."

"You're telling me that you think Chris is in there as well?"

Buck's rage threatened to overflow into physical violence as he strained against Josiah's restraining hand, his anger directed at the Fire Services co-ordinator.

"Buck, " Sanchez remonstrated gently, "Don't shoot the messenger."

Wilmington shrugged out of the older man's grip and straightened his jacket, walking in a tight circle, venting his frustration.

"This is wrong!" he stormed, "All fucking wrong!"

The co-ordinator continued as if Buck had not spoken addressing Sanchez.

“A Miss...” he looked at his clipboard, “...Elliott has already informed us that Mr. Standish was working late. All attempts to contact him by phone have failed. We have now determined that Mr. Larabee’s vehicle was also in the underground parking area and we are assuming at this stage that both men were on the premises at the time of the blast.”

Buck looked up at the blasted façade of the Bureau, his voice tightly controlled.

“How soon before you know for sure?”

“I’ve got crews working from above and below but the whole thing’s pretty unstable. The stairwells have collapsed. We go in like the seventh cavalry and I risk burying your men under a ton of rubble, if they’re not already. You just let me do my job and I might have half a chance of bringing out these guys.”

Josiah nodded and dismissed the officer, freeing him to continue the search and rescue efforts. Offering a silent prayer that Chris and Ezra were indeed still alive he threw a massive arm around Buck’s shoulders.

“Have faith, brother.”

Buck dug his hands into his jacket pockets.

“Gotta tell the others,” he mumbled, wheeling away then: “Shit! This isn’t happening.”

Vin and Zoé held onto each other, moving in aimless patterns outside the cordon, talking in low, intimate voices and taking some small comfort in the nearness of the other reluctant to share their misery with anyone else. Josiah, silently observing their interaction, guessed what impact the news Buck was about to deliver would have on the couple and with a sigh moved in their direction. This was going to be a difficult time for all of them.

Nathan and J.D. circulated through the rescue workers, hovering between the fire trucks and the EMT vehicles. If there was any chance of being in on the rescue, and he had to believe that there would be a rescue, Jackson wanted to be ready; Dunne was merely working off his inherent restlessness now intensified by the surging adrenaline that the crisis had produced. The word that Chris Larabee was now thought to have been in the building escalated the tension already rippling through the group. All of them wanted to believe that there had been some terrible mistake; that Ezra and Chris had been elsewhere when the bomb exploded. None of them did.

Chris moved his fingers over the pulse in Ezra’s neck. Fast but still strong. The Southerner’s long sandy lashes fluttered.

“Yes, Mr. Larabee. I’m still here.”

“How ya doin’?” Chris asked softly, “Thought you’d run out on me there for a minute.”

Ezra smiled, sadly amused.

"Never, Mr. Larabee. We have an agreement, remember?"

Chris tightened his hold on the man resting in his lap.

"Just as long as you remember. You renege on that and I'll follow you all the way to hell to drag you back."

The smile widened, showing a flash of gold but the green eyes were glazed with pain.

"What make's you think I'm heading that way?"

"What odds you offerin' to say otherwise?"

A cascade of cement dust and pebbles suddenly sprayed from the ceiling, followed by a low rumble and a subtle tremor that Chris felt through his very bones. The building was shifting, caving under the immense pressure from the floors above and for the first time the uncertainty of his own survival hit home. The soft soughing of shifting debris sent a chill of fear up his spine and he instinctively leaned over the injured man offering him the protection of his body wondering if they were destined to die together here today.

The upheaval was brief and intense as the entire floor seemed to undulate around them and debris rained down on the two men. Ezra's hoarse scream as the floor shifted beneath him died away to breathless sobs and Chris straightened, afraid that he would find the Southerner crushed beneath the heavy slab. Shaking dust and plaster out of his hair he brushed the fallen debris off the undercover agent's heaving chest. Chris saw that he had both hands pressed to his belly, his back arched, and his face a rictus of agony.

"Ezra!"

"Jesus, Mary and all the Saints!"

He forced the words through clenched teeth. *Keep the pain inside!* Fear that if he opened his mouth again he would be unable to stop screaming filled his mind -- and shame that Chris would witness his cowardice. This was not the way he wanted it to end. No chance to ever redeem himself. No apologies. No farewells. His courage a thing without substance as he wept, hurt and afraid, in the arms of another man. He blinked, unable to stop the tears that ran down his cheeks.

Maude. His mother. She would be disappointed. *Appearances are everything, son.* He drew in a deep breath and allowed it to escape slowly, willing his jaw to relax as the pain, having reached its zenith slowly ebbed to persistent but tolerable level. Panting, unable to control his rapid breathing as his body demanded oxygen, he could no longer -- *keep the pain inside!* -- hold on to...to...what? *Life? How hard would it be to let go?* Hold on.....

"Don't leave me." Chris let out the breath he hadn't realised he'd been holding and tightened his arms around the Southerner in response to the barely heard whispered plea. He was no longer sure that Ezra even knew he was there. Slowly this man, his friend, was slipping away and there was not a thing he could do about it.

"I'm here, Ez. You just hang in there, pard." He breathed. "Don't you run out on me now."

Larabee felt Ezra stir and relaxed his hold but found himself gripped around the forearm with surprising strength.

“Chris. I can’t...” His voice was raw with emotion. “I’m...I’m scared.”

Chris closed his eyes and leaned into the smaller man, embracing him with as much strength as he dared, willing him to hold on to the life that was slowly bleeding out of him.

“Shit, Ezra. Just between you and me, so am I.”

Ezra stirred restlessly, muttering indistinctly and once again began pushing fretfully at the unyielding wedge of concrete before him. Although he remained conscious he had become increasingly confused as his brain demanded oxygen that his body could no longer provide in sufficient quantity. During his lucid moments they talked, but those periods were becoming less frequent and with each passing minute Chris knew that the Southerner was losing the fight.

“You still with me, Ez?” he asked softly, and the younger man once again relaxed.

“Would rather be...somewhere else.”

“Got somewhere in mind?”

“Anywhere but here. Too cold.”

It was cold. Chris was feeling it too. *Hell, on top of everything else they were now at risk of hypothermia.*

“Tell you what. When we get out of here we’ll take a week’s vacation in the Bahamas.”
Ezra smiled.

“You’re a very bad liar Chris Larabee. ”

Chris felt tears pricking at his eyes and he closed his fingers around his friend’s upper arm in a forceful grip.

“You stay with me, you hear? No running out, you bastard!”

Ezra reached up and Chris felt a slim hand, cold as marble, close over his.

“No promises this time.” A shower of fine plaster floated down from the ceiling. Chris looked up, alert, sensing movement overhead. An avalanche of rubble cascaded to his left and he moved quickly out from behind the injured man to slide into the space beside him, pressing as close against him as a lover and using his upper body as a shield. As the debris rained down in a steady stream he pushed aside the too vivid image of seeing himself and Ezra buried forever under tons of masonry but the sudden fear of being trapped, crushed and broken, was a living thing uncoiling in the pit of his stomach. Beneath him, Ezra bit back a moan, his already abused body protesting at the added pressure of Chris’ weight. As the deluge died to a trickle Chris shrugged his shoulders free of the rubble and rolled away from the injured agent, conscious that he had been the inadvertent cause of additional pain. Blinking the dust out of his eyes he stared up at the gap in the ceiling above his head and as his pupils adjusted to the flood of light he began to laugh softly. Torches. He fell back, his laughter fuelled by the raw sense of relief coursing through him gaining momentum. He leaned on his elbow and grabbed the Southerner in a fierce embrace

unmindful of the tears that were trickling down his face.

"We'll go to the Bahamas, Ezra. I promise."

"We have visual. Confirm two males located. Seventh floor."

Nathan, wearing the distinctive coloured vest of the rescue team, scrambled through the debris medical kit in hand and dropped to one knee beside Ezra, half-turning to address Chris as he immediately began his assessment of the injured Southerner. Larabee didn't even want to ask how he had managed to finagle his way into the operation.

"You okay?"

A quick nod.

Nathan allowed his gaze to linger for a moment on the senior ATF agent then satisfied that Chris did not require urgent attention, switched his focus back to Ezra. An EMT, Nathan's support, positioned himself on the opposite side of the injured man and went to work in conjunction with the black doctor.

"Ezra! Can you hear me?"

The undercover agent's eyes fluttered but he was unable to keep his eyes open.

"Why, Doctor Jackson. Imagine you being here."

Nathan smiled in spite of the seriousness of the situation. The man was incorrigible.

"Listen, Ezra. We're gonna get you out of here believe me, but first I need to get you stabilised. Understand?"

The answer was a barely perceptible nod as surrendering, he put his trust in Nathan.

He felt exposed.

Vulnerable.

Cold.

Frigid air caressed his naked chest, its icy tendrils drawing the bosses of his nipples almost painfully into hardened nubs; bronzed islands in a pale sea of gooseflesh.

So cold.

His shirt had been cut from his back and he mourned for a moment the loss of such fine linen until the touch of intrusive hands on his body reminded him that the loss of his clothing was a minor

consideration. Still, it had been a particularly fine piece of haberdashery. He could hear Nathan talking, the familiar voice steady and unhurried, a marked counterpoint to the speed at which he could feel his strong hands moving over his torso. Someone out of sight had fitted an oxygen mask over his mouth and nose and he gratefully drew the hissing gas hungrily into his lungs, chest heaving.

"Start a litre of Ringer's and a litre of saline -- wide open."

"Can't get a vein."

"I'll do cut-downs. You just give me the vitals."

A sudden savage flare of pain in his arm became lost in the intensity of the greater pain which already sought to consumed him and became nothing. Less than nothing.

"Pressure ninety over fifty. Resps 40. Pulse 130."

"Let's get that pressure up!"

He wanted to draw back, find a warm, dark place to escape the intimately questing hands and unrelenting pressure on already abused flesh but there was no way out except....
HOLY CHRIST! He bucked, every muscle in his neck and chest straining as he resisted the sudden manual pressure on his belly that sent agonising shockwaves through his system and drove him to the very brink of unconsciousness. The voices around him ebbed and flowed, disjointed phrases and fragments of speech forming a verbal kaleidoscope that added to the sense of distance and unreality he was already feeling.

Am I still here?

He was crying, unable to stop himself although he held onto the screams inside -- locking them away so no-one would be able to see or hear his weakness. *Appearances are everything, son.* He would not disgrace himself in front of strangers. Bad enough that Chris had witnessed his earlier loss of control.

"Jesus, Nathan. Can't you give him something?"

"If I do, Chris, he might arrest. He's already in respiratory distress."

Yes. Hard to breathe now.

"He's going flat, doc. We're losing him."

Chris resisted the urge to lunge forward, a violent protest of denial dying on his lips as he watched the two men swing into action, their response urgent yet controlled, their movements as co-ordinated as a pair of dancers in a carefully orchestrated ballet. All that had gone before, all that was yet to come, was reduced to this one moment in time as Chris looked down into the glassy green eyes, now fixed and staring into infinity. Impotent rage surged through every fibre of his being as, reduced to an observer, he watched Nathan methodically go through the motions of resuscitation. *Not now, Ezra. You made it this*

far. Don't give up now.

In a procedure that took the medic no longer than two minutes Jackson hyperextended the Southerner's neck slipping an endotracheal tube over the laryngoscope blade and into the trachea with practiced ease. His assistant promptly connected the oxygen and Ambu-bag, beginning manual ventilation while Nathan anchored the tube in place. The EMT continued the compression of the bag every few seconds, his rhythmic pumping the only thing keeping the injured man alive. Closing his eyes and hanging his head in despair Chris shut out the image of Ezra lying broken and dying among the rubble, more real now than it had been through all the hours they had clung together -- emotionally and physically -- waiting for rescue. Now, of the urbane Standish, the most enigmatic of his team, only a shell remained; even the most basic autonomic function of breathing lost to him.

"Chris?"

The blond man raised his head suddenly aware of Nathan's presence; his sympathetic voice and the touch of his hand on his arm. He met Jackson's warm, brown eyes and read understanding there. "I told him I wouldn't leave him." He managed to force the words past the constriction in his throat. "He didn't want to be alone."

Nathan gripped his arm.

"Then talk to him, Chris. He needs you."

"But..."

The doctor interrupted him.

"No buts, Chris. Ezra's not going to die. Not if I have anything to do with it. But we still have to get him out and I want you to start talking and keep talking to him until he's free. Give him something to focus on. A voice he knows."

Chris nodded just once, his expression reflecting the determination in his eyes.

"Hey, Ezra. It's Chris. You hang in there, you hear? Won't be long now."

He was conscious of the fact that his voice was not as steady as he would have liked but he doubted that Ezra was very much interested in either what he was saying or how he was saying it. Could he even hear in whatever state of consciousness he was currently in? Almost mesmerised by the steady rise and fall of the undercover agent's chest Chris began to speak:

"Remember when we first met, Ez? Didn't think we'd ever get beyond first base. Now look at us! How long has it been? Three...no, almost four years now. Reckon we've come along way since then." He chuckled softly. "Still play your cards close to your chest though, don't you?"

Larabee watched as the heavy segment of what used to be the next floor was raised with painstaking slowness, the gap between the concrete wedge and Ezra's body widening second by second. He kept his voice low and conversational, completely at odds with the emotions that were pulling at him.

"Did I ever tell you...?"

With uncharacteristic candour, Chris launched into an intimate personal history that few people had ever been privileged to share. He spoke of growing up, his life in the navy, his wife and son...elements of his life which had been locked away in the compartment marked "Private" for so long. He paused in his

soliloquy, catching his breath as Ezra's body spasmed, muscles contracting as the beam, the final obstruction to the rescue, was carefully lifted. The EMT's voice was steadily reading off vital signs, cueing Jackson in to the injured man's current status.

Pressure up. Ninety five on sixty.

Pulse one hundred.

He's fighting the tube, doc.

Nathan glanced up from where he was removing the remainder of Ezra's clothing.

"Diazepam 10mg IV."

The EMT nudged Chris.

"Here, take over. One full compression every five seconds."

The blond man moved into place without argument and began the same rhythmic action that his predecessor had been maintaining for the past fifteen minutes. Ezra, now showing a definite change in level of consciousness, seemed to be gagging on the tube in his throat.

"He's trying to get rid of the tube," explained the EMT as he injected the muscle relaxant into the IV port, "Wants to breathe on his own."

Chris slowly nodded and for the first time in long hours his lips twitched in the hint of a smile. That sounded about right. Ezra always did want to do things his own way. Even dying didn't come easy.

Vin Tanner wordlessly accepted the styrofoam cup of coffee from Zoé, his intense blue-eyed gaze still fixed on the ATF building across the street. The news that Chris had suffered relatively minor injuries had not been enough to shake his black mood as on the other end of the scale Ezra's life still hung in the balance. Zoé slid down the wall to sit beside him and silently slipped an undemanding arm around his shoulders.

"Still no news?"

Vin shook his head and finally tore his eyes away from the seventh floor.

"I'll get the bastards that did this, Zoé."

She rested her head against his arm.

"You shouldn't take this personally, Vin."

He looked at her then.

“How the fuck am I supposed to take it? Someone planted a bomb that blew away two floors of a federal agency where I work! That’s pretty damn personal as far as I’m concerned.” He raked a hand through his hair as if surprised by his own outburst and dropped his voice a level. “It could have been any of us, Zoé. It might have been you.”

The English agent squeezed his arm.

“Or it could have been you, Vin. But it wasn’t.”

“Am I supposed to feel glad about that?”

She drew him towards her until their heads touched.

“Being thankful that you weren’t in a particular place at a particular time doesn’t mean that you feel any less for the people that were. Guilt over something you can’t change is a wasted emotion.”

He pulled back a little from her.

“You know, Zoé, you can be a hard bitch sometimes.”

“It’s called pragmatism, Vin. And if I didn’t have that to fall back on I’d be a bloody wreck.” She planted a light kiss on his cheek and leaned across to remove the lid from his coffee. “But I’ll tell you this for nothing, if anything happens to Ezra I’ll not only find the bastards who did this, I will take great pleasure in personally eviscerating them.”

“I thought you weren’t taking this personally.”

“I lied.”

He was in hell.

He had descended into the pit of darkness, his lungs on fire no longer able to draw breath, plunged into the void in which death waited like an insatiable predator.

And he was afraid. Consumed by the terror that he would not be able to hold onto the tiny spark of life still burning, that against his will the flame would wink out and he would no longer be.

Falling...deeper and deeper into the nameless abyss that existed outside time and space.
Falling...alone and frightened of what awaited him. Falling...

“Hey, Ezra. It’s Chris. You hang in there, you hear?”

A distant voice. Calling him back. Chris. Of course. It would be. Never get away from Chris. A promise.
I’ll follow you all the way to hell to drag you back.

And he had.

Chris tensed involuntarily as Nathan, an implement that looked like an oversize awl in hand, made a clinical stab wound in Ezra's lower abdomen and fed through a silastic catheter which promptly disgorged a flood of bloodstained fluid. The brutality of the action touched a nerve in the blond man; this was emergency medicine up close and personal and the fact that the subject was one of his own men made it even more disturbing. A case of the cure being worse than the disease. He was thankful when Nathan completed the procedure and covered the Southerner with a light blanket; not that he had any particular problem with Ezra being naked but he had seen enough of the damage wrought in the explosion. Nathan had already confirmed an unstable fracture of the pelvis, -- something he had called an open book -- as well as left shaft of femur and right neck of femur; he also suspected internal injuries with a ruptured bladder almost a certainty. Chris shifted his gaze to look sympathetically at the smoothly relaxed features, now partially obscured by the endotracheal tube and attachments. It somehow bothered him that the EMT had taped the undercover agent's eyelids shut; he understood the rationale but that didn't make it any easier - too much like last offices, he thought. Ezra was unconscious and still not breathing on his own but his colour was better and Nathan had assured him that his vital signs were improving with the rapid infusion of IV fluids.

Chris continued to pump the manual ventilator at the required five second intervals, watching as Nathan and the EMT manipulated anti-shock trousers around Ezra, then inflated them; the last step in preparing the injured agent for transfer.

"Okay, you guys, let's do this. Everyone on three."

Chris controlled the head and shoulders as Ezra's body slid sideways and onto the waiting stretcher. Then as the team moved in he leaned close to the Southerner's ear.

"You're almost home, Ez," he whispered, "Don't let me down now."

God he was tired. He remembered protesting in ER that he was fine; in fact he remembered abusing the doctor and telling him to get his fucking hands off him but somewhere along the line he had finally had to give in. Actually if he was honest it had been more like caving in and if Vin hadn't already been hanging onto him to stop him from taking a swing at the doctor he would have hit the deck. Then someone, quite unfairly he had thought at the time, had stuck a needle in him and he had woken up in this hospital bed. Chris moved stiffly and was surprised to find that he wasn't in five-point restraints. Why did he have to get so damned crazy? And they had been right. He wasn't okay.

"Take it easy, pard."

Chris managed to co-ordinate his actions enough to turn his head but his reactions were still sluggish, courtesy of the medical equivalent of a mickey finn.

"Ezra? He's okay?" He croaked out the words.

"Still in OR. Here, have a drink." Vin offered a glass of iced water and waited for Chris to finish it before continuing. "Pelvis is busted to shit, needs metal plates to put it back together. Both legs're broke too and he's torn up pretty bad inside."

Chris eased himself up in the bed and leaned wearily against his pillows.

“Christ, what did they give me? I can hardly move.”

Vin’s lips twitched the barest hint of a smile.

“That’s because at last count you had a torn ligament in your knee, a sprained wrist, two cracked ribs, a perforated eardrum and fifteen stitches in your head. Ain’t nothin’ to do with anything they gave you.”

“That could explain it.” Chris’ own brief smile disappeared in a moment, his eyes clouding with remembered grief. “You know, Ezra died up there, Vin. Stopped breathing.”

Tanner nodded slowly.

“Nathan told us. Respiratory arrest. Close call, huh?”

“Too fucking close, Vin. I want whoever did this.”

Tanner did not change either his relaxed posture in the chair or his expression but his voice hardened.

“You’ll have ‘em, Chris. On my word, you’ll have ‘em.”

He felt detached. Almost as if his mind and his body had become separate entities operating independently of each other. The pain had gone. No longer the savage predatory beast tearing at his vitals yet still lurking on the periphery of his awareness, occasionally closing in but strangely no longer of any consequence to him. Suspended as he was in a twilight world in which time and space ceased to have any real meaning he could safely ignore the realities of existence. Air moved in and out of his lungs under pressure beyond any ability of his to control and if he thought about it, the fact that he could not move produced a vague sensation of unease but again, not enough to create any sense of distress. That he was unable to move was something of a mystery. He had no memory of anything that had gone before the here and now; leaving him with no past on which to anchor. He was faintly troubled by the notion that there was something important that he should remember, knowing that somewhere in a far and inaccessible recess of his mind lay the answer but he had neither the will nor the strength to pursue the thought and once again he surrendered to become a being without substance. A mind floating free.

Zoé looked at the finely sculpted hand lying inert in her palm. Ezra had such beautiful hands. With her thumb she gently massaged the surprisingly soft skin, following the contours of the well-defined knuckles, then individually tracing each finger and well manicured nail but her gaze kept wandering to the regular rise and fall of the Southerner’s chest and the ventilator that was doing his breathing for him. Here was a man whom she loved dearly, someone who was hurting and all the comfort she had to offer was to hold his hand. She raised his hand to her face and fought the tears that threatened to spill onto her cheeks. Dammit, she’d promised herself that she wouldn’t cry!

In musical counterpoint to the wheezing of the machine, the cardiac monitor beeped reassuringly, graphically tracing the steady beat of the injured man’s heart. Zoé’s eye wandered to the numerous tubes and wires either connected to or invading skin, veins, organs and tissue; Beside her an electronic infusion pump monitored the transfusion of blood into a vein in his shoulder, while a solution of electrolytes dripped slowly into a vein in his left arm. Mercifully out of sight under the sheet, catheters and tubes evacuated blood and wastes from a ruptured bladder and from surgical incisions in each thigh. To all intents and purposes Ezra’s body had become merely a living conduit for the exchange of fluids and electrical impulses and as she looked on the still form, made insignificant by the high tech equipment surrounding him, she wanted nothing more than to see those incredible green eyes open and to have him smile; but she knew he would not - could not - rouse. The medications that allowed the ventilator to operate without Ezra fighting it, effectively paralysed every muscle in his body and the narcotics that kept him pain free also kept him in a state of induced narcolepsy. Not knowing whether he

was even aware of her presence she remained, touching, talking; a reminder to him that he wasn't alone. That he had not been abandoned. That he was loved.

Vin hesitated, slowing his stride as he approached the ICU bay, reluctant to encroach on what was obviously a very private moment. He understood the special bond between Zoé and Ezra, so different from his own relationship with the English agent, but he was unable to stop the fleeting pang of jealousy as he watched her lift the unconscious man's hand to her lips in an intimate gesture that spoke volumes of her love for the Southerner. Finally summoning the courage to interrupt he moved up behind Zoé and rested his hands on her shoulders.

"You gonna stay all night?"

Without turning she brought up her free hand and captured his fingers in her own.

"I can't leave him alone, Vin. Not here with no one but strangers around."

"You think he even knows you're here?"

She looked up at him then.

"I don't care if he doesn't. It's enough that he might."

Vin broke contact and moved to stand beside the bed. God, he hated hospitals. Hated to see Ezra was lying there with a tube the size of a garden hose down his throat and a machine doing his breathing for him; hated the fact that this man, his friend, had been reduced to an insensible shell and most of all hated the reminder of his own mortality. He tentatively reached out and rested his hand on a well-muscled shoulder momentarily shocked by the coolness of the skin beneath his fingers. Not knowing what to say he hoped if nothing else Ezra would be aware of the physical contact and take some comfort from it.

Buck looked around the temporary office they had been assigned and sighed. Back to work. Chris had no intention of sitting back or giving his team time to regroup; he was out for blood and that meant putting men on the streets, if it also meant kicking a few asses then so be it. While he knew Larabee had been right in saying that the best way they could all help Ezra was to find both the reason for the bombing and the perpetrator, it didn't make it any easier to walk away from a friend to concentrate on an investigation. Chris would be on the case as soon as he was released from hospital. Hell, the phone at his bedside was already working overtime! But for now he had put Buck in as team leader and for once Wilmington felt he should respond to that faith in his abilities by getting some results. Already Nathan and Josiah were following up a lead on the gas tanks that had been used in the explosion for while the containers themselves had exploded in spectacular fashion, the collar of one had been retrieved from the blast site and on that collar had been imprinted a serial number. Now all they had to do was track the gas tank from the manufacturer to wherever it ended up. Right! Buck presumed that sometimes needles could be found in haystacks.

In a cramped corner JD was hunched over his computer, a man with a mission. Buck had suggested he find out just what Ezra had been working on when the bomb went off. The Southerner had pulled an all night stint for some reason and that in itself was sufficiently unusual that it might just have some bearing on the case. Again it might be nothing more than coincidence. Wilmington felt he was clutching at straws but an investigation had to start somewhere. It might help if they knew who the target had been. Was this a terror bombing aimed at the federal agency or was it more personal? Distractedly combing his hair with his fingers he felt a cold chill of dread along his spine suddenly hoping that this was someone with a grievance against the ATF, the government, public buildings -- anything but a personal attack. Warily Buck reached for the phone and dialed waiting impatiently for a response.

"Vin? Can you get down here right away? Gotta talk." He waited for the response that he already knew would be in the affirmative. "Okay. See you in ten."

He slowly replaced the handset and leaned back in the chair. *What a fucking day!*

Chris dressed slowly in the fresh clothes Buck had brought him, wincing as his still tender ribs protested at the activity and hindered by his sprained wrist. His knee, now strapped, was uncomfortable but not too painful, certainly nothing that would stop him getting back to work. If he cast his mind back far enough it was no worse than some of the football injuries he had carried in his younger days. Of course he was no longer young and today he felt as if he bore the accumulated weight of all his injuries over his lifetime. The ringing in his ears had faded to a minor annoyance that he had been told would subside in a few days and the rupture in his eardrum had already been patched although he would probably require further treatment. Fastening the last of the buttons and tucking his shirt into his jeans he paused to look at his reflection in the mirror. He needed shave and in spite of the enforced rest his eyes were still bloodshot; to complete the picture an uneven line of stitches snaked along the right side of his forehead, disappearing into the hairline and terminating just above his ear. Fucking hell! He looked and felt every one of his forty-two years. Turning away he picked up the elbow crutch and limped slowly out of the hospital room.

He would see Ezra before he left.

The knowledge that he was on a life support system did nothing to prepare him for the gut-wrenching reality of actually seeing the Southerner hooked up to the ventilator, any more than the knowledge that his state of consciousness was deliberately induced made it any easier to accept. Chris hoped he was feeling no pain. He deserved that much.

Although he had not intended on doing anything more than looking in on the undercover agent, he found himself sitting down in the vacant chair and reaching out to grasp the motionless hand. He needed to make that small gesture, to make physical contact because in truth he felt as if he had broken his promise not to leave, but even he could not follow where Ezra had gone.

"Hey, Ez. Told you we'd make it. Guess I owe you a trip to the Caribbean; you deserve a little R & R after this one. Sun, sand and surf -- just what you need. Hear they've got some mighty fine casinos over there. How 'bout you show me how to beat the odds at roulette?" He bowed his head, squeezing his eyes shut and fighting the sudden flood of conflicting emotions that threatened to overwhelm him. His relationship with the Southerner over the past few years had followed an erratic course to say the least. While he respected the undercover agent for his work, he was a difficult man to get to know. Always hiding behind a carefully engineered facade and preferring to keep even his colleagues at a respectable distance, the first years of their association had been tough on everyone. Ezra had trusted nobody; his unorthodox upbringing and later experiences as an adult giving him no cause to believe in, or rely on, anyone but himself. That defensive shield had been hard to break through and even now after more than three years together, on the occasions when the Southerner was assailed by doubts, that barrier could be thrown up in an instant.

Now he had seen Ezra at his most vulnerable; helpless, in pain and afraid. Well, they had shared at least that in common. Yet even enduring what must have been the most horrific agony the Southerner had maintained a degree of control that Larabee suspected he would have been hard pushed to maintain under similar circumstances. He knew that Ezra believed himself to be lacking in courage and that indeed given the choice he would avoid physical confrontation but Chris had always recognised in the undercover agent a different kind of courage; a quiet strength that their shared experience had done nothing to dispel.

The ventilator hiccupped, paused, then resumed its rhythmic cycle before stuttering again, the regular pattern interrupted again and again. Chris raised his head in alarm uncertain of what was happening.

"Jesus, Ez. Don't do this to me," he whispered fiercely, "Don't you give up."

"It's all right, Chris. He's just trying to breathe on his own."

He turned sharply at the voice, caught a little off balance, knowing his own emotions were fully exposed. Zoé, her approach having gone unnoticed, slipped an arm around his shoulders, an unexpectedly comforting gesture.

“They reduced the medications a few hours ago,” she explained, “The machine is set to respond to Ezra’s own respirations so when he takes a breath the ventilator cuts out.”

Chris struggled to regain control of his feelings, the fear that Ezra was about to arrest again only partially alleviated by Zoé’s explanation; the reality of having held Ezra’s life in his own hands too recent a memory to readily dismiss. Until he saw the Southerner fully conscious and breathing without a machine those doubts would remain.

The return was as traumatic as the leaving. He had given up consciousness, panic-stricken at not being able to breathe as he was pulled down into darkness and was now resurfacing, gagging and coughing, still fighting to draw air into his lungs.

A voice he did not recognise spoke calmly in his ear, encouraging him to breathe slowly and deeply. Then he felt the contact of a mask against his face and the sudden inrush of welcome oxygen augmenting his own insubstantial efforts at maintaining independent respiration. *Who would have thought the act of breathing could be so hard? He used to do it all the time without thinking about it, now it was taking an inordinate amount of energy just to move air in and out of his lungs.* He coughed again, and felt the unpleasant movement of fluid in his lungs.

The voices around him were beginning to take form, the words coalescing into an understandable whole and he finally made the connection that he was in hospital. The crushing weight that had held him down was gone but he was still unable to move; his limbs heavy and uncooperative.

“Okay, suck him out.”

Ezra fought to open his eyes. Whatever they were talking about did not sound like something he wanted to be a part of, in fact it suggested something faintly disgusting of which he would rather not be a participant -- time to make an effort and regain some control. *Easier said than done, Standish.* With a huge effort he clawed through the fog shrouding his brain and for a moment the activity going on around him completely overwhelmed his senses and he took a mental step back. *Jesus! What were all these people doing?*

Too exhausted to do anything but allow these strangers access to his body he reluctantly submitted and concentrated instead on the simple action of pulling air into his lungs and pushing it out again. For now that was all that mattered.

“Okay, so what have we got?”

Larabee pushed himself away from the desk, leaned back in the executive chair trying relieve some of the strain on his injured leg, and looked expectantly at his assembled team. The five men crowded the small room, sitting and standing in various relaxed attitudes in the limited space available around Chris.

“No one has claimed responsibility so far,” offered Vin, “and we have no real clue as to why the ATF was targeted.”

“Great.” That was not what he wanted to hear.

“Josiah and me managed to trace the gas cylinder to a rail-yard workshop,” reported Nathan, “One of six stolen about two months ago,”

Chris' eyes narrowed.

"Six? How many were used for our bomb?"

"Looks like two thirty pound LPG."

No-one needed Chris to elaborate further to understand the direction his thoughts were taking. How many more devices were out there?

"Nate, keep checking for any other reported thefts of LPG cylinders in the last three months. We might have a bigger problem on our hands than we thought."

Jackson nodded as Chris turned his attention to the youngest member of the team.

"JD. Anything?"

"I've traced Ezra's calls and his computer log for the past week. The night he was working late he'd been in contact with affiliate agencies in both Australia and France. He's logged as having net-conferenced with the guy in Australia five times in the last week. Buck's been following that up."

"And?"

The tired but still intense blue eyes focused on Wilmington.

"Nothing. Haven't been able to track down either one as yet. Talked to ASIO and the federal police in Australia but there's more red tape to get through there than we got stripes on the flag. I've got that Canadian guy, Matthieux, working the French angle, stands a better chance knowing the lingo."

"Keep at it, Buck if only to eliminate any connection but somehow I don't think this was aimed at Ezra. He just happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time."

Vin parked his lean frame on the corner of the desk Chris had appropriated.

"Got a point there, Chris. Hell, how many times would you find Ezra in the office at seven in the morning?"

The others nodded seeing the sense of it.

"Unless," mused Josiah slowly, "it was deliberately planned that way."

Chris shook his head.

"I just don't see it, Josiah. Ezra's not that predictable. Do we have anything on the timer or detonator yet?"

"The lab's working on everything that was recovered from the blast site," reported Nathan, "All we know is that it was Boiling Liquid Expanding Volume explosion; a fairly simple device using LPG and auto gas."

"Simple or not," retorted Chris sharply, "It fucking well blew the ass out of the building."

And almost killed Ezra.

He might as well have spoken the words aloud as every man picked up immediately on his thoughts but no-one wanted to venture into that territory. It was too close to home.

Jackson stood up breaking the suddenly fragile atmosphere.

"Mind if I go now, Chris. Lotta work to get through."

Chris waved his dismissal.

"Sure, there's nothing else doing here right now. Unless anybody else has something they want to add?"

No-one did. This kind of work never had quick answers. They could spend months tracking down minutiae that ultimately might lead nowhere but it had to be done because somewhere may be the missing piece of the puzzle that would shed some light on the case. And Larabee wanted this case solved. It had become personal -- for all of them.

One by one the team filed out until only Vin and Chris were left.

"Have you thought it could have been aimed at you?" ventured Vin finally.

"Sure I've thought about it," admitted the blond agent, "but I went in early on impulse. No one could have known I would be at the office at that time because I didn't know myself until I got out of bed."

"A random act of terrorism then?"

"I wish I knew, Vin. It worries me that no-one has claimed responsibility. Usually publicity is all part of the big plan if it's a terrorist thing. What scares me is that this might be one person with a personal grievance and I have a gut feeling that this might only be the beginning."

Vin stood up.

"I hope you're wrong Chris."

"So do I."

The younger man, a decade Larabee's junior, recognised the burden of responsibility weighing heavily on Chris. Although beyond his control he knew his friend was feeling guilt at Ezra's brush with death. He had not yet spoken of those hours spent trapped in the rubble with the injured Southerner and Vin was not sure than he ever would. Some things were never meant for sharing. Still, no man should have to shoulder the burden alone.

"You wanta come back to my place tonight, 'stead of driving out to the ranch? Got some beer in the fridge and I can maybe find somethin' to eat that isn't more than a week old."

Chris was forced to smile. He really didn't feel like going home. His knee hurt like a bitch and he knew he'd only wind up hitting the bottle if left to his own devices so it didn't take much consideration for him to accept.

"Why not? Only we'll call for take out on the way. I don't think I'm ready to add salmonella to my experiences for this week."

"It's a deal then. Be back to pick you up 'round five."

Tanner flashed him a rare smile and disappeared through the door.

Sighing Chris pulled himself back towards the desk and picked up the phone barely hesitating before dialling the number.

"Intensive Care Unit, please."

As promised, Vin was back at five and it was an indication of Chris' present state of mind that he was already waiting outside the agency's temporary home when the Jeep drew up in the parking lot. Vin hurriedly cleared the passenger seat, tossing the detritus into the back of the vehicle there to join the rest of the accumulated junk that Tanner ferried continually around in the battered Wrangler. Chris swung in beside Vin for once glad that there were no doors to get in the way as he lifted his injured leg into the vehicle.

"Okay, cowboy," grinned Tanner once he was settled, "What'll it be, Chinese or Mexican?"

Chris didn't even pause to consider.

"Mexican."

Vin nodded his approval.

"Sure thing. Found a new place just last week. Makes the best chili this side of the border." He accelerated out into the street and turned into the flow of traffic. "Gotta swing by the hospital and pick up Zoé first. Haven't seen her for more than ten minutes at a time in the last three days."

Chris shook his head then glanced at the lean Texan, a mischievous glint in his eye.

"You sure you want me to stay over, Vin?" he asked, cautiously, "Three days is a lot of making up to do."

Tanner flushed as Chris knew he would, a scowl settling across his tanned features.

"Aw, hell, Chris. Don't you start."

Vin and Zoé had been together for three months and during that time the intensely private Texan had done his best to avoid drawing too much attention to the relationship, managing admirably -- so Chris thought -- to maintain a level of professional discretion which had worked extremely well; except with his closest friends. And they had gone out of their collective way to embarrass him at every opportunity. Buck was particularly adept at making Vin blush, armed as he was with a full battery of sexual innuendo with which to attack the normally quiet Texan.

Larabee laughed softly at his closest friend's reaction.

"No, Vin. I mean it. Wouldn't want to cramp your style."

Tanner's scowl deepened.

"Don't matter none. Won't make a blind bit of difference to Zoé whether you're there or not!"

Chris had difficulty keeping the grin off his face. He had to admit that after a shaky start he had come to both like and admire the feisty English agent and if Vin hadn't staked a claim (or rather if Zoé hadn't staked her own claim on the marksman) then he might have been inclined to ...hell, who was he kidding? He would have had to stand in line behind Ezra and Buck first! Still, Vin could have done a lot worse for himself than Zoé Elliott.

"No, shit? Guess I'll just have to keep myself occupied then."

Vin sent a last penetrating glare in Larabee's direction and wordlessly focused on the road ahead deliberately ending that particular avenue of conversation.

Zoé was tired. She had spent seventy two hours at the hospital, sleeping little and eating less in her determination to stay with Ezra until he either woke up or...well, there was no need to go down that road now as he had finally rallied and was off the ventilator. She still hated to leave but common sense dictated that she should at least try to get back to a degree of normality. Nathan had offered to spend the evening with the undercover agent and she could find no valid reason to stay on. The thought of a long, hot bath, some food, bed and Vin -- not necessarily in that order -- suddenly became very tempting.

A piercing whistle snapped her out of her reverie and she wondered how she could have failed to hear the distinctive rumble of the Wrangler's engine as it approached. *I really must be tired.* Gathering her things together she crossed the parkway and added her own contribution to the growing pile behind Vin and Chris before unceremoniously climbing over the rear fender and settling in the back. Immediately she leaned over the front seats, draped one arm over each man's shoulder and quickly kissed them both.

"Hi, Chris. How are you? God, you look as knackered as I feel! Are you staying over? Of course you are. What's on the menu for tonight, Vin? 'Cos unless you've been to the store, and I bet you haven't, there's nothing in the place that's remotely edible. So it's take-away, yes?" She looked from one man to the other, neither of which had managed to utter a word and smiled. "Let's get going then. And Vin, don't forget we need to get some wine."

By six-thirty the three were back at Vin's utilitarian apartment in the *barrio*. Zoé's occasional tenancy had done nothing to alter its spartan identity as far as Chris could see and for that he was somewhat relieved; the idea of Tanner becoming domesticated didn't sit at all well with Larabee. Instead it appeared that Zoé was perfectly content with the arrangement as it stood and he wondered if Vin had found a true soul-mate or if the woman just tolerated the Texan's idiosyncrasies.

He sat down, gritting his teeth as he raised his now throbbing leg onto the sofa and stretched out the kinks in his back as he popped open a can of Bud.

"I'm getting way to old for all this shit."

"You say that every time you get beat up," replied Vin, reasonably as he dished up the food.

"That's 'cos there's nothing left that hasn't been busted," countered the older man, "I'm running out of options here."

Zoé leaned down as she passed the sofa sipping a glass of wine and gave him a quick hug.

"Never mind, Chris. As long as the important bits still work."

Chris coughed, choking mid-swallow on his beer, the sudden spasm causing havoc with his cracked ribs. He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and shot Zoé an accusatory glare that was offset by the briefest flicker of a smile that crossed his face.

"I plead the fifth."

Vin shook his head slowly at the interaction between the two people closest to him, satisfied that he had made the right decision in bringing Chris back to the apartment. The blond man was looking more relaxed already and he guessed that Zoé was deliberately working towards that very outcome. The Texan felt a stab of guilt that he was using the young Englishwoman to do what he could not; for while he recognised in Chris the need for solace he didn't feel that he was the one to offer it, knowing that if he tried Chris would immediately close down and retreat into his fearless leader mode. At least Zoé stood half a chance of getting him to offload some of the emotional baggage he was carrying around.

"Ezra asked about you today."

Vin almost dropped the carton in his hand. *Shit, Zoé, just go for the jugular why don't you?* There was no censure in her voice but the unspoken question hung in the air like a challenge: where were you?

“Nathan says he’s still pretty out of it.”

She nodded in agreement.

“The morphine makes him a bit crazy and he talks a lot.”

Chris snorted.

“Wouldn’t be Ezra if he didn’t.”

“But, Chris, it’s you he needs to talk to.” She raised her eyes to look at Chris over the rim of her wineglass. “Something about following him into hell.”

Seeing Chris pale visibly and promptly set about disposing of the remainder of his beer, Vin intervened.

“Okay, folks. Let’s eat. Food’s gettin’ cold.”

He exchanged a quick glance with Zoé and shook his head almost imperceptibly. *Let it go.*

Zoé stood up and crossed behind the lean Texan, enjoying his discomfiture when she slid a slim hand first across his backside and then between his thighs as she leaned to whisper in his ear.

“You’ll pay for this later, cowboy.”

He handed her a plate of food, deftly evading her wandering hands.

“Oh, I’m sure I will.”

Chris was not totally drunk in spite of craving the oblivion that total inebriation would inevitably bring but he had sunk enough beer and bourbon to induce a serious alteration in mood. While he had learned from past experience that getting smashed did nothing to solve a problem he could at least take comfort in the knowledge that it had the power to chase it far enough into the shadows to make it go away for at least a brief time. Only this time it was not going away. Every waking moment -- and most of his sleeping ones -- he relived the horror of the aftermath of the explosion, haunted by Ezra’s stoic endurance, his own inadequacies and the reality of their own private hell on earth. In his worst nightmares it was him, not Ezra, who was trapped and on those occasions he woke in a lather of sweat, certain that his own screaming had awakened him.

He reached again for the bottle of whiskey only to have it nimbly removed from his grasp.

“I think that’s enough, Chris. It’s getting late.”

Chris aimed his still-impressive glare at the woman giving her the benefit of both barrels loaded, cocked and ready to fire.

“Fuck it, Zoé,” he snarled irritably, “Can’t you let a man alone to drink in peace.”

“You know you’re a mean drunk, Larabee?” Vin’s quiet voice cut through the alcoholic haze. “And I reckon it’s time for you to sleep it off. Now get your sorry ass moving.”

Chris found himself hauled to his feet, the wiry strength of the Texan never failing to surprise him and, chastised by the tone of sad disappointment in Vin’s voice, he dutifully stumbled beside the younger man. Zoé’s voice followed them into the bathroom.

“Put him in our bed, Vin. I’ll make up the fold-out.”

Larabee hung over the sink and doused his head under the tap.

“Shit, Vin. I’m sorry.”

Tanner closed the door and leaned against the wall watching his friend, wanting to understand but not completely sure what was going down with the older man or indeed what he could do to help.

“Somethin’ you want to talk about, pard?”

Chris ran a hand through his dripping hair and over his face.

“Don’t know that I can put it into words, Vin.”

“Try.”

Vin was not sure if open confrontation was the way to go, in fact he might wind up on the wrong end of Larabee’s fist especially in his current mood but something told him he had to take action now before Chris lost control altogether.

Larabee’s shoulders slumped and he leaned heavily on the rim of the hand basin.

“You ever see that movie “Groundhog Day”? The one where the guy keeps gettin’ up in the morning and living the same day over and over again?”

“I know the one,” confirmed Vin.

“Well, that’s what it’s like for me, you know. It’s gonna be May sixteenth every day for the rest of my life! It’s like a bad movie and every time I see it Ezra dies again.”

Tanner was lost for words. He couldn’t begin to imagine what Chris was going through. He still hadn’t spoken to anyone about the experience and Vin wondered if a visit to the agency psychiatrist might not be in order, although he was not about to risk his life by suggesting it. That was something he’d hand over to Nathan.

He moved a step forward, hesitated, then continued on and grasped Larabee’s shoulder in a firm grip.

“Whatever happened, it’s over. Ezra’s okay.”

Chris swung his head up and Vin was struck by the utter desolation written on his face.

“No, Vin. It’s not over. Not for Ezra, and not for me.”

Zoé and Vin lay entwined, still breathing deeply from their exertions, each comforted by the tactile sensation of skin against skin; reluctant to break contact, each wanting -- needing -- the other. They had gone through the motions of making love but both had been distracted and the act had been purely physical. Now Zoé lifted her head and looked down into Vin’s troubled blue eyes.

“You’re worried about Chris.”

“Was it that obvious?”

She smiled gently and nestled back into the Texan’s shoulder.

“It wasn’t a criticism.”

Vin rhythmically stroked along the curve of her back.

"Has Ezra said much to you? You know, about what it was like."

"Being trapped you mean? Not really. I think he has a hard time remembering anything right now."

"He might be the lucky one then."

"It's a defence mechanism. Certainly a recognised phenomenon," she explained, "Like childbirth. Women forget the experience to enable them to go through it again."

Zoé stirred again, and rolled on top of the Texan's lean but muscular frame to look directly into Vin's eyes. Vin laughed.

"What do you know about childbirth?"

"Nothing," she whispered, nibbling his earlobe, "but I'm hoping to find out. That's why I need to practice so much."

For several minutes Vin's attention was diverted until he managed to focus his thoughts again.

"Zoé, what's that syndrome that soldier's get?"

"Post-traumatic stress syndrome?" She paused, making the connection. "Chris?"

"Just a thought." Vin sounded guilty at having suggested it.

"We'll talk to Nathan tomorrow, okay." She looked up at the bedroom door. "He'll be okay for tonight at least. I hope."

There was no night here. Ezra had come to that conclusion when every time he opened his eyes it was light. Constant, artificial light. Time had ceased to have any real meaning for him and he never really knew, or cared to know, the precise hour. He did know that every two hours, or to be exact twelve times in every twenty-four hours he was repositioned -- a medical euphemism he had decided for maximum infliction of pain in the shortest possible time. No matter that this exercise in relieving pressure on certain parts of his anatomy was designed to prevent the development of bed sores, it was torture while it lasted. Every four hours he was given morphine, which compensated somewhat for the periods of torture but he didn't care for the odds of one shot of painkiller for every two repositioning sessions. To be truthful he didn't care for any aspect of his confinement. He abhorred the indignity of hospitalisation at the best of times and this was most definitely not the best of times.

"You with me, Ez? It's Nate."

Ezra opened his eyes a fraction at the familiar voice.

"Why, Dr. Jackson. I do believe I owe you my thanks."

Nathan gestured dismissively.

"How're you doing?"

"I thought you were going to tell me being a man of the medical persuasion and all but if you are merely attempting to ascertain my own opinion, in layman's terms I feel as if a building fell on me."

Nathan laughed and pulled up a chair.

“Ezra! If you can manage to string together a sentence like that without choking you must be feeling a whole lot better.”

The Southerner moved his shoulders slightly, getting comfortable.

“Ah, Dr. Jackson, behold the wonders of narcotics.”

Jackson smiled and flipped through the chart of medical orders.

“Geez, Ezra, they’ve got you so juiced up it’s a wonder you’re not flying.”

“Believe me, Nathan, if I were able to perform such a feat of aviation I can guarantee that I would be flying right out of here and into my own delightfully civilised feather bed.”

Nathan put away the chart and looked instead at the undercover agent, understanding in his eyes.

“You’re a lucky man, Ezra.”

The green-eyed man grinned.

“I don’t know about that, Nathan. If I was truly lucky I would have been outside the building when the bomb went off.”

“You’ve got a point there, Ezra. But better some luck than no luck at all right?”

“I’ll take what I can get and that’s the truth but not to put too fine a point on it, it’s a fucking miracle that we weren’t both squashed like bugs. How’s Chris?”

“Working too hard,” replied Nathan, “I guess he’s still a little strung out himself.”

“Tell him I’d like to talk to him, Nathan.” Ezra’s voice became serious and he reached out to emphasise his words by grasping Jackson’s arm. “There are a few things I need to...to clear up.”

“You got it.”

“Now,” continued the Southerner, his tone changing again, “as my medical advisor and close friend, would you mind telling me exactly what’s wrong with me?”

“You busted up your pelvis and both legs but with a few plates, screws, nails and wires you’re all back together again and I don’t think we lost any pieces along the way.”

“And?” prompted the injured man, although he was starting to visibly tire from his lengthy conversation.

“When that beam hit you across the pelvis it caused what we call an open book,” he demonstrated with his hands, imitating the opening of a closed book, “the pelvis fractured in several places and caused some internal damage. A piece of bone lacerated the bladder and you also had a urethral tear. Lost a lot of blood too.”

Ezra nodded understanding why the area between his waist and his knees felt as if everything had been rearranged -- badly.

“Thanks, Nathan.”

Jackson gave his shoulder a reassuring squeeze, feeling slightly guilty that he hadn’t had the courage to tell him that 70% of men who sustained urethral damage from a pelvic fracture were left impotent. He had enough to worry about without dumping that on him just yet.

“You might not think it, Ezra but by the end of the week they’ll have you on your feet and weight-bearing.”

The Southerner had closed his eyes again.

“Of course, Nathan,” he murmured patronisingly, “About the same time that I fly out of here I suppose.”

Shaking his head and smiling, Jackson withdrew a paperback novel from his pocket and sat back to read. This was going to be a long night.

Chris knew it was late as soon as he opened his eyes. A glance at the clock confirmed it: nine-thirty. Goddamn Vin! Throwing aside the bedcovers he hurriedly scrambled to find his clothes and promptly found himself on the floor as injured his leg gave way beneath him. For a moment the intensity of the pain took his breath away and he rolled helplessly clutching his knee, managing only to utter a string of profanity through clenched teeth.

“Chris?”

He looked up, blinking to clear his vision. Zoé. Great! Where the hell was Vin? He struggled to get up conscious of the fact that he was clad only in his shorts and feeling incredibly foolish that he was rolling around on the floor in front of her.

“Where’s Vin?” he snapped, still holding his knee, but succeeding finally in achieving an upright position with his back against the bed.

Elliott, dressed more formally than he had seen in a while -- plum business suit and black heels -- moved forward and leaned down to assist him but he impatiently shrugged her hand off his arm.

“I said, where’s Vin?” The snarl was almost animal in its ferocity.

Zoé’s first instinct was to back off in response to the violent outburst but she steeled herself and tried again.

“He’s not here. Come on, let me help you up.”

“Damn you, woman!” This time it was a roar and he easily pushed her aside with a sweep of his arm. “I don’t need any help!”

In regaining her balance she took a step back, her own anger suddenly flaring and over-riding any sympathy she felt for his predicament.

“Well, fuck you too, Chris. If that’s how you feel then find your own damned way to work. Maybe I’ll see you later if you ever manage to get up off the floor!”

The bedroom door slammed behind her as she stormed out, her high heels rapping out a tattoo on the wooden boards, almost immediately followed by the equally forceful and very final bang of the front door as she left the apartment.

Larabee swore in frustration, and hauled himself onto the edge of the bed, annoyed with himself as much as Zoé. *Dammit, why couldn’t everyone just leave him alone?* He ran his hands through his hair, anger and remorse flooding through him in equal measure. *Good move, Larabee. Take it out on your best friends why don’t you? Still, you always were good at that.* Snatching up the soft splint lying with his clothes, he secured it savagely around the offending joint and almost welcomed the stab of pain the abrupt action elicited.

He limped to the bathroom and turned on the shower, deliberately avoiding looking at his reflection in the mirror; he was already familiar with the man who was going to be looking back at him and it was someone he didn't care much to meet right now. *Geez, Larabee, if you can't even stand yourself, how'd you expect anyone else to put up with you?*

Zoé found herself standing on the sidewalk outside the apartment block, still seething and quietly wishing all the torments of hell on her illustrious leader as she struggled to regain some composure. Several passers-by had already paused to give her a second glance and in this neighbourhood that in itself was a rarity. *God, men could be pathetic!* Not only did he have the audacity to get drunk, appropriate the bed (*be fair Zoé, the bed was your idea -- okay strike the bed*) and wake up mean but he also had the cheek to yell at her when she offered to help. *Bastard!* She dug into her purse for the keys to the Jeep. *Serve him right if he had to spend the day on the floor.* Vin had taken the Harley so that she and Chris would have transport; well, Mr. Larabee could walk every inch of the way as far as she was concerned. Better still crawl. *Asshole!* She searched again through the small leather bag and realised that she had left the apartment in such furious haste that the keys still sat on the table. *Great!* Now she'd have to spoil the whole effect by going back. She sighed, some of her initial anger already starting to dissipate and slowly retraced her steps. *Okay Mr. Larabee, here I come, ready or not.*

The Englishwoman quietly let herself back into the apartment, thankful that the car keys were on a separate chain to her house keys. The indignity of having to summon an already irritated Chris to answer the door would have been too awful to contemplate, in fact with any luck she could grab the keys and leave. She paused, her hand poised over Vin's keys then abruptly stopped and instead dumped her purse on the table. *For God's sake Zoé stop being such a bitch.*

In any case she could make some coffee and maintain a veneer of civilised behaviour even if she did feel that any exhibition of good manners would be like casting pearls before swine then she reminded herself that just because Chris was pissed didn't mean she had to be. The fact that she could hear the sound of water running in the shower suggested that at least Chris had managed to finally get himself off the floor although she did wonder if his mood had improved at all in the last fifteen minutes or so. Taking off her jacket she began measuring out the coffee.

"Chris?"

Zoé was starting to worry. By her estimation the shower had been running for a good twenty five minutes and by now she knew all the hot water would have gone. Half the time she stayed at Vin's they showered together for that very reason. She knocked on the door again.

"Chris? Are you okay?" She gnawed on her lip trying to decide on her best course of action. What if he just happened to like long, cold showers.

"Chris, you're scaring me. If you don't answer I'm coming in." After a moment's hesitation she pushed the door open and prayed she wasn't making a mistake. Hell, how bad could it be if she was wrong? Had anyone actually ever died of embarrassment?

The room was cold, the shower blasting full force sending sparkling droplets against the frosted glass. Her eye travelled quickly around the small space; the enclosed shower stall was the only place he could possibly be but...she dropped her gaze and, suddenly afraid of what she would find, slowly pulled aside the glass door. Chris huddled defensively in the corner of the shower, arms wrapped tightly around his knees, head hanging forward as the water cascaded from his hair, and shivering. Violent, jerking muscle spasms as his body tried unsuccessfully to warm itself. For a split second she was too shocked to move then:

"Jesus, Chris!"

Turning the water off she grabbed a bath towel and kicking off her shoes stepped into the small cubicle. Slowly, he raised his head and she saw nothing but haunted confusion in his eyes. Under her fingers his skin felt like marble, frigid and unyielding, as she grasped his arm, urging him to get up.

“Chris, it’s me. Zoé. I need you to stand up.”

She hoped to God that he could. There was no way she had any hope of getting his six foot frame out of the shower unless he could do it under his own steam. Very slowly, stiffly, but without protest he started to unfold at her bidding. Trying to ignore the startlingly obvious fact of his nakedness she quickly secured the thick towel around his waist and slid under his arm to support his sagging weight.

“I hope you know this is really pushing the friendship, Larabee,” she muttered as the two of them stumbled out into the bedroom.

Breathing heavily she guided him to the divan and sat him down, hurriedly stripping the blanket from the bed and wrapping it around his shoulders before snatching up the bedside phone and rapidly dialling, impatiently waiting for the pick up on the other end.

“Vin? You need to come home. Now. And bring Nathan.”

Tanner didn’t wait for the elevator. Instead he took the stairs two at a time confident that Nathan would be close behind him. He knew he had made better time than Jackson, ignoring speed restrictions and using the Harley’s superior manoeuvrability to plough through the still heavy mid-morning traffic. He had responded to Zoé’s phone call without hesitation trusting that her reasons for the abrupt summons were sound but almost fearful of what had gone unsaid. It could only be something going down with Chris, nothing else made any sense. His heart hammered in his chest as much from the adrenaline still surging through his system as the physical exertion of charging up five flights of stairs and he paused a moment to catch his breath before unlocking the apartment door.

He wasn’t sure what he had expected to find but the living room looked exactly as he had left it several hours earlier. The smell of freshly brewed coffee filled the small apartment and two pristine cups sat on the counter, a picture of tranquil domesticity. Vin was suddenly doubtful about the urgency of the situation yet was unable to put out of his mind the intensity of those few words uttered over the phone.

“Zoé? Chris?”

He crossed the polished wooden floor and paused at the bedroom door, his breath catching in his throat. Whatever he had anticipated he was not prepared for this particular sight and a hard knot of resentment forming in his gut succeeded in driving out all other emotions. The bedroom was a disaster area. Clothing, bedding, towels - all discarded on the floor but while his mind registered the minute details his eye was unable to see beyond the two figures conjoined on the bed. Zoé, shoeless and dishevelled, her rumpled blouse sticking damply to her skin relaxed against the headboard while Chris, sleeping (*spent?*), lay with his head in her lap, one arm thrown around her waist and his body curved intimately into hers while she held him tightly in her arms, rocking gently.

“What the f...?”

Zoé held up a hand and shook her head in a warning gesture. *Not now.* Vin, silenced, took a step forward, struggling to make sense of the scene, trying to make two and two add up to anything but four and failing miserably. Why Chris?

“Is Nathan coming?” The voice was soft but sufficient to halt the tumultuous flow of his thoughts.

Nathan? Of course. Vin guiltily cursed himself as understanding dawned and he saw the tableau in a subtly different light. *Jesus Vin, get your brains out of your dick and start thinking like a federal agent!*

Moving quickly, ashamed now of his initial hasty conclusion, he crouched beside the bed wondering if Zoé had read that split second of doubt in his eyes.

“What the hell happened here?” he whispered, “Are you okay?”

She nodded and looked up, relief evident on her face as Jackson finally strode into the room.

“You know, Vin, I reckon you broke at least four different city ordinances and who knows how many moving violations you clocked up, in that wild ride. Wonder you’re still alive, boy.” He quickly surveyed the room as he talked then joined Tanner at the bedside, concern etched on his dark features as he laid hands on the too cold skin of the unresponsive blond man.

He looked up at Zoé, the unspoken question in his warm brown eyes and she smiled softly already knowing what both their first thoughts had been.

“No, he didn’t hurt me.” She stroked the damp blond hair sadly. “He’s the one who’s hurting.”

The three of them sat around the table and drank Vin’s coffee - so strong that neither Nathan nor Zoé believed they would be able to sleep for a week but grateful anyway for the caffeine boost. A few feet away a sedated Chris slept cocooned in multiple layers of wool and feathers on the pull-out sofa, his body temperature finally registering close to normal.

“So what happened, Nathan?”

“I’m no psychologist, Vin, but I think you were pretty close to the mark with your idea of post-traumatic stress. There’s nothing I can find physically wrong other than the fact that he nearly froze his ass off. My guess is that maybe he hasn’t been sleeping too well and from what he said to you that he’s got a few demons lurking around. He’s been pushing hard on this investigation too so I guess something had to give.”

“Hell, Nathan,” exploded Tanner, “Chris is a veteran; ex-navy, seen combat; been shot, beaten up, stabbed and Christ knows what else, are you gonna tell me now that he’s got the jitters from a bomb blast that barely ruffled his hair?”

Nathan looked into his coffee cup as if the answer would miraculously appear to him from its liquid depths.

“I don’t think this is just about Chris, I think this has a lot to do with what happened to Ezra,” he ventured finally, “although it beats me why. Did he say anything to you at all, Zoé?”

The woman shook her head.

“He kept saying he was sorry and looked as if he was going to cry, then finally he stopped talking altogether and I just held onto him.” She raised her eyes to look at Vin, daring him to break eye contact. “And,” she added, “I can assure you that having a cold, wet, naked man lying next to you is not to be recommended, especially when he’s your boss.”

Vin winced, knowing he was going to pay for thinking the worst not only of his best friend but also by inference, Zoé. Hell, what else was he supposed to think finding Chris all over her like that? He turned back to Nathan.

“So what now?”

“First up he needs sleep and lots of it. Y’all don’t mind if he stays here do you? I really don’t think hospital is an option, it would just add to whatever stress he’s already under.”

“Zoé?”

She looked across at the peacefully sleeping agent.

“I don’t think he’s in any shape to go anywhere right now but it’s your apartment, Vin.”

Nathan quickly looked from Zoé to Vin and back, aware of the tension building between the couple.

“Vin?”

The Texan nodded.

“No problem, Nate, but what about when he wakes up again.”

“He’ll be out of it the rest of the day. Just make sure he stays warm. I’ll come back around six and check up on him then. You need me before that, call.”

“Sure. Thanks, Nathan.”

The tall doctor let himself out and a strained silence filled the small apartment. Vin searched for answers in his coffee cup much as Nathan had done but finding no help finally looked up.

“What was all that about?”

Zoé pushed herself away from the table and stood up, pulling her ruined blouse out of her skirt.

“All what?”

“The ‘it’s your apartment Vin’ crap.”

“Well, it is.” She peeled off the wet garment. “I didn’t want to speak for you.”

He snorted and muttered quietly.

“Right! That’d be a first.”

Ignoring the barb she disappeared into the bedroom and came back several minutes later dressed in an oversize t-shirt having given up on any idea of getting to work. She paused and sat down on the arm of the sofa leaning across to pull the covers back over Chris’ shoulder. After a few moments she spoke.

“Why don’t you just ask me, instead of wondering?”

Tanner guiltily met her eyes.

“Ask you what?”

She laughed then. Not a pleasant sound.

“You’re wondering whether I’d sleep with Chris.”

Vin rose abruptly and walked into the small kitchenette.

“You’re crazy.”

“No, I’m not.” Zoé got up and moved behind him. “In your mind I already have.”

The Texan sighed and turned to face her.

“Zoé...”

“Tell me I’m wrong,” she interrupted her voice brittle, “I saw it in your eyes the minute you walked through that door.”

“What do you want me to say? Sorry?”

“He’s your best friend, Vin.” The quiet censure in her voice struck him like a slap in the face.

As she turned to walk away, he captured her arm.

“I thought...” His voice faltered, “I thought he’d hurt you.”

She pulled out of his grip.

“No, Vin. You did that.”

He tried again.

“Zoé, I’m sorry.”

“So am I.”

Few people ever saw Buck Wilmington lose his cool. The easygoing ladies’ man generally managing to overcome most hurdles through his innate good humour but even Buck’s affable nature could be taxed beyond endurance.

The mustached agent rounded on Jackson the minute he stepped through the door and into the team’s temporary home.

“Where the hell have you been? And where’s Vin? In fact where’s my entire fucking team?” He slammed a file down on his desk. “Chris doesn’t show, Zoé doesn’t show but what the hell she hasn’t been around all week anyway, Ezra’s out of the picture, then you and Vin just take off without a word for a couple hours in the middle of the day...tell me just how I’m supposed to run this frigging operation WITH THREE MEN!”

Nathan allowed the man’s anger to wash over him, knowing that Buck was not targeting him personally but understandably venting his frustration on the nearest available live body. JD had obviously picked up on the impending explosion and removed himself from the scene as the office was empty although Dunne’s computer terminal was still active. The boy was learning.

“Life’s sure a bitch ain’t it, Buck.”

Buck bristled, fuming, then caught the smile on Jackson’s face and his temper faded as rapidly as it had flared.

“Sorry, Nate. Just mouthing off again but right now I reckon I’m having about as much success as a one legged man in a butt kicking contest.” He paced restlessly, his temper having cooled but his agitation unabated. “What the hell is going on here Nathan?”

Jackson unbuttoned his jacket and leaned back in the chair.

“Chris is out of the equation for a while, Buck.”

Wilmington's pacing stopped abruptly and his head came up like a hound on the scent but before he could even speak Nathan pre-empted his next question.

"Chris had an...episode this morning; a stress related collapse for want of a better definition. That's why Vin and me took off like bats out of hell."

Buck's expression was a mixture of concern and confusion.

"What do you mean, stress related collapse? Is he okay?"

Nathan leaned forward again keeping his voice low.

"Let's just keep it in the team for now, huh? I'm putting him down for a week's sick time; he's earned it."

Buck allowed the words and the implications to sink in.

"You telling me Chris has gone loco?"

He was familiar enough with Chris and his past to know how badly the man could come unstuck if the right buttons were pushed and he recalled with a sense of dread the aftermath of Chris' attempt to deal with the loss of his wife and son.

"Just listen up, Buck! Chris needs a rest, okay? Don't go reading anything more into this than there is. The guy's been through a tough time but as usual doesn't know when to call it quits. Well, his body has just given him a very clear message that it's time to take a break."

Wilmington nodded slowly.

"Know what you mean, Nate, he's been strung out to the max for the last coupla days. So what happened?"

"Chris was staying over at Vin's, they had dinner, Chris hit the bottle a little too hard. Nothing too unusual. This morning Vin came to work leaving Chris to sleep it off with the idea that Zoé would come in with him later. Seems he woke up angry, took it out on Zoé and they had an argument. She was pissed with him and left him to cool off intending to come in to the office but forgot the keys to the Jeep. When she got back, Chris was in the shower."

Buck shook his head, not understanding.

"So? What's new about Chris being pissed? That man's got the disposition of a grizzly even when he's sober."

"Zoé finally guessed something was wrong when he didn't come out and found him sitting under a freezing shower almost catatonic not to mention hypothermic."

"Jesus!"

"And that's where Vin and I came into the picture."

Buck ran his hands through his hair then drew a hand down over his face.

"Nathan, did one of us kill a Chinaman or something?"

The ringing of the phone interrupted any further potential discussion of karmic law as Buck snatched up the receiver.

"Wilmington."

The big man listened for a long moment, then grimly replaced the receiver.

“There’s been another explosion.”

The expression on his face prompted the question that Nathan wasn’t sure he wanted answered.

“Where?”

“The *barrio*. Purgatorio.”

Vin did not follow. The bedroom door closed behind Zoé with a quiet finality that he found he didn’t have the nerve to challenge. His first instinct was to leave, indignant anger vying with hurt outrage for dominance, but even as his fingers closed around the door handle he knew it would be a mistake. *Bad move, Vin.* He hesitated, finding among the maelstrom of his emotions just as many reasons to leave as to stay but realising in a moment of absolute clarity that if he walked away now, he could never hope to find his way back. The question was did he want to?

The sleeping figure stirred, shifting restlessly beneath the covers and the agitated movements drew Vin to the man’s side, his concern immediately erasing any thought of imminent departure. The Texan watched over the blond agent for several minutes as he fretted and muttered, relieved when he finally settled and became still again. Looking down at the familiar face, for once lacking the usual intensity of expression, he wondered how Chris would feel about his blundering misinterpretation of the bedroom incident. Disappointed? Angry? Amused? Flattered? *Hey, cowboy. Wanna help me out here seeing it’s partly your fault I’m in deep shit?* Vin sighed and chewed thoughtfully on his lip. *Hell! Why did Zoé have to make it so hard? What did she want from him - blood?* He looked up towards the bedroom. Your move Tanner.

The door yielded, swinging open smoothly under the pressure of his hand and he released the breath he didn’t realise he had been holding. The room looked the same; floor dotted with puddles of water; wet towels and clothing strewn across the bare boards; bed linen dragging on the floor and the still damp imprint of Chris’ body on the bed. Zoé had changed into jeans and was just tying the laces on her running shoes. *Leaving?* Her expression as she met his eyes showed no emotion but the rigid set of her shoulders hinted at her state of mind. Anger he was prepared for but this study in composed determination unnerved him.

“Can we talk?”

She flicked her hair back with a toss of her head then after a brief hesitation nodded and sat down on the foot of the bed. He took the gesture as a tacit invitation and moved to sit alongside her, not touching, the six-inch gap between them feeling a mile wide.

“This is so dumb, Zoé,” he sighed, eventually finding the words. “You know how I feel about you.”

“I thought I did.”

“Nothing’s changed,” he persisted, “How could it?”

“I want to believe that, Vin and I know you do believe it. It’s just a part of me that’s wondering whether I mean any more to you than a convenient lay.”

Her words sliced through his already abused emotions like a razor and his temper flared, propelling him to his feet in an uncharacteristic display of anger.

“For God’s sake, Zoé! Give me a break.” His voice cracked like a whip. “You want to crucify me because I made a mistake? Yes, I admit I made a bad call. Yes, I was wrong. So I’m an insensitive bastard.

What is it you want from me? What will it take for you to forgive? Do you need to see me bleed before you can find one shred of compassion?"

He stopped then, shoulders slumped, his hands dropping to his sides almost in a gesture of defeat and his face an open book of the combined hurt and indecision raging through him.

"I thought I knew you, Zoé, but now I'm not sure I ever knew you at all." His voice was quiet; the anger gone. "And if you can't accept me as I am, with all my faults and insecurities then I don't think I want to. I just can't live up to your expectations of me."

The Texan turned sharply and strode out of the room; the brief silence that followed punctuated by the forceful slamming of the front door for the second time that morning.

Vin couldn't decide if he was more angry at Zoé for being so totally unreasonable - *what did you expect, Cowboy?* -- or himself for losing his cool -- *jerk!* He stood outside the apartment block suddenly at a loss as to what his next move should be. Talk about burning your bridges. *Smart move, Tanner, it's your apartment; you gotta go back sometime.*

"Hola, Señor Vin. You not at work today?"

The Texan looked down at the young Latino who had approached and smiled in spite of his inner turmoil, crouching to stroke the kid's shaggy dog, a mutt of indeterminate geneology. Manolito Mendez. One of the kids he had taken under his wing.

"Hey, Mano. Shouldn't you be in school?"

He shrugged and dismissed the question with typical twelve year old logic.

"Been twice this week already. You got that baseball mitt for me yet?"

Vin shook his head and stood up remembering how much simpler life was as a kid; cutting school to play ball had been one of his own junior vices. He knew a lecture would be pointless so gave the kid a high five instead.

"Come on. It's in the Jeep."

The kid jogged on ahead of the ATF agent fully aware of where the Jeep was parked. It was a point of honour among the barrio kids that Tanner's vehicle was kept safe through their combined vigilance. Not once had Vin's Jeep or indeed any of his belongings been stolen or vandalised for which the Texan was eternally grateful. This was neighbourhood policing with a vengeance. Mano's dog, fully conversant with the drill ran on point, flag waving like a banner as he anticipated a gustatory treat. Vin always had something edible secreted among the junk in the back of his car and the mutt was never afraid to search out the loot for himself.

Tanner looked at his watch and hesitated in front of the convenience store debating whether to stop for a carbohydrate fix. His stomach was growling and he felt slightly nauseous although he had no doubts that could just as easily be from his emotional state as from hunger. Seeing boy and dog almost at the Jeep he changed his mind and started to walk forward again.

Penareathirite terninitrate. The simplest and crudest of military raw grade explosives. But with the addition of a detonation device and a pressure switch, a very efficient bomb. Nothing too sophisticated, just enough to blow a man and a car into oblivion. Maybe a few bystanders if anyone was unlucky to be too close to the unfortunate victim but generally a very personal -- and effective, if indiscriminate -- device.

The Texan saw the shaggy animal leap into the front seat of the Jeep and the blinding flash that immediately followed, then he was hurled twenty feet into the air before connecting with the wall behind him and slamming against the footpath in a bone jarring fall which drove the breath from his lungs and sent a kaleidoscope of colours spinning before his eyes. Someone was screaming and as his vision faded first to grey then black he felt unseen hands touching him, helping. Then came the pain.

Zoé started to pick up the bedding from the floor and stuff it in the laundry hamper. *Well, you did it. You finally found the limits of his patience.* She gathered the wet towels and threw them in the hamper after the sheets. *He could at least have put up more of a fight.* Chris' clothes still lay strewn untidily between chair and bed and she stooped to pick them up and fold them. *So why'd you have to be such a bitch?* Looking at the shirt, she reconsidered and tossed that into the laundry hamper too. *Because he was being a bastard, thats why!* Retrieving a semi-dry towel from the bed she knelt to mop up some of the water still lying in puddles on the floor. *Come on, be fair, he's a man.* Zoé moved systematically around the room clearing away all evidence of the morning's debacle until the room had been restored to a pristine neatness that it had rarely seen before. She smiled briefly; neither she nor Vin were particularly fussed about keeping the place tidy when there were more important things to be done in the bedroom. Her smile faded again. *Is there a me and Vin anymore?* With a sigh she glanced around the room. The bed would have to wait to be made up. It was still wet. *Better check on Chris.*

He had pushed the layers of blankets aside that covered his chest as his temperature rose and she could see the fine sheen of perspiration on his upper body. Although Nathan had left no instructions except to keep Chris warm she assumed that overheating the guy wasn't on the agenda either. Folding down two of the blankets she pulled the feather quilt back up and tucked it around the sleeping man's shoulders. With a sigh she sat down on the edge of the fold out frame, reaching out a hand to move a lock of hair from across his face. *Oh, Chris. What have you done? What have I done?*

The apartment rocked, a brief shock wave that rattled the windows and sent Zoé's heart into her mouth, and her brain racing as she identified the muffled report of an explosion from the street. Close. How close? Chris jerked, a spasm that shook his entire body and when Zoé looked his eyes were open; wide and staring but unseeing. His hands gripped the covers and he lay rigid, his gaze locked in the far distance far beyond even the walls of the apartment. She launched herself from the low bed and hurried to the window, automatically scanning the street below for any sign of Vin. She could see the Harley still parked on the footpath immediately in front of block. *Where are you Tanner?* The blast alarmed her more than she wanted to admit for while violence was a part of life in Purgatorio but she did not believe explosions were any part of the norm even here. She looked back at Chris who had made no further movement and threw open the window. The noise assaulted her eardrums as she worked at separating the sounds of women screaming and men shouting; a babel of several different languages from which she could gain no coherent meaning except that there were some casualties then above everything she heard the word "*muerto*" and someone was calling for an ambulance. Leaning out she tried to see where the blast had been centred. *Shit! Too many people.* Through the noise -- she was certain the entire *barrio* had descended on the scene -- she could already hear the wail of sirens and once again she scanned the street hoping for a glimpse of Vin. Of course he would be there. Her eye travelled along the row of parked cars and with a dawning sense of dread she finally understood the awful reality. The blast had been a car bomb. Only her years of training kept a lid on the rampant speculation that threatened to overwhelm her. The deep-seated fear that she knew exactly which vehicle had been targeted was only fuelled by the knowledge that the reason Ezra still lay in intensive care and Chris was currently sedated right in the very room in which she stood was because of a similar bomb. *Not the Jeep. Please not the Jeep. Not Vin.* But she knew that the activity in the street below was focused on the spot where Vin had parked the Wrangler the night before. *Was it only last night that they had all come home together for a few beers and a meal? Just where had it all gone wrong?*

She snatched up the cell phone from the table and once again sat by Chris as she dialled. Anxiously waiting for a response she unconsciously covered Chris' hand with her own. He started as she touched him and she could feel the fine tremor vibrating through his body as she held onto his hand, and wondered if the contact was for truly his benefit or hers. The phone rang out and she tried again telling herself that it meant nothing; once he saw it was her calling he probably wouldn't answer it anyway. She

couldn't blame him for that. Damn caller ID! The phone rang out a second time and she barely paused before keying in a new number.

Nathan answered on the second ring.

"Jackson."

"Nathan, it's Zoé. All hell's broken loose here right on the street. Looks like a car bomb." In spite of her attempt at impartial professionalism she found that her voice was shaking.

"We're on our way. Buck was just trying to call you. Where's Vin? We haven't been able to raise him."

Her throat constricted and she found she couldn't answer immediately, terrified by the implication.

"Zoé? You still there? I said where's Vin?"

"I don't know." She paused not sure if she could get out the next part. "He left and Nathan, I think the bomb was in the Jeep."

For the space of a dozen heartbeats Nathan was silent then she heard.

"We'll be there in five."

In the speeding SUV, Nathan glanced at Buck. The mustached agent didn't turn in the doctor's direction, his eye never leaving the road as he threaded his way deftly through the traffic.

"I don't want to hear this do I?"

"Zoé thinks it was Vin's Jeep that was targeted."

"Shit! Is she sure or does she just have the jitters?"

"I don't know."

"Vin?"

She doesn't know where he is."

Buck contained himself with difficulty, a multitude of equally disturbing alternatives coming to mind.

"I though you said they were both with Chris."

Nathan shrugged.

"They were. But Vin left."

Wilmington finally took his eyes off the road picking up the uncertainty in Jackson's voice.

"Anything you want to share with me, Nate?"

"A feelin' that's all. Somethin's going down with those two."

"Great! Just great! Vin had better have a damn good excuse as to why he's not answering his phone that doesn't have anything to do with the fact that he's pissed at his little lady!"

Buck drove the SUV as close to the milling crowd as he could, parking behind two fire trucks, an ambulance and three black and whites. He got out of the vehicle and shrugged into the jacket that identified him as ATF trying to ignore the nagging doubt that the reason Tanner was not responding to calls was that he really had no choice in the matter.

Fuck that hurts! He came to a rapid decision that his best option was not to move any part of him, which would have worked admirably except he couldn't stop himself breathing and at that moment it was this most basic of involuntary actions that was causing him the most pain. He coughed wetly, unable to suppress the urge any longer, and almost passed out from the searing pain that tore through his chest. His mouth filled with blood and he spat, needing no medical opinion to tell him that he had punctured a lung. *Not good, Tanner.* He moaned aloud as someone eased him into a sitting position and he peered through unfocused eyes at what he hoped was an EMT, not relishing the idea of drowning in his own blood because some good samaritan decided to get in on the act. It registered in his still reeling brain that someone was instructing him not to cough. *Yeah, right. Easy for you to say, bud.*

Slowly he returned to full consciousness, not entirely happy to do so. His head felt as if he had been crushed in a vice and the thundering headache pounding behind his eyes made him nauseous. To make matters worse his vision was blurred and he was seeing two of everything, a phenomenon which made him recall the aftermath of a competition he had once had with Ezra to see who could put away the most shots of schnapps in sixty seconds.

".....name?"

It finally computed that the EMT had asked his name. *Geez, what was it again?*

"Tanner," he managed breathlessly, after a moment's consideration, "ATF."

He coughed again, bracing himself against the pain and feeling the bubbling of fluid in his chest. *This was definitely bad news.* Vin looked down to make sure he was still all there, surprised to find that he was pretty much intact. At least he could still make out a body, two arms and two legs. He could see there was a lot of blood on him but he couldn't focus with enough clarity to locate its source. His head fell back again; maybe it was just as well. Pity Zoé wasn't here, she'd wanted his blood -- now she could have as much as she wanted. A half-formed thought tugged at his sluggish brain. What had he been doing to wind up like this? Going to his Jeep...Mano...Mano?

"Agent Tanner?"

Vin blinked and tried to focus but the man before him, both versions, remained in a haze. *Was he supposed to answer because he wasn't sure he could manage to breathe and talk any more?*

"Just take it easy, now. You'll feel like coughing but I want you to try not to, you've got some broken ribs here and one of them has punctured a lung."

"Tell me something I don't know," he gasped, feeling pleased that he had actually succeeded in completing a sentence.

Without any effort on his part he found his jacket being carefully manipulated over his arms. He hoped it wasn't damaged -- he'd paid \$300 for it only last year. His shoulder protested at the movement and the pressure on his ribs was agony but he bit down on the moan that threatened to erupt and stopped trying to help. A few minutes later he winced as the EMT stuck a cannula in the back of his hand and attached intravenous line. *Damn, but he hated IVs but he knew the drill well enough not to protest. Just let the man do his job, Tanner.*

Finally transferred to a stretcher he leaned gratefully against the raised backrest, breathing shallowly and trying not to either throw up or cough and wanting nothing more than to do both. He held one arm

across his chest and closed his eyes, his last thought as the stretcher was loaded into the waiting ambulance being: *Zoé's going to kill me.*

Buck shouldered his way through the milling crowd, surveying with a professional eye the devastation wrought by the car bomb. The remains of the chassis suggested that this had indeed been Vin's Wrangler, the twisted license plate recovered from the other side of the street confirmed it. Blood seemed to be everywhere, sprayed in a wide arc across the road, sidewalk and even onto the shopfronts. Buck closed his mind rejecting the most obvious possibility and joined two police officers interviewing witnesses.

"Wilmington, ATF," he introduced himself and flashed his ID, "What can you tell me?"

"We think it was a car bomb."

Buck looked at the young officer with a bland expression that did little to reflect his feelings.

"No shit! Now, can you tell me anything useful, son?"

The rookie blushed.

"One fatality, two if you count the dog, and one injured."

Dog?

Buck shook his head not quite sure he had heard correctly.

"Any ID on the victims?"

His gut clenched as he waited for the officer to check his notebook.

"Uh, we have a deceased male Latino aged approximately twelve years no ID yet and a male, caucasian name of..." He paused, having difficulty deciphering his own writing, oblivious to the fact that at any moment he was in danger of having his youthful features rearranged by the frustrated ATF agent, "...Tanner. Hey, that's right. He's one of yours."

Buck took a deep breath and let it out slowly, then put a large hand on the rookie's shoulder and aimed a feral smile in his direction.

"You'll go far in this business, kid."

Buck's relief that Vin was alive faded rapidly as soon as he climbed into the back of the emergency vehicle. He had wheeled a couple of minutes out of the EMT, needing to see Vin was still in one piece before he could let the ambulance leave but the sight of the young Texan did nothing to reassure him. Blood trickled from the corner of his mouth and he could hear the laboured breathing, wet and gurgling with each inspiration. He was surprised when Vin opened unfocused eyes and managed a crooked grin.

"Hey, Buck. Heard you coming two blocks away."

"Looks like you're not havin' a good day, pard."

"Better believe it."

Tanner coughed explosively and a fine spray of blood added to the gore already decorating the front of his shirt. Grimacing he closed his eyes and the EMT signalled that Buck's time was up. He nodded.

"Gotta go, Vin. Hang in there."

He moved to leave but Vin reached out to stop him.

“Buck. Tell Zoé...” He paused. “Aw hell, forget it. She wouldn’t listen anyway.”

Chris had finally relaxed. Zoé, her nerves as tight as a drawn bowstring, could not. Every moment that passed increased her anxiety until she wanted to scream. Twice she had considered leaving Chris and joining the throng in the street just to be doing something other than watch and wait, but the stricken look on the blond man’s face and the incredible confusion in his eyes stopped her. Even after the tension had gradually seeped out of his muscles and he had slipped once more into a deep sleep she had been unable to bring herself to go. One betrayal was enough in one day even for her.

Senses alert, she was up and opening the door almost before Buck had finished knocking. The two ATF agents stood awkwardly for a moment but Zoé was unable to read anything in either their expressions or their body language, then Buck strode forward and wrapped her in a comforting bear hug.

“Vin wasn’t in the Jeep...”

Zoé clung tightly to the big man, her face pressed into his broad chest as she absorbed the news, grateful that Buck had the sensitivity to answer the question uppermost in her mind then, as the realisation that the gentle agent was waiting to say more filtered through to her, she drew back and searched his face for a clue.

“But..?” she urged, all too aware that there was indeed a but.

Nathan stepped forward and put his hand on her shoulder.

“Vin was in the blast zone and took some damage.”

“Some damage?” she repeated dully, thinking it sounded like something that could be repaired in an auto shop. “How bad?”

Nathan deferred to Wilmington with a gesture.

“Just saw him for a minute or two Zoé but he was awake and talkin’.”

She snorted and turned away from both men.

“And that’s supposed to be reassuring?”

“Look, Zoé,” continued Buck, patiently, “I can’t tell you what I don’t know. EMT said only that he’s got a few busted ribs and a collapsed lung. If you get your things we can go to the hospital right now.”

Zoé laughed, the sound brittle and humourless.

“Buck, I’m the last person he’d want to see.”

Wilmington looked curious then as he made the right connections Vin’s few words in the ambulance made all the sense in the world.

“You two had a fight, right?”

“Stupid really,” she mused, “Things said that can’t ever be unsaid. I’ll be lucky if he ever wants to see me again.”

"If you believe that then you're not as smart as I thought you were, princess," He reached out and slid one arm around her shoulders. "And Vin might be as stubborn and ornery as a country mule when he sets his mind to somethin' but he sure as hell ain't dumb."

Zoé looked levelly at the mustached agent and knew that she couldn't walk away from the wiry Texan quite as easily as she had thought. Abruptly turning she addressed Nathan who had already moved to look over Larabee.

"Will you stay with Chris, if I go with Buck?"

The doctor was in the process of peeling back one of Chris' eyelids to check his pupils and nodded briefly.

"You go."

The woman leaned down and kissed Nathan gently on the cheek.

"Thanks. You take good care of him now."

Jackson smiled, showing a row of even, white teeth.

"And you take care of Vin, you hear? Don't come back till you've sorted somethin' out."

She nodded and picked up her purse from the table, then took a deep breath as if bracing herself for an ordeal.

"You'd better be right about this, Buck."

The tone of her voice left him in doubt that he better had.

That's another pair of jeans ruined. As a nurse cut the bloodied denim from his legs he idly considered whether it would be worth making a claim to the Bureau for reimbursement. Hell, maybe he should just start getting clothes with rip-stick seams. Resigned to the all too-familiar routines he forced himself to relax and tried once again not to cough although the urge to clear his congested lungs was become increasingly harder to ignore. He did everything he was bidden with a quiet acceptance, pushing aside the apprehension he felt as each procedure was carefully explained to him: the needle-sticks for the blood work, the naso-gastric tube, the catheter (*again!*), the best-forgotten gross indignity of a rectal exam and finally the chest tube. It was over reasonably quickly but he had almost passed out as the metal rod was forced through the chest muscles between the lower ribs in his left side in spite of the local anaesthetic that had been injected into the chest wall. Once in place, secured and connected to a drain, the flexible tube had filled with dark blood and the pressure in his chest almost immediately lessened. Physically and emotionally exhausted he was barely aware of the numerous lacerations across his arms, chest and thighs being stitched and he was asleep before he was finally transferred to ICU, missing the irony of being relegated within the space of twenty four hours from visitor to patient.

Memory drifted back; shattered fragments like the crystal shards of a broken mirror, fragile yet razor-sharp. Sarah. No. Not Sarah -- someone else. There was no Sarah any more. It had been someone else. A woman; touching. Searing heat against cold flesh that ignited a slow-burning flame in his soul. Heat that dragged him weak and mewling from the frozen wastes of despair and into arms that promised...

He blinked sluggishly, unable to focus properly and barely able to hold his eyes open. *Shit! Where was he?* Slowly, his vision cleared and he allowed himself to relax a little. *Think Larabee!* Scraps of memory taunted him but slipped out of his reach when he tried to make sense of them. *Too much to drink.* Lifting

an an arm, a feat he found surprisingly difficult, he covered his eyes against the bright daylight. *So tired he could sleep for a week.*

“Chris? You with me now, Chris?”

Only just. With a supreme effort of will, he raised his arm and peered at the source of the familiar voice. Nathan. He swallowed and tried to work some moisture into his mouth.

“What hit me?” he whispered, hoarsely, amazed at how difficult it was to articulate those three words.

He felt strong fingers close around his wrist, checking his pulse.

“You don’t remember?”

Chris struggled to make sense of the disconnected images that still flittered tantalisingly through his confusion.

“No,” he confessed after several moments, his voice thick.

Jackson thumbed his eyelids open and shone a pencil-light torch into each pupil.

“What’s the last thing you can recall?”

The blond man thought hard, a frown creasing his forehead as he struggled with an imprecise memory.

“Got drunk.”

“How d’you feel now?”

The answer was several seconds in coming as Chris considered the question.

“Like shit!”

“Do you want to sleep?”

Larabee nodded slowly. *Yes. Sleep.*

He didn’t even feel the hypodermic needle that Nathan slid into the muscle of his upper arm as he drifted once again into sleep and the just-out-of-reach memories that hid in the darker recesses of his mind.

Ezra considered the dilemma of his current situation. If nothing else confinement to a hospital bed permitted indulgence in contemplative thought that the Southerner might otherwise not have had the opportunity to engage in. Coming to terms with his own mortality was not something particularly new for the undercover agent; after all he made a living from a dangerous occupation, he took risks and he accepted the hazards. Still, having spent but a single intimate moment with death, he was now more than satisfied to keep that particular relationship at arms’ length and hoped to continue doing so for many years into the future. No, his concern was how he had measured up when faced with circumstances over which he had no control; how he would be judged by others. *Say what you mean Standish - by Chris.* His recollection of the whole nightmarish episode was startlingly clear. He had not once lost consciousness, although at times he had wished otherwise, not until his lungs had finally betrayed him and given up the fight and each moment of fear, each exquisite instant of pain, each word spoken, was indelibly etched into his brain. *He had cried for Christ’s sake!*

In the last thirty-six hours, every member of the team had passed through his room except Larabee. That in itself sliced open a wound within him that caused more pain than all his other injuries combined; a pain that all the medication in the world could not alleviate. *What did you expect, Standish? See what*

happens when you trust people; when you let them get close? Do you think given a choice that he'd have chosen to be stuck in some rat hole with you? He remembered with a sense of shame his willingness to be held by the other man; his complete and unconditional surrender to that physical contact which had in part eased his pain. *You were scared! Scared? Admit it, you were fucking petrified!*

Retreating from his almost masochistic self-analytical introspection he reached for the overhead trapeze, using the strength in his arms to relieve the pressure on his buttocks and shoulders for a few minutes; a trick the physical therapist had shown him just that morning.

"I'm impressed!"

Biceps taut, Ezra lowered himself back onto the bed and smiled at the sound of the voice.

"Well, Mr. Wilmington. What brings you to the hallowed halls of this establishment of healing in the middle of a working day? Shouldn't you be in dogged pursuit of the perpetrators of this outrageous abuse of my person?"

Buck failed to meet his eyes and the Southerner tensed, Wilmington's open countenance, never schooled in artifice, immediately sending a cold chill down his spine.

"Buck? What is it?" Straight to the point. No verbal embellishments.

"Vin's been hurt," he admitted quickly, pushing out the words as if he wanted to be rid of them, "A car bomb."

"Badly?"

Ezra's stomach squirmed as he waited for the answer.

"They're bringing him up from ER now," explained the ladies' man, "Probably the luckiest son of a bitch in the world. Broke a few ribs and punched a hole in one of his lungs, concussion, lots of cuts and bruises."

"Dear God! What next? Far be it from me to be the harbinger of bad tidings but I detect a certain disturbing pattern here, my friend."

"You and the rest of the Bureau," confessed Wilmington, "Travis is about to bust a blood vessel. He's talkin' about puttin' you, Vin and Chris under 24 hour protection so don't be surprised if you find you can't take a piss without someone watching over your shoulder."

The undercover agent managed a self-mocking half-smile.

"Oh, rest assured, Mr. Wilmington, I'm quite used to that already."

Vin had a headache. Not just a morning-after-the-night-before type headache but the worst headache he had ever experienced. It helped to keep his eyes closed because seeing double just aggravated the pounding behind his eyeballs but he couldn't sleep for longer than an hour at a time; not because he didn't want to but because no-one would let him. Now he felt sick. Whether that was from the headache or all the blood he had swallowed he wasn't sure but the last thing he wanted to do was throw up. The very idea of movement was something he didn't wish to contemplate, the idea of heaving his guts up was enough to bring him out in a cold sweat. Everything hurt. Some parts more than others but as yet he had been unable to find a single inch of his body that he could safely say was pain free. Of course, being hurled twenty feet into the air against a brick wall tended to produce that effect.

"Mr. Tanner."

Geez, here we go again. Lights, camera, action! Vin Tanner. 572...no, 527 East Street. May 18th? 19th? Tuesday...? Fuck it, I don't know! Just go away and leave me alone.

He decided that persistence was a prerequisite for becoming a nurse, not to mention being impervious to abuse from irritable patients.

"How many fingers am I holding up?"

Not again.

Defeated, he squinted in front of him for a moment then closed his eyes again.

"Does polydactyly mean anything to you?"

Evidently it did because the nurse actually laughed.

"Mr. Tanner, I know this is driving you crazy but I just need to look in your eyes again."

"I'll give you fifty bucks to leave me alone."

"Tempting, but no."

"I'll give you a hundred if you'll let me sleep."

"Just give me one minute and I'll let you sleep for free," she promised.

He surrendered and allowed her to check his pupils, then tried to get comfortable and ignore the pounding in his head thinking it was a good thing he hadn't been able to corrupt the nurse. He didn't have a hundred bucks.

It was late. Much later than she had thought. And she was slightly drunk. Not rolling in the gutter drunk but ever-so-pleasantly buzzed. Frequenting bars alone was not something she made a habit of but after leaving the hospital she had swung by Inez' place craving a little feminine tea - or in this case vodka -- and sympathy. Inez had been very understanding. Now she was on her way home in a cab, the driver's reluctance in accepting a fare to Purgatorio having been overcome by a combination of tact, bribery and threats from the attractive Mexican woman.

She wondered if Nathan would still be sitting with Chris and felt a momentary pang of guilt for not calling. Hell, it was almost midnight!

The *barrio* was quieter than usual, still reeling from the bombing she supposed; still grieving for an innocent twelve year old whose only crime had been to skip school. *Bad choice, kid.* Vin's had reacted predictably to the news that Mano had not survived the blast and she wished she could have absorbed some of the pain of it, shared some of the guilt, but it was something only he could deal with and in his own way. She knew they would talk about it later, but for now it was wound too fresh.

She tripped on the stairs, navigating around people and objects strewn with equal abandon in the stairwells. *Damned elevators were always broken. Why couldn't Vin have chosen a respectable neighbourhood?* Getting the key into the door became a major tactical exercise and she stifled a giggle while at the same time sympathising with Vin's visual disturbance. The door swung open and she almost fell through, looking in puzzlement at the key which was still in her hand. *Open sesame!*

"Zoé?"

She straightened guiltily, recalling other late nights when she had rocked home only to be sprung by a vigilant parent.

"Nathan. Sorry I was so long. I got..."

"...Drunk?" ventured the dark doctor, taking her by the arm.

She allowed Nathan to lead her forward.

"I'm insulted, Nathan," she protested, "I just had a few drinks with Inez."

"What do you call a few?"

She looked at Nathan curiously. Hell fire, that was some trick! She could have sworn his lips had never moved. Slowly it filtered through that it hadn't been Nathan speaking at all. There was no mistaking that voice. The speed at which she snapped her head around to scan the room made her head spin and she tottered slightly glad of Jackson's grip on her arm but nevertheless grabbing the edge of the table for support.

He leaned against the door frame separating the bedroom from the living area, dressed in a pair of sweat pants she recognised as Vin's, and looking totally wasted. In fact he looked as if he could barely stand and the jamb was the only thing keeping him from an imminent meeting with the floor.

"Chris!"

Larabee took a couple of limping steps a slow, almost embarrassed, smile animating a face so pale that the sutures on his forehead stood out in a hard black line against his skin.

"I think I have some apologising to do."

She crossed the space between them in a couple of strides and for several minutes the two of them clung to each other.

"Forget it. I'm the one with the monopoly on sorries today. Just join the queue and take a number."

Zoé released her hold on him and Nathan moved up to support the fatigued man, his concern for Chris' well-being written clearly on his face. Larabee's brief burst of energy was rapidly dissipating and the tall doctor had no real difficulty in coercing the blond man into lying down again.

"Vin?" he asked quietly, once Nathan had settled him to his satisfaction, "Nathan told me about the bomb. He's okay?"

She swallowed hard. Her previous good spirits suddenly evaporating. *Alive? Yes . Okay? I don't think so!* The alcohol which had given her such a buzz was now pushing her steadily into a trough of misery. Vin was a mess with a hole punched in his left lung and a brain so concussed that he couldn't even see straight. Not okay. And Ezra? Poor Ezra. So much pain and still so much doubt in himself. Not okay. Chris? *What about you Chris? Are you okay?*

"He was lucky," she said finally, "Just as you and Ezra were lucky."

Zoé sat down at the foot of the sofa bed and leaned back, stretching out perpendicular to Chris her arms raised above her head.

"But don't forget that whoever is doing this might be the lucky one with the next roll of the dice."

Chris lay back and closed his eyes.

"That's what I'm afraid of."

Six of them sat around the table in the Purgatorio apartment; the first time they had all been together in one place in almost six days. Still, this was not a social occasion but a case of the mountain coming to Muhammad rather than the other way around. Chris Larabee was not the kind of man to be easily deterred, even by his own physical limitations, and had dictated that if he was not allowed to go into the office then the office would come to him. Nathan had initially ruled out the idea but finally after coming up against an equal and opposite force, he had in the interests of Chris' sanity -not to mention his own - reluctantly agreed. Now, watching him in action, Nathan realised that it was probably the best therapy he could have ordered.

"So what do we have?"

Larabee sat to one side of the cluttered table clad in denim shorts that had obviously once been jeans and a t-shirt with his leg elevated on a chair and his injured knee encased in a neoprene support. He looked tired but animated; a coonhound on a blood trail straining at the leash. His question was directed at J.D. who had been systematically tabulating and flow-charting the information as the agents had brought Chris up to speed on all the facts they had gathered over the last few days. In response Dunne deftly manipulated the track-ball on the laptop and brought up the screen he needed.

"Okay, here goes: the first bomb exploded at 7.15 a.m. on May sixteenth at the Bureau..."

"I hardly need reminding of that," growled Chris, interrupting.

The young agent flushed but Buck immediately jumped to his defence.

"Hey, cut him some slack here! You asked for what we got so listen up."

Zoé, head down over a sketch pad, agreed.

"If we're going to have a chance of building an accurate picture here we have to follow the sequence of events logically, and that means starting at the beginning whether you like it or not. Right, Josiah?"

Before the profiler could reply, Larabee held up his hands in surrender.

"Enough already! I get the message. Sorry, J.D., go on."

"The bomb was a fairly basic B.L.E.V.E. combination of LPG and gasoline. The blast's epicentre was the central elevator car on the sixth floor but all the elevators had been disabled. The lab recovered parts of the gas cylinders, the detonator and the timing device."

"And we got a trace on the cylinders to the rail yard, right?"

"Right," confirmed J.D., "Two of six stolen some months ago."

Zoé looked up as Chris was about to speak, pre-empting his next question.

"No, there haven't been any more reported instances of this type of device being used in any other recent bombing in this country. The remaining LPG cylinders are still unaccounted for."

Chris nodded and turned back to J.D. who continued:

"We have narrowed the time frame down to a thirty-five minute window of opportunity between 6.30 when Ezra used the elevator and just after seven when Chris arrived and had to use the stairs."

Nathan leaned forward frowning.

"How the hell did anyone manage to get by security?"

"Cameras caught nothing suspicious," commented Buck, "The techies are still working on it."

Chris sighed.

"So what about the car bomb?"

"P.E.T.N./Latex. Low grade military explosive. Pressure device placed under the passenger seat."

Josiah stretched his large frame and got out of his chair, moving slowly around the table as he talked. Sanchez always preferred thinking on the move.

"Fairly indiscriminate in target," he mused, talking to himself as much as any of the group.

"Shit, Josiah, I don't call blowing up a man's Jeep indiscriminate!" protested Buck, "I call that downright personal."

"No," interrupted Zoé, "Think about it. The ATF building for one could just as easily have exploded with no-one there. Chris and Ezra were both there by chance. And the Jeep - there was no telling who might sit in the passenger seat next." She looked up at Chris. "In fact if things had gone according to plan it would have been Chris with me driving. Even if Vin hadn't taken the bike and had driven the car, he would have been in the driver's seat."

"She's got a point," admitted Chris, "There are too many variables here."

"One bomb was timer activated, the other was pressure activated, neither one of which require the bomber to be anywhere near the actual explosion," continued Josiah, "These types of devices being fairly crude, also leave a large margin for error."

"You don't think it's personal then?" asked J.D.

"There's a definite pattern in that it seems to be this team that's been targeted. Even if Vin wasn't the intended victim, the very fact that the bomb was placed in his car suggests much more than a random act of violence."

"Anybody else getting an itty bit paranoid?" muttered Buck, "I know I'm getting' mighty cautious."

"That's exactly why Travis has a surveillance team at the hospital," offered Nathan, "Just in case."

"And," added Chris, "Why the bomb squad has been over all your apartments and the ranch with a fine tooth comb."

"You know Chris, ventured Zoé after a brief pause, "you're the only link here so far."

Larabee raised a questioning eyebrow.

"That's one hell of a speculative leap."

"I thought that's what brainstorming is all about," she returned smartly, "but whether you like it or not you are the only common factor we can identify."

"But Chris wasn't near the second blast," protested J.D. "It doesn't make sense."

"Look at it this way," she persisted, the conviction in her voice evident, "We all drove home together that night, there was no reason to believe it would be any different on the return trip. We should all have been in that Jeep when it went up."

Josiah moved behind Zoé and leaned on the back of the chair looking over her shoulder at the notes she had made.

“Still, that would have targeted all three of you not just Chris,” argued Nathan.

“Wouldn’t matter. This person has already demonstrated that a few additional casualties along the way mean nothing.”

“You know, Zoé. what you’re suggesting implies that whoever this is must be watching Chris’ movements.” Josiah’s tone indicated that he at least was willing to give credence to the young woman’s theory.

“Come on, Josiah!” Interjected Buck, “That could mean we’re all being watched.” He glanced uneasily at his friend of many years who was listening impassively to the discussion as if it was someone else they were talking about. “What do you think, Chris?”

Larabee tapped the pen he was holding lightly against the notebook in front of him, then tossed the instrument down.

“I can’t afford to discount anything at this stage, Buck. I think Zoé’s wrong but I’m not going to take any chances either.”

J.D. spoke up.

“So what’s the plan?”

Chris flexed his knee, easing some of the strain on the joint.

“Standard operational procedure. We close ranks, stick together, watch each other’s backs, follow the leads and be very, very careful.”

“Standard operational bullshit,” snorted Buck, “I ain’t driving any more till this is over and I reckon JD and me’ll book into a hotel for the duration.”

Zoé smiled.

“No one would want to blow up your apartment, Buck. There’d be no point when it wouldn’t look any different after an explosion than it does now.”

Wilmington started to protest but Chris interrupted the light-hearted by-play.

“We do it by the numbers, okay? Nathan and Josiah, decide whose place you’re going to bunk in. I don’t want anyone on their own at any time, understand?”

Josiah chuckled in spite of the gravity of the situation.

“Could be a true test of friendship, brother.”

“Ezra and Vin will be under guard in the hospital, so they should be okay. I’ll be staying here.”

Nathan chewed his lip thoughtfully.

“Do you think that’s wise, Chris? This guy’s already fingered Vin’s Jeep, he might have this place marked too.”

“Or the Ram, or the temporary offices, or the mailbox outside, or he might just be waiting around the corner with a frag grenade. Hell, if I’ve got to go somewhere it might as well be here.”

The other’s nodded in silent agreement. Until this bomber was apprehended none of them would be safe.

“Right, let’s get to work people. J.D., Buck I want you to start compiling a list of anyone with a record of arson or explosives that any one of us helped to put away, and who has been released from prison recently. Josiah, you speak some Spanish, I want you to start talking to these people; find out if anyone knows anything about the Jeep. Vin’s got a lot of friends in this neighbourhood, let’s use that to our advantage. You stick with him Nathan. I want a phone check every hour and don’t split up for any reason; go to the bathroom together if you have to.” He paused and looked up at Zoé with a sly grin. “Don’t worry. I’ll make an exception in our case.”

The Englishwoman raised an expressive eyebrow.

“I suppose I should be thankful for small mercies.”

“...that’s fine. Just relax now. Now we’re going to try hip flexion to 80 degrees and abduction at 60 degrees, okay?”

The physical therapist manipulated his left leg through the routine range of motion exercises that after several sessions he was starting to become familiar with. So far the exercises had been entirely passive requiring nothing from him except the temporary surrender of himself; something in which he believed he was becoming quite adept. He watched, still not entirely comfortable with the confidently casual familiarity of her touch but appreciating the skill involved as she continued to systematically work the joints and muscles of first one leg, then the other. He had to concede that she had good hands and part of him was actually starting to look forward to her visits which served to alleviate some of the boredom of his day. At least he was out of intensive care.

He turned his head to look across at his sleeping roommate. Under any other circumstances he would have protested at having to endure shared accommodation but the familiar presence of Vin Tanner was unexpectedly comforting in spite of the Texan’s equally unfortunate state of health. The knowledge that they were both under guard, albeit for their own protection, had done nothing to reassure him in the least. Having already had the misfortune of falling victim to an act of extreme violence perpetrated in a federal building that boasted a particularly high level of security he had his doubts as to the effectiveness of a single agent posted outside the door of their hospital room.

Tanner finally stirred as the therapist left the room and Ezra wondered if he had been truly asleep or just allowing him a moment of privacy.

“Well, Mr. Tanner. Our fates seem to have conspired to bring us together even in misfortune.”

“Christ, Ezra,” he muttered, “Can’t you just say hi like everyone else.”

“I see that being injured has done nothing to improve your disposition.”

“What’d you expect? Don’t rightly feel like dancin’ just yet neither.”

Ezra smiled gently, his sympathy genuine.

“I can identify with that sentiment.”

Vin adjusted his position, each individual movement done with a slow deliberation that confirmed the pain of every action.

“I reckon you can at that,” he managed, through clenched teeth, “How’re you doin’ anyway? Thought for a while there you’d bought the farm.”

“Believe me Mr. Tanner you are not Robinson Crusoe in that regard.” He looked pointedly at Tanner. “If I may say so, Mr. Tanner your own current state of health does nothing to inspire me with confidence.”

Vin waved a dismissive hand as he fought the urge to cough, clutching his injured ribs as he finally succumbed.

“Just a coupla busted ribs and a major fucking headache,” he insisted once he had recovered his breath, “No big deal.”

Ezra sighed.

“I will never understand this misplaced stoicism of yours, Vin.”

“Just don’t like to make a fuss, that’s all.”

“Might we expect to see our illustrious leader any time soon?” queried The Southerner casually, “Mr. Larabee has been conspicuous by his absence.”

Vin looked long and hard at the undercover agent detecting the underlying anxiety in his voice. *Shit! He doesn’t know. Probably thinks Chris couldn’t give a flying fuck about what’s happened.*

“Chris has been out of action. Somethin’ went down with him a couple of days ago and he’s on sick leave.”

Ezra frowned suspiciously.

“Something went down?” he repeated slowly, “Just what in God’s name does that mean?”

“Chris lost it in a big way, Ez. Nathan’s thinking post-traumatic stress.”

The Southerner’s usual poker face was absent as his expression which had initially registered disbelief changed rapidly to reflect something like relief. After a few moments he started to laugh. Vin stared in confused surprise at the completely unexpected and, he decided, inappropriate reaction of the undercover agent, which only seemed to fuel Ezra’s amusement.

“You’ll have to forgive me, Vin,” he finally managed, trying to regain a degree of composure, “But that’s the best news I’ve heard all day.”

Josiah and Nathan had been the last to leave. Jackson had insisted on giving Chris the once-over, still unconvinced that he was anywhere near recovered. Engines on, yes; fuelled, yes but cleared for take off, no.

“I know you’re feeling a whole lot better but your blood pressure’s way up, your heart-rate is still too fast and you’re jittery as hell.” He had turned to Zoé. “No stimulant’s okay. That means no coffee, no alcohol, not even a cola.”

She had thrown him a mock salute in reply.

“Got it, doc.”

Much to Larabee’s disgust Nathan had given him another injection, this time slipping the hypodermic easily into a vein in Chris’ forearm.

“Look, Chris. You won’t take tablets if I leave them so we gotta do it the hard way. Just kick back and relax now, okay?”

Okay.

He stretched out on the sofa and closed his eyes listening to the almost soothing sound of Zoé moving around the apartment; sounds of domesticity that he had almost forgotten.

It was quiet and very dark when he woke. He had been dreaming and from the exquisitely aching tension in his groin it had been no nightmare this time. Still, his heart was dancing erratically in his chest and he wondered if that too was the aftermath of some now forgotten erotic fantasy or if something had disturbed him. Damn the medication Nathan insisted on giving him! It took the edge off the lurking panic but it also took away the finely tuned sixth sense he had always relied on to keep him two steps ahead of the field; right now he felt as if he was wandering aimlessly among the back-markers. He lay motionless, his heart having resumed a more regular rhythm, and listened to the noises of the night considering what might have wakened him. If not a nightmare then what? He was still groggy but he made a conscious effort to push back the lethargy that was creeping over him, unwilling to surrender when something was tugging so persistently at his subconscious. He flexed his injured knee, swearing under his breath as pain lanced through the stiff and unresponsive joint and wondered now if it had been wise to avoid taking the pain-killers he had been prescribed.

Light, stark and unrelenting, flooded the room destroying his night vision and temporarily blinding him as he closed his eyes against the almost painful glare.

“Shit...”

He managed no more as a muscular arm snaked around his neck effectively pinning him to the sofa and he felt the unwelcome pressure of a gun barrel behind his ear. He knew now why he had woken up.

“Shut the fuck up, Larabee and don’t move.”

He didn’t.

There were two of them. A second intruder was dragging Zoé out of the bedroom but she was putting up more of a fight than Chris had been able to, managing to get in several telling body blows before the man finally tired of the resistance and threw her to the floor using his superior physical strength. Kneeling in the small of her back he tied first her wrists then her elbows with nylon cord, the action pulling her shoulders savagely back and immobilising her upper body. In defiance she threw back her head as the man leaned over her and Chris heard a satisfying crack as her skull connected with her assailant’s nose. He knew she was going to pay for it but nonetheless he felt a moment of admiration for her spirit. The man roared in pain and stood up, trying to stem the flow of blood pouring from his ruined nose.

“Bitch! I’m gonna kill you.”

Zoé struggled to get up spitting like a wildcat and amazingly managed to get to her knees while the man was still cursing and dealing with his injury.

“No you won’t you son of a bitch because I swear I’m going to kill you first!”

Chris felt the pressure on his throat tighten and he was forced to his feet then pushed forward; his knee and his still tender ribs screaming in protest at the rough treatment.

“Lady, you settle down right now,’ the armed man intoned calmly, “Or I’ll blow his fucking head off.”

Zoé’s eyes, full of fury, snapped to Chris then to the man holding the gun to his head assessing whether he would make good his threat. Chris saw that moment of calculation and for a moment his gut clenched. He had no doubt that if she had been armed she would have taken the risk and fired anyway, banking on the odds that she could put him down before he managed to get off a shot. His captor saw it too and laughed quietly.

“You want this the hard way, babe? It’s your call.”

He waited for a beat but Zoé remained defiant, clearly unrepentant and ready to do as much damage as she could. In a swift movement that brought the woman to her feet in spite of her bound hands, the armed man expertly brought the butt of his weapon down on Chris’ shoulder with just the right amount of force to break the collarbone.

Chris wasn’t sure if he cried out. He wanted to but the sound may have just been in his head. The sound of bone snapping was as sickening as the pain that surged through him but he bit down and rode out the initial agony, his breath coming in short bursts. Through the haze of nausea he watched as Zoé capitulated, her body language now clearly transmitting defeat rather than defiance. The injured man closed in, once again prepared to tackle the woman now she had signalled surrender. Chris instinctively moved a step as the man slapped Zoé across the face before pushing her forward, knowing it was a futile gesture. He was in no shape to play the hero. If either of them were going to get out of this, they would have to play smarter not harder.

“You know Larabee you’ve got more lives than a fucking cat?”

He sat on one of the straight-back kitchen chairs as his captor competently immobilised the fracture, strapping his right arm against his chest. Chris took some hope from the fact that he was being treated for the injury; it meant that imminent dispatch was not on the agenda and he would gladly buy all the time he could. He avoided looking at Zoé. Her guard had taken perverse pleasure in tormenting her now that she was effectively neutralised and currently stood behind her with one hand down the front of the satin teddy she wore, toying with her breasts. Chris chalked that up as an offense that he would deal with later.

“I guess this is number nine, huh?”

“And this time you’re gonna go out with a bang!”

He laughed at his own joke and if Chris had any doubts before that he was dealing with the man who had already blown up two of his men, he was absolutely sure now.

“What makes you think you’ll do any better this time? Two botched jobs already. You putting a wager on third time lucky?”

The man tightened the binding around Chris’ arm with a vicious tug.

“There’ll be no mistake this time. When I’ve finished with you they won’t even be able to find the DNA.”

Chris inclined his head towards Zoé.

“Why not let her go? You’ve got me.”

“Because this little lady can provide us with something you can’t -- a little entertainment while we wait.” He leaned closer to Larabee, almost whispering. “Tell me, is she a good fuck, Larabee?”

Chris’ kept his expression bland although his blood ran cold. *Don’t react, Chris. That’s what he wants. Chill out and start thinking of a way out of this.* He looked at Zoé but she merely looked bored and the fact that someone was almost drooling over her shoulder, his lust apparent even to Chris, seemed not to faze her in the least.

The man slowly got up and walked over to the woman, sensuously trailing the front sight of the revolver across her cheek and down her neck.

“You don’t have to answer that Larabee. I intend to find out for myself.”

Zoé was still trying to come to terms with the casual barbarity of these men. She had heard the distinctive crack as the bone in Chris’ shoulder had snapped then seen the colour drain from his face, and at the moment she had understood very clearly that if she continued to fight Chris would be the one to suffer. Bastards! While hating everything these men stood for she had to concede that their psychological strategy was flawless. What was the saying about discretion being the better part of valour? Well, she would bide her time – for now.

She stood quietly, no hint of resistance in her, and although repulsed by his very touch let the man’s hands crawl across her skin. If her sex was a perceived weakness in this type of situation she decided, it could also be her strength; a weapon to be used. If allowing these men access to her body gave her chance to change the odds in her favour she would do it, if only to have the opportunity of tearing the bastards apart with her teeth.

The guy was toying with Chris. Yanking his chain. She wondered, as he traced a line down her cheek with the gun, what Larabee had done to him that would so majorly piss him off that he sought such destructive retribution. Whatever it was they were both going to pay for it before the night was over, of that she was absolutely certain.

His mouth sought hers, brutal and insistent as he roughly kissed her, pulling away and laughing as she remained unresponsive.

“Not your type, huh? It’s Larabee here that lights your fire is it? Or maybe one of those other faggots you hang around with. That guy with the Jag and the thousand dollar suits maybe? Or maybe you like ‘em real young, like that kid Dunne.”

Zoé felt sick. This man knew them all. She kept a tight rein on her emotions and let nothing show on her face not, giving him the satisfaction of a reaction although she felt as if someone had kicked her in the stomach. She continued to stare past him at the wall, glad that Ezra and Vin were both in hospital but fearful for the others as she began to suspect that she and Chris were about to become the bait that would bring the others. This was not against Larabee alone, but a vendetta against the team.

“Never mind, darlin’. You’ll keep for later. Maybe then I’ll give you a choice. Larabee or me.”

Nathan terminated the call and looked across the room at Josiah who had settled himself on the floor assuming a meditative position. Centering himself he’d called it. Nathan sipped a welcome cup of hot coffee and thought he could do with regaining some balance himself after the last week. He had just made his final call-in for the night, not only as a routine procedure but to check that Chris was okay. He was almost glad that Zoé had told him the man had been asleep since the late afternoon. Chris was a hard one to figure, keeping so much hidden that it was difficult to get through all the layers and find the man inside. He sometimes thought that Chris even had trouble finding himself so deeply did he bury his feelings. His collapse had been a manifestation of all his suppressed fears and Nathan had been truly afraid that he might never be able to find his way back from the place he’d gone to hide. Somehow he had managed it, and for that he believed Zoé was partly responsible although he couldn’t begin to understand how. He watched the slow and steady breathing of Josiah, amazed at the sheer contentment on the man’s face. Centred. Balanced. In tune. He made a mental note to get Chris a psychological referral as soon as he could. Right now he was going to go to bed.

J.D. had no conception of time when he was at the computer. Buck had known him to spend the entire night in front of the screen totally oblivious to the passage of time. He nudged the kid in the back and waved a hand in front of his face.

"Hey, J.D. You know it's after midnight?"

Dunne peered around the intrusive hand.

"So?"

"Well, I don't know about you but I'm bushed and I'm going to bed."

"Okay."

Buck gave up.

"What you got, anyway?"

"Nothing -- yet."

"So you're going to sit here all night looking at that screen looking for more nothin'?"

"No, Buck. I'm looking for something, it's just that I've found nothing."

"Shoot, boy. You're crazier than I thought."

He slapped the younger man across the shoulders and left him to it.

Dunne scanned the list scrolling in front of him. Somewhere in this mass of data he knew there was something he was missing. Something important and if it took him all night he would find it.

Chris tried to ease the cramp in his arm and sucked in a sharp breath as the nylon rope tightened simultaneously around his neck and between his legs. *Easy, Larabee. A wrong move and you'll either strangle or castrate yourself.* He was on the floor, lying on his left side with his body arched painfully into a bow, a rope tying his ankles to his good wrist and looped in a slip knot around his neck and then passing through his crotch. The complicated system of knots ensured that any movement of his hand or feet tightened the noose around his neck and increased the pressure on his testicles. His thighs were already aching with the strain and the pain from his injured knee was excruciating. The only relief he could find from the tightness around his throat was to arch his back still further which tortured his ribs but at least allowed him to breathe. Eventually he knew, he would not have the strength to maintain the position and once he failed to do that, once he relaxed he would slowly suffocate. He could hear movement behind him as the two intruders moved around the apartment but he was facing the wall and the very fact that he could no longer see Zoé was adding to his unease. Chris estimated that he had been lying on the floor for a good two hours, and for the last quarter hour or more there had been no talking. The silence worried him more than the constant taunting and veiled threats and he found himself straining to identify the sounds.

"Comfortable?"

His tormentor crouched in front of him and checked his handywork.

"Hell, yes, you son of a bitch, just fine," he rasped.

His response was greeted with a laugh.

"Good. Then you won't mind staying there a bit longer. Miss Elliott and I have a little business to attend. My associate has already become bored with his toy but then he has no imagination."

Chris closed his eyes and shut out the man's grinning face, controlling his rage and refusing to fuel his sick fantasies and after a minute or two he sensed more than heard the man move away. He felt a

tremor start in his thigh and groaned aloud as he was forced to momentarily relax knowing the consequences.

He lost track of time as each minute stretched endlessly into the next. His back was on fire, muscles burning and the rope was cutting into his wrist and ankles but there was no respite. Every muscle in his body was cramping, even his abdominal muscles were starting to feel the strain and he couldn't remember when he had endured such pain.

"Well, Larabee. Time for phase two of the operation; are you ready?" He held a straight-edge razor in his hand.

"Go fuck yourself."

He hadn't intended to vocalise the thought but there was no taking it back once it was said. He braced for the expected retaliation but the man simply insinuated the slim blade under the rope around his neck and sliced through it in a single motion. Chris held his breath as the blade traced a path down his bared chest leaving a thin line of blood, then moved down across his denim-covered belly to his crotch easily sliding through the rope there until in turn each length of rope was released. He heard a thud as something landed on the floor beside him only realising that it was Zoé when the man spoke.

"Help him up. You've got five minutes."

The woman scrambled to her knees, no longer bound and leaned over him.

"Come on, warrior. That's enough lying down on the job. Got to do as the man says."

Chris slowly brought his arm forward and started to unbend, gasping with the pain of it. Zoé rubbed his legs and back restoring some of the circulation and easing out the knots until he was able to sit up. A livid red mark circled his throat and she touched it gently before moving to massage his neck and back. As her fingers worked the length of his spine she leaned her chin on his shoulder.

"Chris, whatever it was you did to this guy you certainly pissed him off."

He surreptitiously rubbed at his abused testes.

"Not half as much as he's pissing me off, Zoé." He turned to look at her. "Are you alright?"

She refused to meet his eyes and continued to rub his back.

"He's like most of his kind. Get's his jollies from seeing people suffer, probably couldn't get it up for a woman if he tried."

"Zoé?"

She stopped and put her arms around his neck in a curiously intimate gesture.

"Don't ask, Chris. You don't want to know."

Chris had known many kinds of fear in his long career but all paled into insignificance before the dread that filled him now. His brain had kicked into overdrive as he sought an avenue of escape but he had come to the conclusion that there were only two possible choices: die now or die later. Neither option appealed to him over much but experience and common sense told him that any reprieve, however slight, left him a degree of hope that the situation could be reversed.

It was increasingly difficult for him to stand and he was grateful that Zoé was there to support him. Not that she had any choice, now that they were bound together but he knew that if she had not been there

to hold him upright he would have already fallen to his knees and right now everything depended on them both remaining on their feet. It was cold on the roof. The chill pre-dawn wind blowing down from the mountains raising gooseflesh on the two captives who would have clung together for warmth by choice even if they had not been forced into the parody of an embrace by the several pounds of explosives taped to their bodies. They were now bait. Hostages to make the ATF dance to a madman's tune. Soon he would make his call; and the insane game would begin.

Zoé pressed her cheek against Chris' chest.

"Do you think we'll feel anything?"

The blond man had his free arm around her waist, his other still strapped to his chest supporting his broken collarbone.

"I imagine not. With this much plastique it will be just as he said -- they won't even find the DNA."

"Bummer. I didn't really want to go out with a bang," she complained, then added with a tight smile: "At least not this kind."

"Gotta say, this wasn't exactly in my plans either."

Feeling the tremor start in his right thigh he braced his legs against hers, aware that he was placing a lot of additional strain on her but no longer confident of sustaining his own weight. She tensed and he could feel her whole body straining to take the added burden.

"Sorry. Don't know how long I can keep this up."

Zoé took a deep breath and adjusted her stance to accommodate him.

"You stand as long as I stand, you bastard," she replied but without heat, "I'm not ready to shuffle off this mortal coil just yet even if you are!"

"You know this guy has us wired for remote detonation as well as having the mercury trigger?" Larabee's voice was soft, "He can hit the button whenever he feels like it."

"Yes but that would ruin the game for him wouldn't it. It's not just about killing you or me. He wants to do this right and until he's got everyone here he won't detonate. I'm putting my money on our guys to ride in like the Seventh Cavalry and save the day before he gets a chance to use it."

"But that's exactly what he wants."

"I know," she admitted, "But we can't always have what we want, can we?"

"He's holding all the aces, darlin' and we just drew a dud."

She twisted her head up to look him in the eye.

"After all this time hasn't being around Ezra taught you anything, Chris? When it looks like you're going to lose -- cheat!"

They both laughed in spite of the dire situation until a familiar harsh voice close by brought them back to reality.

"Shut up!" He circled the pair again checking the wiring and electrical circuits attached to the explosives which he had taped around their chests, holding the revolver against Chris' neck as he worked, remarking: "You know, you're crazy!"

Zoé tucked her head against Chris' chest again.

“Yes, but we’ve got along way to go to match you, shithead.”

The blond man closed his eyes. *Aw hell, Zoé! Don’t do this!* He heard a soft gasp from the woman and was almost afraid to open his eyes.

“Open your mouth again, Sweetness and I’ll hamstring your friend Larabee. Understand?”

Chris felt Zoé’s grip tighten and the sobbing inspiration of her next breath then the gunman was gone and he looked down into the woman’s face. He felt the blood flowing over his arm before he realised what had happened.

“The razor,” she hissed, “He cut me.”

Nathan had been unable to sleep. Even his traditional remedy of chamomile tea had failed to overcome the lurking anxiety that had seeped into every fibre of his being since the first explosion that had injured both Ezra and Chris. For a week he had been trying to be all things to all people and he recognised from the subtle signals his body was sending him that the strain was beginning to tell. *Time to back off Jackson, he admonished himself, look after yourself or you won’t be much use to anyone else.* Standing in the kitchen of his apartment he stared out across the city and watched the sun appear over the horizon, relishing the moment of absolute peace and tranquility; exactly what had been missing for the past few days. Maybe today would be different. The contemplative silence was shattered by the demanding ring of the telephone and with a sigh he turned away from the window. Maybe not.

The call was brief. How many words did it take to put the fear of God into a man? Jackson slammed the phone down.

“Josiah! Josiah! We’ve got a problem, man. Get up!”

The older man groggily emerged from the spare room within a few seconds, the alarm in Nathan’s voice enough to rouse him from a deep sleep.

“Okay, I’m up,” he rumbled, “Where’s the fire?”

Jackson was moving urgently through the apartment, dressing as he went.

“Hostage situation. Vin’s apartment block…”

Sanchez didn’t need to hear the rest, he ducked back into the room and started throwing on his clothes.

“I thought we had a guard posted there?” he called as he struggled into jeans and a sweatshirt.

“We did.”

“So what happened?”

“Damned if I know. Guess we’ll find out. You ready yet?”

Josiah emerged from the bedroom still half-dressed and ducked into the bathroom.

“Give me a break, Nate.”

Jackson shrugged into his shoulder rig and checked his weapon before slamming it into the holster. He paused for a moment realising he was panting as if he’d done a hundred metre sprint and consciously slowed the rate of his breathing. *Damn ! You’re acting like rookie on his first bust.* By the time Sanchez

emerged from the bathroom finally looking as if he was ready for action, Nathan had brought the adrenaline rush under control.

"I thought we might have a better day today, Josiah," he commented bitterly, "I guess I was wrong."

Sanchez lowered a meaty hand onto Jackson's shoulder and gave a mighty squeeze.

"Let's move it, huh? Got people depending on us, Nate. Time to kick some serious ass."

The two men moved with purpose to the SUV in the driveway. Destination Purgatorio.

Buck Wilmington was not exactly sure how he felt; all he knew was that he wanted to hit someone or something. In the cab beside him J.D. was keeping up a steady stream of talk that flowed over and around him as he drove, what the kid was saying barely registered but he was glad of the distraction. The call had come at daybreak. A demand. An ultimatum. Larabee's team at the apartment on East Street within half an hour or the hostages would die. Hostages. A good word. Impersonal. Easier to live with than acknowledging that it was Chris and Zoé they were talking about. A shouted warning from J.D. penetrated his consciousness. Cursing, he hit the brakes, veered around a startled pedestrian and once again floored the accelerator.

"Jesus, Buck. Take it easy."

He felt the hand on his arm. Nodded. Understood the need for control and eased back a notch but the grim determination on his face remained and his body language transmitted the urgency he was still feeling.

"Thanks kid."

Wilmington looked at his watch and was surprised to find that only sixteen minutes had elapsed since he had answered the phone and found the world suddenly turned upside down. What had gone wrong? Someone had fucked up. Buck made a note to track down the surveillance crew assigned to Larabee and beat the living shit out of them. He concentrated again on what Dunne was saying and realised that they had arrived. East Street.

Vin had woken early. Even in hospital and after being given sedation he rose with the sun. He would have given anything to be outside, feeling the early morning breeze, watching the sunrise and listening to the birds before the city sounds drowned them out for the day. Here he could only see the rosy glow of morning around the edge of the window, fingers of light exploring; looking for a way in and hear the hum of machinery over Ezra's steady breathing. He breathed as deeply as he was able and released it in a sigh. The city was starting to crowd him again but with some sick time coming he could take Zoé and they'd head up to the mountains for a weekend. Up there he could find himself again. Maybe.

Zoé. He hadn't said any of the things he wanted to say to her. He knew how he felt but putting it into words that would make any sense was too difficult for him to even contemplate. Whatever it was he intended to say always came out wrong and the trouble with words was that once they had been spoken, once they escaped, there was no getting them back. *You're wondering whether I'd really sleep with Chris.* There it was. Spoken aloud. Made real. It now stood between them, dividing them, like the ice-covered slopes of the Rockies. Damn!

He listened to the wail of a siren keening in the distance, joined by a second then yet another in an off-key chorus that was so familiar and closed his eyes. Some poor bastard somewhere was having a real bad start to the day. Hell, he thought, probably even worse than mine.

East Street for the second time in a week was a scene of chaotic activity. Police cars, emergency vehicles, fire trucks all with strobe lights flashing but sirens now silent, and the ubiquitous outside broadcast units from the major television networks clogged the street outside the familiar apartment block. Quietly determined, Buck Wilmington shouldered his way through the mass of people already gathering in the street and targeted the ATF Section Supervisor, Barry Flintoff, bearing down upon the older man like a battleship at all ahead full. Barely a step behind, J.D. followed in his wake, making use of the clear path that the mustached agent forged for him.

“Flintoff! What’s the big idea? It’s like a goddamn three ringed circus here.”

The Supervisor put out a hand and steered the fuming agent to one side.

“Not my doing, Buck. This guy wants maximum exposure - called in the media before he even called us. Going to be like walking on eggshells, son. Shit, I hate doing stuff like this with the whole fucking world looking over my shoulder.”

“So what’ve got, aside from a shit-load of onlookers?”

“Larabee and Elliott have been taken hostage by one, maybe two, unidentified captors. Claims he’ll kill them...”

“If the rest of the team don’t belly up, right?”

“You got it.”

“Well, gimme a vest and let’s see if we can’t put the squeeze on this guy.”

“Hold up, Buck. Not so damn fast. Guy says he’s got Larabee wired to enough plastic explosive to take out half this block. Gotta do it his way till we can get a handle on the situation. His demands are clear: he wants all of you, the whole team and he sure as hell ain’t gonna give us any time to plan anything fancy. By my estimation you’re gonna be in the spotlight in around five minutes.”

“So we’re just going to roll over, give ourselves up and trust in the Lord and the ATF to save us, that right?”

Flintoff looked at his watch.

“We don’t have a lot of choice, Buck and we’re running out of time, so let’s haul ass and see what’s doing.”

J.D. looked apprehensively from Wilmington to the apartment block.

“Why do I get the feeling that this is going to be a really bad day?”

“Whatd’ya mean going to be?”

Blood ran unchecked down Zoé’s side, neither one of them able to manoeuvre enough to bring any pressure to bear on the six inch gash the razor had opened up; a deep crescent curving across her right breast and into the soft flesh of her armpit. Chris felt her wilt against him, the colour draining from her face and he gritted his own teeth as his injured knee and his ribs vigorously protested at the shift in the distribution of weight. After a few minutes the fingers she had twisted into his shirt relaxed and she straightened again.

“Son of a bitch!” she managed, her breathing still ragged, “That should teach me to keep my big mouth shut.”

Chris tightened his arm around her and rested his head against hers.

“I’d be much obliged if you’d stop yanking his chain,” he said softly, “And I know it might sound selfish but I don’t exactly look forward to the idea of bein’ hamstrung.”

She made a sound that was half way between a snort and a sob.

“Me neither. You’re already too bloody heavy now.”

Larabee rubbed his cheek against her hair, the only gesture of comfort he could manage under the circumstances.

“I’m sorry for getting you into this mess.”

Zoé was quiet for a moment as she adjusted her stance again.

“Could be worse,” she pointed out, finally.

Chris drew back to look at her.

“Worse?” He was having difficulty contemplating anything that could be much worse than their current situation.

“You could be old and ugly with bad breath and body odour.”

He would have laughed aloud if he could have found the energy, instead a tired smile flickered across his face.

“You know, Miz Elliott, you’re really something else.”

‘And you, Mr. Larabee, are...’

“I thought I told you to shut up.” Zoé froze at the oily, menace in the familiar voice. “You know, you two seem to be having way too much fun there.”

Fingers trailed through her dark hair, intrusive, unwelcome.

“Getting’ all hot and bothered are you, sweetheart?” He released her hair and started to circle around the two of them. “Got a hard-on, Larabee?”

The two agents remained silent, muscles tensed, frustration at their powerlessness barely held in check.

“Nah,” he answered his own question, “Probably prefer to slip it to one of the boys, right?”

No reaction.

“Well, Larabee, you just might have the chance ‘cos I’ve organised a little reunion. Guess who’s coming to dinner?”

The laughter as he moved away again did nothing to reassure the two captives.

"No vests, no weapons, no wires," repeated Buck, disgust evident in his voice, "You want us to go up against this guy with what, a smile and a friendly word?"

"It's your call, Wilmington. If you want to take responsibility for this whole thing blowing up in your face then go ahead."

"Not the best analogy," muttered Josiah, in an aside to Jackson.

Buck looked at the other three men.

"Well, boys? J.D.? Nate?"

J.D. sighed.

"The first thing this guy will do is a body search, Buck."

"J.D.'s right," agreed Josiah, "Can't risk it. Not even a switchblade."

"Gotta find some other way, Buck," added Jackson.

Wilmington nodded finally.

"Okay." He squinted up at the six-storey block. "Let's do it."

For the first time that any of them could recall even J.D. had lost his almost legendary enthusiasm and now hung back, allowing Josiah to take the lead. As the four men continued to climb the stairs to the roof, the youngest member of the team fell into place beside Buck.

"You know this is crazy?"

Wilmington nodded. The kid would get no argument from him.

"Yup."

"We're gonna get our asses kicked, right?"

"Not if I can help it."

"Look, whoever this guy is he wants Chris, right?"

"I'd say that's a fair guess."

"So if he's already got him where do we fit in?"

"Beats me, J.D. but this is the way he wants it and right now he's the one calling the shots. Rule One, kid, never argue with a man who's got you by the balls."

"I'll remember that."

Wilmington took a swipe at the younger man, then grabbed him in a friendly headlock.

"You just watch your ass, kid, okay?"

Josiah paused for a moment at the short flight of steps that would take them onto the roof and looked gravely at each man.

"Okay, this it. Just play it cool and be ready to grab any opportunity to take these guys down. This could get pretty ugly, but whatever you do don't lose control, especially you, Buck."

Wilmington ducked his head acknowledging Sanchez' warning.

"Ready?"

Three nods. Sanchez stepped up and opened the door to be greeted by the unwelcoming sight of a grinning face in a black ski mask and a Ruger Blackhawk .44 Magnum.

His right arm was numb. Chris wasn't sure if that was a good sign or not but he thought it was unlikely. His injured shoulder had settled into a dull, throbbing ache and while he had to admit that strapping his arm to his chest had stopped the worst of the pain, the increasing loss of sensation worried him. Pushing aside uneasy thoughts about nerve damage he wondered again at the reasons for him being in his current predicament. It hadn't been enough that he had almost lost two of his friends already because of this man who now held him at his mercy; this was as personal as it could get, and it seemed nothing but his own death was going to satisfy this madman. *Don't forget Zoé.* No. He breathed in the scent of her, his heightened senses feeling every millimetre of her body against his. Too aware of the touch of her barely-covered breasts in contact with his skin and the thrust of her hips against his own as they both struggled to maintain a comfortable balance, he was shamed by the undeniable truth that only the circumstances of their enforced intimacy prevented his complete arousal.

Without effort he drifted gently into another plane of existence as his subconscious rebelled against the horror of reality; retreating, withdrawing, seeking the hidden recesses of his psyche where he could disengage from the pain and the humiliation.

Vin. He had betrayed Vin. The thought was born and took shape; a hard thought full of sharp edges. *You take what you want, don't you Larabee? Even Zoé? No. Liar! Vin, no! And Ezra. He had left Ezra. Left him alone. Promised he wouldn't then just couldn't face him again. You let him down, Larabee. Afraid that someone got a look at the real you? You can't hide it. You're scared. Yes. Scared of dying? Yes.*

"Chris."

The voice pulled him back, a verbal slap in the face.

"Chris! Don't you give up on me now, you bastard!"

"Sorry. Must've drifted off," he mumbled, trying to collect his scattered thoughts. *Get a grip, Larabee! You're losin' it.*

Once again he focused on his pain to keep him in tune with reality. He deliberately flexed his knee, feeling Zoé immediately counterbalance, and a jolt of agony flared through the joint and into his thigh. He grunted as he straightened his leg again, riding the second wave of protest from the abused ligaments. *Your wake up call, Mr. Larabee.*

After what seemed like an interminable length of time he brought his ragged breathing under control and placed his lips next to Zoé's ear.

"We're gonna nail this motherfucker. If it's the last thing we do."

Her arms tightened around him.

"It might well be the very last thing either of us does, Chris, but it will be worth it."

Ezra had not wanted to wake up. He never wanted to wake up but he especially avoided waking up any time before mid-morning. Then some uncouth person had insisted quite strongly that he do so while his body kept telling him quite emphatically that it was still far too early. He had lost the fight. Reluctantly surrendering he had surfaced and realised that the room had more people in it than it should. Far too many people in suits.

“Gentlemen?”

The Southerner managed by intonation alone to imbue that single word with a myriad of unspoken questions.

Ezra pulled himself up in the bed, all protest at his interrupted sleep having fled before the realisation that something was seriously amiss. Vin, drained of all colour, looked as if he was going to be sick and Ezra, having correctly judged the assembled federal agents to be harbingers of doom felt a distinct sense of empathy for the marksman.

“If somebody would care to enlighten me as to the reason for this early morning convention I would be much obliged.” His voice did not reflect the trepidation he was feeling.

One of the agents, an older man named Thomson with whom Ezra had had some dealings in the past spoke up.

“Larabee and Elliott have been taken hostage.”

He said it in a rush as if he wanted to be rid of the news as quickly as possible. In truth, no-one had wanted to break the news to the two men, not as much out of consideration for their feelings but rather in anticipation of their reactions. The reputation of Larabee and his men was fearsome even within their own ranks and their closely-knit group had achieved something close to legendary status both inside and outside the Bureau. All for one and one for all had taken on new meaning with this particular enclave.

“To what purpose?”

Typical Standish, thought Thomson, straight to the point. While the man could manipulate the English language with more skill than anyone he knew, when the Southerner wanted to know something he expected answers - as of two minutes ago.

“We give up the rest of Larabee’s team or he kills the hostages.”

Ezra managed to keep the shock from registering on his face but believed that he could have provided a fair imitation of what he was seeing in Tanner’s expression. He swallowed with difficulty, wondering where all the moisture had suddenly gone from his mouth.

“Mr. Tanner and I included?”

“No. He asked only for Sanchez, Wilmington, Dunne and Jackson.”

“We’re negotiating?”

Thomson looked stricken and shook his head.

“They volunteered to give themselves up.”

Ezra’s green eyes glittered dangerously.

“Correct me if I’m wrong, gentlemen but does that not rob us of any opportunity to bargain? All the chips are in the pot with no way to up the ante?”

It was delivered mildly but every man in the room almost recoiled from the rebuke.

"This guy holds all the cards, Standish," Thomson almost apologised, continuing the metaphor.

"Then, Agent Thomson, I suggest forcing his hand and doing what any accomplished poker player would do under these circumstances." Ezra's smile reminded the ATF agent of a shark.

"Which is?"

"Cheat!"

Sanchez was beginning to wonder why they had been so willing to give themselves up. The overwhelming desire to protect Chris and Zoé had been uppermost in everyone's mind but now facing the reality of two armed men with nothing more than his wits with which to do battle made him question the wisdom of that decision. Too late to do anything about it now though, it was up to those on the outside to do their job. *Time to show a little faith, Josiah.* Except that his faith did not extend beyond that which he had in God, himself and the men who currently shared his fate.

The four of them had been searched and handcuffed, then made to stand in line, backs to the waist-high parapet that surrounded the roof, facing the poignant spectacle of the two agents forced into a travesty of an embrace, bound inextricably to each other with duct tape and nylon rope. Their captors, Sanchez noted, remained at a distance from each other on the premise that if one was taken down the second would be able to carry out the threat. Only one carried what the profiler assumed to be the detonation device but he guessed that a single bullet would achieve the desired effect.

"Chris looks in bad shape," commented Josiah softly to Jackson who stood immediately on his left.

"Zoé don't look as if she's had too good a time of it, either," pointed out the doctor, "See the blood."

Sanchez nodded. As a psychologist he believed he had some insight in to the workings of the type of mind which had created this particular nightmare. The sexual overtones were quite blatant; Zoé's state of undress and the deliberate positioning of the hostage's bodies but what bearing it had on the man's obvious fixation with Larabee the profiler was uncertain. The aspect that was worrying Sanchez the most was that he had already developed a theory that they were all expendable; that they had been drawn into some insane game where Chris would be forced to witness each one of them die before himself being killed. It bothered him more that to overcome these two men would take no small sacrifice on the part of one or all of the four for there was no easy way he could see to break what would ultimately be a stalemate. He took several deep breaths as one of the gunmen approached. To paraphrase the Caesar's: Let the games begin.

He saw Nathan's furtive glance in his direction, the doctor's obvious concern over the two hostages written clearly in his eyes but also understanding that for now Chris and Zoé were beyond his help. He returned what he hoped was a reassuring look and immediately reverted to staring straight ahead not wanting to draw the attention of either of the two masked men and risk punishment for transgressions either real or imagined.

Neither Zoé nor Chris had acknowledged their arrival in any way although Josiah was certain they must be aware of the four men standing less than ten yards from them. Instead they clung to each other, oddly relaxed, occasionally swaying slightly as one or the other shifted position. Josiah could detect no sign of panic, no tension or rigidity, in fact if anything their body language suggested a complete symbiosis. He had known lovers who had never achieved that degree of closeness. On further analysis he considered the long-term implications and with a mental shrug hoped that Vin was an understanding man.

Vin had to admit it. Ezra made things happen. The Southerner through a mixture of coercion, threats, smooth-talking and bare faced cheek had managed to organise their room into a satellite office. Ezra had also decided he had spent more than enough time in a hospital bed and aided by a pair of elbow crutches, a healthy dose of determination and a great deal of colourful language he managed to cross the room and park himself in a chair beside Tanner's bed. From the sheen of perspiration on his skin and his unusual quietness, Vin appreciated the sheer physical effort it had taken for him to do it. Now both of them sat glued to a computer monitor, loose sheets of paper covered in diagrams and the odd floorplan scattered over not only the bed but also every available flat surface within reach of the two men.

"So you're the expert, Vin. How would you do it?"

The Texan advanced the footage on the screen frame by frame until he found the one he wanted. The aerial shots provided a clear view of the rooftop where the hostages were being held and Vin found himself again focusing on the two figures in the foreground, captured with such clarity by the TV cameras. Zoé...and Chris.

"Vin."

Ezra's gentle prompt brought him back to the task at hand and he quickly marked several areas on the image, then pulled a city map towards him.

"See here. This building is the only one with enough height and a half decent view to get a shot off."

Ezra looked doubtful.

"Mr. Tanner, I'm sure you don't need me to tell you the distance involved in what you are suggesting."

"It's a long shot," he agreed, "But it can be done."

The Southerner picked up one of the diagrams Vin had drawn, showing dozens of calculations involving distance, height and angles of trajectory.

"These men are wearing body armour. It would need to be a head shot."

Tanner nodded.

"Gotta be that way no matter what, otherwise the bastard will still be able to hit the button. Clean head shot and he won't never even know what hit him let alone give him time to detonate."

"I believe you. And I have every confidence that you would be quite capable of carrying out such a delicate operation, however there is one glaring deficit in this plan."

"I know," sighed the Texan, "Ain't no way I'm gonna be the one doin' it."

"There is also the question of the other man, Vin. Am I correct in assuming that even the most accomplished marksman would have difficulty achieving a double hit before at least one of them could react."

"Touch and go even with two snipers," confirmed Tanner.

"So even if the one with the detonator is taken out successfully, the other man may just shoot the hostages."

"But at least it reduces the odds, Ez. Less damage with a gun than having all of them blown sky high. Remember, if he triggers those explosives it won't just be Chris and Zoé but Nathan, Josiah, Buck and J.D. as well."

Ezra looked again at the image on the screen and six people he considered his family, then back to Tanner.

“Can this be done?”

The Texan did not respond immediately but seemed to turn in on himself, eyes unfocused as he weighed the lives of his friends against another man’s skill with a rifle. After several long moments Tanner looked up, blue eyes a double-barrelled onslaught of fiery intensity.

“Yes.”

Standish picked up the phone.

Sanchez was calculating the odds, contemplating the risk to Zoé and Chris if he made a move. In his view the two men had made a major tactical error in bringing the four able-bodied ATF men to the roof in the first place; certainly they were handcuffed and unarmed but there were now six people for the two of them to keep tabs on. The two men appeared confident as they continued to move like sharks, as if to stop moving would be to die, among the six captives. Josiah cast a surreptitious glance at the surrounding buildings and wondered if these men might not suspect that ATF marksmen may be already in position, but they had chosen well in that there were no clear vantage points within striking distance. The constant movement assured a degree of safety with the hostages providing transient cover.

Now Josiah was starting to worry about Chris. Larabee had made no eye contact with any of them, his head bowed and he was sure that the effort of remaining standing was taxing his endurance to the limit; not surprising given not only his injuries but the mental beating he had taken over the last week. The little signs of tension were beginning to appear where before there had been none; and it was obvious that the woman was increasingly bearing more of the strain. Zoé had raised her head just once and he had caught her eye but had been able to read nothing into her expression. Now he was truly beginning to have grave concerns as to the outcome of the standoff. These men did not want to negotiate, they wanted to dictate.

Having made his decision, he hoped the other three would understand his motives and his actions, and respond accordingly otherwise he would most likely be a dead man within the next few minutes. Slowly he started to move, taking several steps forward and distancing himself from the others. The reaction, as he expected was immediate. A gun in his face.

“Stop right there, asshole! No one told you to move.”

Josiah kept walking getting ever closer to the man with the gun, of which the muzzle seemed to be the size of a small cannon from the profiler’s current point of view. *Well, boys, time to help me out here.* In his peripheral field of vision he saw a movement as J.D. peeled off from the other end of the line and he couldn’t resist a small smile of approval. He finally stopped as the gunman cocked the hammer. No point in taking resistance too far. The second captor had raised his own weapon to cover Dunne but following Josiah’s example the young agent continued to walk until he had put some distance between himself and Buck, the next man in line and the two hostages.

“Back in line, old man!”

“I don’t think so, son,” countered the profiler, taking a relaxed and easy stance, “I was getting bored over there. Thought I’d take a little stroll. Shoot the breeze.”

Sanchez saw a tightening of the man’s finger on the trigger and hoped he hadn’t underestimated the willingness of these men to kill unnecessarily. He sensed further movement from behind and for a moment the armed man was uncertain as to which target he should draw a bead on. Nathan was striding not at all slowly but purposefully towards Chris and Zoé.

“ALL OF YOU! STOP MOVING. NOW!!” The man with the detonation device -- the one giving the orders -- finally responded as the four of them splintered off in different directions, keeping his weapon trained on J.D. “Move again and I’ll shoot. It doesn’t matter which of you dies first in my book.”

Sanchez shook his head as if puzzled.

“You know, it seems we’re all going to die anyway, so there’s not much point in prolonging this is there? You’ve got Larabee and now you’ve got us. End of story.”

“I’ll say when this ends, not you. And don’t try your mind games with me, Sanchez, ‘cos I know ‘em all.”

“I’d like to know who it is that’s pulling the trigger before I die.”

The gunman laughed then.

“I’m sure you would but I’m still waiting for Larabee here to figure it out, and he seems to have lost interest. Even his whore can’t keep him up any more!”

Buck took another step forward and the gun was rapidly trained in his direction. The shot kicked up concrete and sparks inches from his feet.

“You get one warning only, Wilmington. Next time it’s in the guts. Slow and painful.”

“You’re in charge,” murmured Buck placatingly, not wishing to incite further violence.

“Fuck’ A,” agreed the gunman, “Long as we got that clear. Now all of you get back in position.”

Jackson started to move but instead of moving back stepped up behind Chris, Wilmington mirrored the action standing behind Zoé. J.D. was wheeling to put more distance between himself and the others when the gunman made an inarticulate sound of rage and fired twice at the youngest member of the team.

Dunne felt as if he had been punched and staggered back several steps before crashing awkwardly onto his back. For a moment the only pain that registered was that in his hands as he landed with his full weight on his cuffed wrists then as he struggled to make himself into a less vulnerable target he felt a fierce burning in his left hip. Still operating on adrenaline he scooted backwards using his feet for leverage until he was backed up against the parapet, where finally he allowed himself to acknowledge that he had been shot.

Buck forcibly restrained himself, curtailing the urge to run to J.Ds assistance, only because he understood that any such action would result in two casualties rather than one and he had no intention of handing his life over without a decent fight. Nathan shook his head as if reading Wilmington’s mind.

“Don’t. J.D.s down but not out. Kid just scooted away into the corner; he’s movin’ okay.”

Buck nodded. A silent assurance to the doctor that he wasn’t about to do anything stupid. Instead he remembered where he was and although he would have dearly liked to have put his arms around Zoé he made do with putting his head next to hers.

“How’s it goin’, darlin’?”

“No reflection on you, Buck but I’m not sure if it just got better, or just got worse.”

“Hell, sweetheart, we ain’t gonna make this easy for ‘em.”

“Tell me this is all going to work out.” She rested her head wearily against his chest.

"This is all going to work out."

"Buck Wilmington, you are such a liar. But I love you anyway for trying to make me feel better. You do know we're all about to get blown up, don't you?"

"Couldn't leave you two to enjoy all the fun, so we invited ourselves to the party. That way at least we all get to go together."

Zoé sighed, almost contentedly.

"If this is how it's meant to end, Buck, I have to say that I couldn't have asked for anyone better than you guys to go with."

"Chris?" Nathan. "You still with us Chris?"

"Ain't got nowhere to go, Nate." The weary response came as a surprise, then: "You shouldn't have come. Gave him what he wanted."

"We bought some time," replied Nathan with conviction, "And the more time we have, the more chance that we'll all live to see this thing through."

Chris finally raised his head.

"Can't do it, Nathan. Time's run out."

Zoé uttered a little cry as she was suddenly dragged off balance, Chris finally giving up the fight and collapsing to become a dead weight. If not for the support of Buck behind her, and Nathan bracing the fallen man against his chest she would have toppled and time would have run out -- for all of them.

Josiah had watched the scene play out in slow motion. Nathan and Buck's selfless act in moving immediately to protect the hostages, the animal roar of anger from the first gunman, J.D. turning and then falling as the gunshots rang out, reverberating almost painfully from the surrounding walls, and finally the open-mouthed expression of shock on the man holding the gun on him. Being a firm believer in opening the door to opportunity he charged the momentarily off-balance gunman, driving his shoulder into his chest in a tackle that drove the air out of his lungs in a satisfying whoosh and sent both men to the ground. He heard the gun go off and felt a searing line of heat across his ear, then there was silence and he was struggling in a very one-sided fight that he knew could only end one way.

J.D. considered himself lucky -- if being shot could really be thought of as lucky. He sat panting at the sudden shock of it but realised as the gunman turned away that he had been removed from the equation. There was too much happening for the two captors to focus on him and it was for that reason alone that he considered Lady Luck to be on his side for once. In truth the wound was not causing him too much pain although there seemed to be a lot of blood soaking into his pants. Taking a deep breath he manoeuvred to bring his cuffed hands from behind his back by first sliding them under his buttocks and manipulating his body until he could pass his feet through his linked hands. Expending a great deal of energy, sweat and blood he ignored popping joints and skinned wrists to finally succeed in flexing his body enough to achieve his goal. Blinking the sweat from his eyes, he paused a moment to recover his breath and decide what he should do next. He glanced at his wrists -- Damn, they hurt more than his hip.

He looked up again. Josiah was on the ground and struggling with one of the gunmen. The second captor had moved to intervene. He scrambled awkwardly along the base of the parapet, biting his lip as the movement sent jolts of pain through his side but determined to find a way to stop these crazy men doing any more harm.

Vin was tempted to tear the tube from his chest and escape the crushing constraints of the hospital room before the confinement stifled him altogether. Not just the confinement but the sheer powerlessness of his situation. Goddamn! He should be the one out there setting up his Tango-51 ready to blow that crazy fucker away! Instead he was relegated to coaching another man to do the job. He had asked for, and got, Bertinelli knowing he was the only agent available who was even remotely capable of making the shot with any chance of success but also knowing that the best man available was second best.

“We’ve got action.”

Ezra’s voice dragged his attention back to the monitor and his desire to scream out his rage and frustration became even harder to control.

“What in God’s name does Josiah think he’s doing?” A purely rhetorical question that the Southerner directed at himself.

He glanced anxiously at the Texan.

“Bertinelli?”

Vin shook his head.

“Won’t be in position yet, Ezra.”

“Damn. They’re moving too soon.”

“Shit! J.D.’s down; looks like he took a hit.”

The picture wavered, became indistinct and the two men realised that one of the gunmen was shooting at the news helicopter and it was backing off robbing them of the detail they so desperately needed as it moved out of range. Vin swore again. He could no longer see Zoé and he wondered if the last memory he would have of her would be the image of her standing on that rooftop, held by another man. Memories crowded out the thought. Good memories. Those he would keep.

Ezra, he realised with a sense of shock, was utterly drained. The Southerner had been indefatigable, ignoring all urgings of the medical staff to rest, to go back to bed, to eat, to accept pain relief but now he was running on empty; emotionally as well as physically taxed. He wanted to ask if the undercover agent was okay but he knew what the response would be so refrained from comment. Standish would see this through to the end just as he would -- for them there was no other alternative.

The shrill ringing of the phone speared intrusively through his thoughts and he found himself holding his breath as he watched Ezra talk briefly into the handset. He held it out -- an offering.

“Bertinelli.”

Tanner grabbed the phone and spoke with more force than he intended.

“About fucking time!”

Sanchez counted himself fortunate that he was still alive. The fact that he had had the stuffing beaten out of him was of little consequence compared to the total value of his diversionary tactics. It all added up to the same thing: time. Flintoff had asked for time and he was going to do his best to deliver or die trying. It had come close but he was still breathing and that was all that mattered. He was certain he had bruises on top of bruises and in places he didn’t believe it was possible to be bruised, but nothing

felt broken. His tongue experimentally explored his bottom lip and he winced as he found the spot where his teeth had been driven into the soft tissue. Damn! He had broken a tooth as well. The Bureau would be paying for that one.

Cracking open one eye he shook his head to flick away the blood that threatened to run unchecked into his eye from a laceration over his eyebrow. The gunmen were standing to one side exchanging heated words as one of them tried to stop the bleeding from his mouth where Josiah had managed to successfully use his head as a battering ram. Straining his ears he could just hear the altercation between the two men.

"First you let that bitch break your nose, then an old man in goddamn handcuffs manages to rearrange your face..."

"I told you it was a stupid idea to get those guys up here, didn't I? Why the fuck couldn't you just blow Larabee away and be done with it?"

"The game. It's all about the game."

"Well, we're losing..."

He heard the sound of a fist on flesh.

"You know, you're a waste of space. I should put you with this sorry lot and just press the button. End of story."

"You can kiss my ass!"

"Just shut up and do as I say, if you can stop whining for two seconds. Now find that kid!"

Satisfied that he had achieved a small measure of success, he allowed his head to drop back and hoped Flintoff had something definite planned before he not only ran out of diversions but also the wherewithal to carry those diversions out.

Dunne skirted the blockhouse that housed the stairs and rested for a moment against its far wall. The wound in his hip was starting to throb from his exertions and the entire left side of his pants from waist to thigh was saturated front and back with blood. He shuddered as he pressed the heel of his hand over the wound in an attempt to slow the bleeding and sat for several minutes thinking out his next move. He had nowhere to go, nowhere to hide and he had no doubt that once the initial fracas had died down that one of the gunmen would start looking for him. Edging forward he peered around the corner of the blockhouse. *Okay J.D. Think of something fast and make it good.*

Stef Bertinelli knew he was good. Sure Tanner was better and he respected the Texan for that but he also knew that the cocky bastard didn't believe he could make the shot. Well, it sure as hell wasn't going to be easy. Was it ever? He again sighted down the scope and prepared to make the biggest gamble of his career. *You're not on the range now, Stef, this is the real thing.* Lives depended on this: not only the legendary Chris Larabee, but four of his men not to mention Tanner's chick. So? Just another job. He concentrated on regulating his breathing, focusing his mind, centering himself. *Who're you foolin', Stef. Miss this one and Tanner and Standish will take it very personally. So damn personally that you'll be lucky to stay alive longer than it takes them to find you.* He decided there were probably better and definitely quicker ways to die than at the hands of Vin Tanner or Ezra Standish. If he missed, he'd just jump from the building and save them the trouble. Moving his finger from the trigger he made a slight adjustment to the eyepiece lens turning it several degrees and instantly sharpened his view. He slowly -- smoothly -- lowered the rifle, the scene in the scope lens drifting liquidly upward, and focused on the group clustered in his sights. Nine hundred yards. A slight adjustment to compensate for distance and angle. *God, the angle is a bitch. Tanner was right.* Just two and a half pounds of pressure

to do the job. His finger closed on the trigger; pulling back, slowly...slowly... *Come to mamma, motherfucker.*

J.D. knew there would be no second chances. He had to get it right first time. The guy had a gun - a Glock he thought, although exactly what particular piece of equipment fired the bullet made little difference if you were on the receiving end, unless of course you wanted to be sure of the size of the hole it was going to make. He had a pair of handcuffs, which were most unfortunately still attached to his wrists. Ezra would have laughed in his face given those odds. He took several deep breaths and, using the wall behind him for leverage, got to his feet relieved to find it didn't hurt quite as much as he thought it would. Now as long as he didn't have to do anything too strenuous he could handle it. *Yeah, right J.D. Piece of cake.*

The gunman was moving slowly, snuffling noisily through his broken nose and having to breath through his mouth; an action which merely exacerbated his pain as cold air whistled through exposed nerves in two broken front teeth, his mind focused utterly and completely on revenge. Someone was going to pay and he didn't care who it was. If he ever managed to find the little shit he'd dance a number on his face before he shot him in the balls. Just the idea of it made him feel better. Where the hell could anyone find to hide up here? *Can't get away, man, I'm comin' after you.* Sidling tentatively along the side of the blockhouse he gripped his gun a little tighter in anticipation.

He didn't anticipate the little bastard throwing himself into a commando roll at his feet, tripping him then coming up from behind in one smooth and incredibly fast movement. Nor did he anticipate the choking pressure on his windpipe as manacled wrists looped over his head and the improvised garrote began to crush his throat. Frantic, he tried to claw at his attacker but the pressure only increased and he started to panic in earnest, using elbows, feet, hands to try and break free. His gun was useless except as a bludgeon, which he used with abandon striking body blows wherever he could but his vision was starting to sparkle with coloured lights and it was becoming harder to breathe. *Who would've thought this short-assed kid would be dumb enough to fight a man with a gun? Who would've thought he'd be so fucking strong!* His breath was whistling painfully through what remained of his trachea and he dropped the gun to scrabble ineffectually at the metal bands pressing mercilessly into his neck.

The man had stopped struggling. He didn't know when that had happened but there was no longer any resistance, just a dead weight hanging slackly from his hands. He felt sick and giddy, his side now a flaming brand of agony where the gunman had elbowed him repeatedly in his death throes, and he wanted to do nothing more than lie down very quietly and curl up in a very small ball. Warily lifting his hands, he kned the man in the back and watched him tumble face down and very dead onto the ground. He leaned down to pick up the man's weapon, surprised that as he did so several large drops of fresh blood appeared on the rooftop by his left foot. *No time to think about it now. Nathan can fix it later.* He settled the gun in a double-handed grip, out of necessity rather than choice and moved on unsteady legs towards the object of his rising anger.

He last thing Josiah had intended was drawing attention to himself again. He believed that enough attention had already been lavished on him for one day, but he had seen J.D. and the kid had a gun. Against all odds he had disarmed the second gunman and Josiah's admiration for the youngest member of the team climbed several notches; if nothing else J.D. had guts -- not always a lot of sense but plenty of courage. Ignoring the generalised pain that seemed to flow through his body with his blood he rolled to his knees and raised his head.

"Hey," he yelled, a little hoarsely but still loud enough to command attention, "I don't think we finished our conversation!"

The gunman took a step forward, then glanced back at Nathan and Buck, his weapon still trained on them before he switched his attention back to Josiah. Sanchez would have bet his pension that under that ski mask the first signs of doubt were showing on the man's face. This was the moment when all their lives were at maximum risk.

“Sanchez, why don’t you join us over here. I hate to shout.”

Josiah made a show of getting to his feet. All he needed to do was keep the attention on him; anything to conceal J.D.’s approach. He just hoped that J.D. knew what the hell was doing. If it had been Vin he would have had every confidence that he could pop the guy with one shot before he even thought about hitting the detonator but J.D. although a good shot was no marksman. If he missed, he had no doubt that they would all die. Quite deliberately he staggered and moved several steps sideways before he started to move forward in a shambling gait that was only part pretense. Predictably, the gunman tracked the profiler’s progress his right hand continuing to keep the gun trained on Buck, his left to hold the electronic detonator oblivious to the new threat closing on him like a stalking panther.

Two and a half pound of pressure. Breathe out, in, out, in and hold...pull back, back, back...

J.D. stopped and adopted a double-handed firing stance in spite of the throbbing agony in his hip, pushing the pain aside and steadying his breathing. *You can do this. You must do this. Can. Must.*

“ATF! Freeze!”

Bertinelli had the target precisely in his sights -- an instant of time only to complete the shot. The trigger now only needed the merest additional pressure to release the firing pin. He stopped breathing on the exhale, so still that he could feel the throbbing of his pulse in his arms and waited until that moment when his heart was between beats. Pull.

The gunman’s head and right arm snapped around in unison to deal with the unexpected threat from a new quarter. Face off. Nine millimetre Glock against .44 Ruger Blackhawke.

“Shoulda taken the advantage while you had it, kid.”

He sounded almost sorry that he hadn’t.

“Drop the gun, or I’ll shoot.” J.D. was annoyed at himself that he allowed his voice to waver. Annoyed that he hadn’t already shot the bastard. Annoyed that he had blown the only chance he had. Annoyed that he had left himself wide open.

The gunman slowly raised his left hand, taunting the young agent with the remote unit.

“You really think you’re good enough to kill me before I can press this button?” He took a half a step back. “I know I can take you down before you can even squeeze of a shot. Still wanna try?”

J.Ds finger tightened on the trigger. It’s now or never. Do it or die. Don’t do it and you still die.

...pull...

The gunman jerked convulsively, a tiny movement but enough for Dunne to react, depressing the trigger of the Glock not just once but four times before he realised that the man was already dead. His head had erupted in a shower of crimson; blood, bone and brains spraying explosively from the back of his skull before J.D.s first bullet had found its mark. In a moment of time that seemed to go on forever J.D. watched the man fall forward, the detonator tumbling from his hand as he fell -- lifeless. Lowering his weapon, he limped forward and rolled the body over with his foot. A dime size hole had been punched above his left eye; the killing shot. The one he knew he had not fired. One bullet had torn into the man’s throat, the rest had hit, and been deflected by, his body armour. *Great work, J.D. - you blew it. Left up to you everybody would now be a technicalour Jackson Pollack spread halfway across Denver.* Feeling sick and light-headed, he dropped to one knee then slowly twisted until he was sitting down before the

inevitable happened and he wound up embarrassingly horizontal. Warily he rested his head on one raised knee, too drained to do anything more energetic than closing his eyes.

Buck had been sure the kid was going to die. That he would see him blown away before his eyes while he stood helplessly by and watched it happen. Then suddenly the game had changed. Someone had pulled an ace from their sleeve.

He didn't move when the gunman toppled bonelessly forward. He didn't even move when J.D. folded slowly like a rag doll beside the body. He was still frantically trying to compute what had happened in that split second after J.D. had yelled his warning. What *had* happened? In the background he heard Josiah yelling for the bomb squad and medics and managed to pull his scrambled thoughts into some kind of order. *J.D!*

Zoé twisted her head to look back at him as if she had read his thoughts.

"You want to see how J.D. is." She was delivering an instruction not asking a question. "It's okay. I can do this as long as Nathan doesn't decide to walk away."

Nathan shook his head.

"Hell, ain't nothin' I can do with my hands behind my back anyway, Buck, but I think he's gonna need you."

Buck took a step back, not moving until he was certain Zoé could tolerate the added strain, then crossed at a run to where J.D. sat motionless beside the dead gunman.

Zoé stood quietly to one side, swathed in a borrowed and too-large jacket stamped with an authoritative BATF across the shoulders, watching as Chris and J.D. were secured on stretchers. Chris pale and unconscious, J.D. paler but conscious. Of the two she was more worried about Chris whose wounds were of a different kind and, she guessed, harder to heal. She shivered and wrapped the coat closer around her feeling the sudden pain of the razor cut across her breast, feeling suddenly alone and exposed, feeling so tired that her entire body was trembling. She thought she was going to cry.

"You comin', Princess?"

Buck. She smiled then. From anyone else the endearment would have been patronising and she would have reacted accordingly, from this man she accepted it without offence; as she accepted the embrace as his arm curved protectively around her shoulders.

"Vin'll kill me if I don't look after you."

She squinted up at him a tiny frown creasing her forehead, managing to look slightly irritated.

"I really wish you'd have thought of that a bit sooner."

Ezra said nothing. Vin, denied visual access to the scene being played out in East Street, sat chewing anxiously on the inside of his lip as he listened instead to the information coming through the commlink headset. Ezra heard the slight, sharp intake of breath from the man beside him, saw the elation in his eyes, and that was enough to tell him what he needed to know. Silently he reached out and offered his hand. Vin clasped the Southerner's forearm in an intense grip, a gesture which spoke of friendship and solidarity -- of a shared experience survived -- rather than a simple congratulatory handshake.

"Son of a bitch, Ezra. He did it." The marksman pulled off the headset and dropped it on the bed. "Nine hundred yards, Ez!"

Standish smiled a little at the almost reverential awe in the Texan's voice and returned the Roman handshake in equal measure.

"You said it could be done."

Vin laughed a little shakily.

"Yeah, I know. But by me."

Ezra nodded once. Understanding.

He released his grip and rubbed a hand over his face.

"I don't know about you, Vin but I feel as though I've just been over Niagara Falls in a barrel."

Tanner grinned, unadulterated joy still reflected in his eyes.

"Don't like to tell you this, Ezra but you look like it too."

In truth, the Southerner felt worse than he had since coming out of intensive care. He ached all over and felt hot and feverish and the very prospect of standing up and taking the necessary steps that would get him back to his bed actually made him feel nauseous. Or maybe he was just going to throw up anyway. He leaned back in the chair and closed his eyes, feeling the bone deep ache in his pelvis and an unpleasant tightness across his abdomen that reminded him of his recent surgery. *Was it ever going to be over?*

"I'll be fine when I've had some sleep," he murmured, "After all I was awakened, quite rudely I might add, at some ungodly hour this morning."

Vin frowned, his good humour quickly dissipated by his genuine concern.

"Are you sure you're okay? You really do look like shit."

"Thank you. Remind me to explain to you the fine art of tact some time."

"No, I mean it. You're as white as these sheets. Here, drink something." He leaned across to pour some water, but his hand froze midway as he noticed a widening patch of red staining the Southerner's pyjama pants. "Ezra, you're bleeding."

Ezra was already fighting a battle to hold onto the contents of his stomach, swallowing back the saliva that was flooding his mouth and decided at that moment that he was definitely not okay. Suppressing the continuing urge to retch he finally managed to speak.

"Mr.Tanner, I believe it might be prudent at this point to summon assistance."

Flintoff was still trying to come to terms with the outcome of the day's events. He had been in charge, co-ordinating the overall plan, yet somehow he had been reduced to the role of observer, at best a minor participant. Against all odds Larabee's team had managed to steal the show again and no doubt there were already a couple of commendations in the pipeline. That kid J.D. certainly had guts -- stopped a bullet and still managed to take out the bad guys. Not that he begrudged them any of the glory; the whole crazy affair could just as easily have gone the other way and in that case they would still be putting what was left of the team into body bags. No, he was glad he would have the opportunity to shake young Dunne's hand and congratulate him on his fine performance. Tanner and Standish had been a welcome, if long range, addition to his task force and he owed them both a beer or three for their contribution. These bastards could still operate from a hospital bed for Christ's sake! No wonder they

had been dubbed the Magnificent Seven, although he was beginning to believe that should be changed to Indestructable.

He moved to enter the hospital room from which Tanner and Standish had co-ordinated their end of the operation but was forced to hastily step aside as a loaded gurney was hastily pushed through the door and wheeled quickly down the hall. Standish? Still looking over his shoulder, he finally made his entrance. The tech staff were still packing up the computer and communications equipment, Tanner sat up in bed looking like someone who lost a buck and found a dime rather than one of the instigators of a successful op. Flintoff flicked a quick glance towards the second -- empty -- bed and jerked a thumb in the direction of the corridor.

“What’s up with Standish?”

The Texan looked up, his hand straying to his chest where his broken ribs continued to remind him in no uncertain terms that he was far from ready to take on the world again just yet.

“Sprung a leak,” he answered laconically.

Flintoff frowned. A leak?

“Huh?”

Tanner shrugged.

“Haemorrhage.”

“Oh. Tough luck.”

Flintoff had never noticed before how icy Tanner’s eyes could be; now he was on the receiving end of a sub-zero glare he could believe that he was looking into the soul of a killer. At that moment it was of little assurance for him to know they were on the same side of the law. He coughed apologetically.

“Sorry, Vin. Not thinking straight. Bad?”

Tanner waved a dismissive hand and the frost thawed half a degree.

“Gotta stitch him back together. At least he’s in the right place.”

Flintoff took a few steps forward.

“Just wanted to thank you both for today. You did a good job.”

Tanner nodded just once accepting the compliment and Flintoff thought absently how talking to the marksman was more like a trip to the dentist than a regular conversation. Each word like pulling a tooth. For God’s sake, the Texan made a Trappist monk look talkative.

“Got an ID yet?”

The Section Supervisor shook his head, knowing Tanner wanted a name so badly it hurt.

“I’ll let you know as soon as I do.”

The blue eyes bored into him again but the ice had melted and Flintoff saw something else there; just for a moment a flicker of pain.

“Chris? J.D.?...”

Flintoff understood. He was asking about the whole team.

"Everyone's here, son. All a little worse for wear except Buck and Nathan. I think they're all still in ER."

"Zoé?"

"She's..."

"Right here."

Both men turned to the diminutive figure, still barefoot and still swathed in a BATF jacket that covered her to her neck almost to knee. She stood forlorn and waif like in the doorway, hands plunged deep into the pockets, her eyes flicking uneasily around the room before finally settling on Tanner.

Flintoff signalled to the two technicians with a jerk of the head and gathering the last of the equipment together they preceded him out of the room. With a slow smile and a hastily sketched wave in Tanner's direction he closed the door behind him. Lucky bastard.

Buck felt a surge of almost paternal affection towards the boy -- no, man -- lying in the bed. J.D., still knocked out by the pain killers, was only half awake and muttering about being sorry for screwing up. The older agent felt a constriction in his throat that threatened to choke him. Sorry? The kid had taken a bullet, managed to disarm and kill one of the gunmen and was apologising for not getting a clean kill on the second. His eyes were drawn to the ragged abrasions circling both Dunne's wrists where the handcuffs had cut through flesh.

"You did good, J.D." he managed finally, tearing his eyes away although he couldn't stop his voice wavering, "Real good, J.D. I'm proud of you."

Dunne sighed and seemed to settle; eyes closing at last, his long sooty lashes a dark fringe against pale skin. Buck sat for a long time just watching the even rise and fall of the man's chest. The bullet had torn through muscle, missing major blood vessels and bone by millimetres, entering just above his left hip bone and exiting in the upper part of his left buttock. Just a few days in hospital they'd told him and he'd be as good as new. After a couple of units of blood in tandem with some antibiotic-laced intravenous fluids his colour was gradually returning and Buck was starting to believe their reassurances. Still, he would not be happy until the kid was once again back to his hyperactive self, finding it hard to adjust to the fact that the pale and unmoving figure in the bed was truly his little buddy. Impulsively he reached out and brushed an errant strand of hair back from the kid's face.

"You're the best, kid."

He stood up then and with a heavy sigh turned to leave. It was not over yet. *Chris*. Hell, not only Chris but Vin and Ezra. Nathan he knew had already taken Josiah home. The profiler had been patched up in ER needing little more than some adhesive tape to fix the laceration over his eyebrow, a couple of stitches in his lip and some painkillers for the bruising that covered most of his body but Jackson had insisted that he go home instead of hovering around the hospital doing nobody, least of all himself, any good. Surprisingly Sanchez had agreed and the doctor had gone with him. Buck wasn't sure what had happened to Zoé but he thought he could hazard a guess as to where she would gravitate. He imagined she and Vin would have a lot of talking to do -- among other things if either of them had any sense. He was firm believer in actions speaking louder than words.

Waking up had never been this hard before. He couldn't understand why it was such a struggle now. He blinked owlishly, not fully awake and trying to overcome the thick-as-molasses lethargy that weighed him down. God, just the physical effort of getting his eyes to open seemed to be an insurmountable task. Damn Nathan and his medication. He panicked for a moment finding himself unable to move his arms. Had they finally restrained him? What had he done this time? He couldn't remember. Then slowly

he turned his head and a brief flash -- a single image -- of memory forced a tiny involuntary gasp from his lips. His shoulder. Collar bone broken. That was why he couldn't move his right arm; it was firmly immobilised in a brace. His other arm he discovered to his great relief was restricted only by an intravenous line and all at once the memories came back in a rush. The clarity he had sought suddenly became an unwelcome intrusion and he found his emotions reeling as within the space of a few seconds he plunged deeply into a trough of despair, to break free and ride a wave of elation only to be dumped a moment later into a shallow pool of infinite sadness where he languished unable to summon the energy to break free.

He was alone. Oddly, the concept disturbed him. His mind grasped the image of a woman -- Zoé -- and his heart started to hammer thunderously in his chest as if it would escape the confines of his ribs then, managing to order this teeming thoughts, he picked up and followed a logical thread. He was alive -- she was alive. A reasonable assumption he decided considering they had been melded like Siamese twins. He remembered pain then. Now he felt nothing and if he'd have been able to muster enough strength he would have roared in frustration. Memory was like a jigsaw with pieces missing and the parts that he could remember with any degree of lucidity merely added to his general sense of confusion. He blinked again, fighting to stay awake although the drugs in his system kept trying to tempt him back into a realm that offered him an escape he no longer wanted. He allowed himself to relax. No longer fighting but not surrendering. What had he told Ezra? *Let it go. You don't have to fight all the time.*

A sound. A touch that jolted through his system like an electrical charge, his hypersensitive skin magnifying the sensation to such a degree that he flinched as if struck.

"Sorry, Chris. Didn't mean to startle you."

"Buck?" It was a hoarse whisper forced through a parched throat, scratchy and barely audible.

"One and the same, pard. Glad to see you finally awake."

Chris unglued his eyelids again and managed to keep them open long enough to convince himself that his oldest friend was indeed reality and not just a figment of his confused imagination.

"You're...okay." Just getting the two words out was a huge effort and took all his energy.

"We're all okay, Chris," confirmed Wilmington.

Chris nodded slowly. All okay. A piece of the jigsaw.

"Had us worried there for a while, you old war-dog," continued Buck softly.

"Worried myself." A confession.

A quiet laugh. Relief.

"You missed the big finish. Should've stuck around for the ending."

The touch again. Warm, caring.

Chris worked a little moisture into his dry mouth and swallowed.

"The bad guys?"

"Dead."

Another nod. Satisfaction. Another piece of the jigsaw falling into place.

"Tired." An admission.

“Go back to sleep, Chris. I’ll take care of things.” *Take care of you.*

With a deep sigh he took his own advice and let go, content knowing that Buck wouldn’t.

Vin had yet to breathe. *God, Zoé! What have they done to you?* The pain in his chest suddenly became real as his damaged lung, unable to cope with the increased pressure, prompted him to take a breath. *Damn.* He drew in a sharp breath easing both the tension and the pain, and struggled for the words that refused to come. Finally guarding his ribs with one hand he reached out across the space between them with the other. It was enough.

Zoé was laughing and crying at the same time, talking in short disjointed bursts between kisses while her hands sought contact with as much of Vin’s body as she could manage as if trying to convince herself that he was real -- that she indeed was real. Gradually that initial almost frantic exchange became something slower and more intense as they both responded to a stronger need. The kisses became longer, deeper and more ardent until the Texan was eventually forced to break contact, slumping against the pillows desperately short of breath.

“Sorry. Hard to breathe.”

Zoé drew back and raised a hand to stroke his cheek apologetically.

“My fault.”

She saw the change in his eyes, darkening from cornflower blue to something much more sinister, and she knew he had seen the blood and bruises as her coat fell open. Wordlessly, he leaned forward and drew aside the jacket. She closed her eyes, afraid of what she would see reflected in his face, and a single tear slid down her cheek as she felt his fingers brush against her skin. He traced every imperfection: the bruises -- thumbprints -- on her neck, the bites across the tops of her breasts, the newly sutured razor cut, down to the livid bruising on her thighs. Slowly he slid the jacket from her shoulders, a gesture which in other circumstances would have been sensuous but now made her tremble with something other than desire.

“Turn around.” His voice was husky, his anger carefully controlled.

She let the coat drop to the floor and slowly turned to present her back to him. Again his fingers trailed lightly across her exposed skin, so different from the ones that had followed the same path earlier, then finally he took her hand and she turned to face him once again, silent tears now coursing unchecked down her cheeks.

Vin cursed the tube anchored in his chest wall, restricting his movement and preventing him from just taking Zoé in his arms. Instead he drew her forward by the hand and prompted by the gesture she slid into the bed beside him. Pulling her close he wrapped his arm around her and rubbed his cheek against her hair.

“Have I told you lately how much I love you?” he whispered softly.

She cried then. Wracking sobs that tore the heart out of the Texan who was powerless to do anything more than hold onto her and take away some of the hurt.

Zoé finally slept, physically exhausted and emotionally wrung out, and curled up against him she looked almost childlike with her tear-streaked face pressed into his chest and her hand clutching the sheet. Her breath stirred the fine hairs around his nipple and he sighed, his desire for her so strong that it was almost painful. Why this woman? Their time together would soon be little more than a memory. She would go, he would stay. Whatever promises they might make the width of the Atlantic ocean and half of the continental US would lie between them; no, they would each go their own way and live out separate lives. No harder than returning a book to the library, right? Right! He made himself comfortable and

closed his eyes pushing the reality of their impending separation to the back of his mind, determined instead to value every moment of the time they had remaining.

The swish of the door opening although barely audible was enough to disturb him from the light doze he had fallen into. Ezra? He was surprised to find Buck striding towards him, closely followed by Stef Bertinelli. The two men exchanged a look and a grin.

“Not wastin’ any time there is he, Stef? Don’t think even I’ve ever done it in a hospital bed.”

Tanner let it slide, not rising to the bait.

“Stef. Good shot, man.”

The two marksmen shook hands and Bertinelli’s gaze slid to the woman lying beside Tanner.

“Glad to be of service. Could’ve been better though. Went an inch to the left off target.”

The Texan nodded. It happened.

“I’ll take it anyway. Cut it pretty fine though?”

Bertinelli nodded thoughtfully.

“You were right. It was a bitch of a shot. Had a narrow window of opportunity and a lot of other players gettin’ in the way. Thought I was going to take off that kid’s head when popped up in front of the target.”

Tanner saw Buck stiffen and he smiled tightly.

“Joke, Buck.”

Bertinelli laughed then and made to leave.

“See you around, Tanner. If you need any more favours, call me.”

The Texan almost snorted.

“Yeah, sure thing, Stef,” then under his breath, “Cocky bastard.”

Buck waited for the sniper to leave then pulled up a chair and sat astride it looking sadly at the Englishwoman. Vin brushed Zoé’s dark hair away from her neck and exposed one of the thumbprints pressed into the soft flesh.

“What happened to her, Buck?”

Wilmington’s expression darkened.

“She hasn’t told you?”

“Hell, Buck. She’s done nothin’ but cry.”

“Understandable.”

“Damn it, Buck. I don’t know what I’m supposed to do.”

Wilmington smiled tightly.

“I’d say you’ve got the right idea already. Just be there.”

Tanner nodded. He'd be there. he just hoped it would be enough.

Ezra didn't feel too much better than when he'd been wheeled out of this very room several hours before. He still had an overwhelming urge to throw up, he still felt as if he'd been over Niagara Falls in a barrel and now, to add insult to injury, he felt as if he'd had the unfortunate experience of pissing razor blades. He took several deep breaths and managed to keep his unruly stomach under control then braced himself to turn on his side. The undercover agent generally took pride in his ability to remain unruffled in the most taxing situations but the entirely unexpected sight of Tanner sharing his hospital bed with his current enamorata, namely a scantily clad Zoé Elliott, was enough to severely test his sang-froid.

"Mr. Tanner," he slurred, his Southern drawl for once quite pronounced, "In future some prior warning might be in order as to your intended sleeping arrangements. I have no particular ambition to add a coronary to my experiences after being subject to such a display of wanton licentiousness."

Vin summoned a wan smile.

"Is your mouth always the first thing to recover, Ezra? Reckon you come out of the anesthetic talkin'." "Sarcasm does not become you, Mr. Tanner," he responded tiredly, but his indignation was feigned and tempered by the briefest of smiles.

His gaze settled on Zoé, sleeping soundly beside the Texan.

"Seems I missed the party. Would you care to give me an update on the situation?"

Vin stared up at the ceiling for a minute.

"It's a fucking mess!"

"Ah, succinct and to the point as usual. However, I confess I was seeking a little more in the way of detail."

"Don't know too much more'n you. Talked to Buck. J.D.'ll be out of here in a coupla days, took a shot in the hip and lost a lot of blood but otherwise okay; Buck said Chris woke up for a while but he's wasted..."

"Zoé?" interrupted Ezra softly, treading on uncertain ground.

The fleeting expression of sorrow that washed over the marksman did not go unnoticed by the Southerner.

"Hurtin'." He said finally and in one word manage to convey every nuance and subtle shading of its meaning imaginable.

Ezra was himself an intensely private person and sensitive enough to understand the need for Vin to maintain a barrier around his feelings, especially where his relationship with Zoé was concerned. Under normal circumstances he would not presume to offer advice or indeed solace but Vin's emotional pain was a raw and weeping wound that the Southerner could not easily ignore. *No man is an island.* Gathering his courage but fully expecting a firm rebuttal from the quiet Texan he forged ahead.

"Vin. You can tell me to mind my own business, indeed suggest that I depart for the nether regions of Hell and I assure you I will take no offence but," he paused to take a breath, "...if it would help to talk...I have been known to listen on occasion."

For several minutes Vin remained silent but Ezra could read body language as well as he could read the English language, better if that were possible, and for the Southerner Tanner was already speaking. He

waited patiently understanding that Vin had decided to offer up a part of himself for scrutiny and determined not to betray that trust. Finally the Texan took a breath and turned to meet Ezra's steady gaze before dropping his eyes to look at Zoé.

"Do you know what it's like to know you're going to lose something, Ezra?"

"Zoé?"

Tanner continued as if he had not heard the other man.

"We waste so much of the time we have then suddenly it's gone and you can't get it back. Same with words. You say something and you can't ever take it back."

Ezra sifted between the words for the meaning.

"Am I to assume that you and Zoé have exchanged words?"

Vin smiled humourlessly.

"Exchanged words? More like throwing rocks in a riot. We had a fight just before I got blown up. It was after Chris broke down. I ..." He stopped abruptly and closed his eyes as if to shut out a memory.

"Goddam it, Ezra! I thought she and Chris had...I thought she'd let Chris fuck her!"

For the second time in one evening Ezra's composure was rocked to its very foundations and he quickly buried the shock he felt at Vin's revelation deep enough to allow him to regain his equilibrium.

"Chris and Zoé? Why in God's name?"

"So stupid of me. She knew what I was thinking and she was right." He related the details of being called to the apartment, the frantic race through the city and how he had found Chris and Zoé, the hasty conclusion he had drawn and the consequences. "You know, Ezra. She was mad for Chris not for herself. Couldn't understand how I could believe he'd do that." He suddenly flashed an anguished look at the Southerner. "You live with Zoé. Haven't you ever wanted to..."

He stopped again, running out of words.

"Vin, if you're asking me whether I have had any carnal thoughts regarding the lady who is currently in your bed I fully intend to leave this facility alive and for that very fact alone I believe it would be imprudent of me to comment." Ezra's amusement was genuine.

Tanner looked up and managed a shy smile.

"Wouldn't it have been quicker to say yes."

"Quicker but not as safe." He became serious again. "Look, Vin. I doubt there's a man in the Bureau who having met Zoé hasn't let his imagination get away from him at one time or another, including Chris, but there's a huge difference between thought and deed."

"It was just a moment. Saw Chris all over Zoé. Felt like I'd been kicked in the balls."

"Does Chris know about this?"

The Texan stroked Zoé's shoulder.

"Christ, no! Last thing I need is Chris hating me too."

"So what happened," prompted Ezra, steering Vin back on track.

Nothing's changed. / I want to believe that, Vin and I know you do believe it. It's just a part of me that's wondering whether I mean any more to you than a convenient lay. / For God's sake, Zoé! Give me a break. You want to crucify me because I made a mistake? Yes, I admit I made a bad call. Yes, I was wrong. So I'm an insensitive bastard. What is it you want from me? Do you need to see me bleed before you can find one shred of compassion? I thought I knew you, Zoé, but now I'm not sure I ever knew you at all. And if you can't accept me as I am, with all my faults and insecurities then I don't think I want to. I just can't live up to your expectations of me.

"What happened was I lost it. Walked out. End of story. Next thing I was drowning in my own blood and wondering what the hell had hit me." He turned away to face the wall. "You know, if I hadn't left then, the kid -- Mano -- would still be alive. It's my fault. Should've gotten on the bike and ridden away."

The undercover agent knew that kind of guilt. The "what ifs" and "if onlys" that start to take over as you try to change the outcome if only in your own mind. The destructive second guessing that plagues you to the point of madness.

"Vin, it's not your fault. It's the fault of the crazy bastard who planted the bomb. If it hadn't been the kid, it would have been Chris or you or Zoé."

Ezra saw the slow nod.

"I know that." He struck his chest. "In here I know that, but it doesn't make it any easier." His grip on the woman tightened. "That's what I mean about things getting away, Ez. About wasting time."

The Southerner finally deciphered the writing between the lines. This wasn't just about mortality, it was about reality. About endings. About goodbyes.

"You've made your peace now?"

Another nod.

Ezra sighed, hesitated, pressed on.

"Far be it from me to give this kind of advice, Vin, but I suggest you take what you have in both hands and make the most of every minute of every day that you're given whether that be a week, a month, a year or a lifetime. No looking back. No regrets."

Vin was quiet for a moment then again met the Southerner's intense gaze. Cocking his head slightly as if listening to some inner voice he smiled; a slow, sad smile.

"No regrets."

Chris leaned back against the pillows, sitting up for the first time and feeling as weak as a newborn colt. His left leg was elevated, swollen knee encased in ice packs the joint so totally destabilised, he had been informed, that he would need surgery to repair the ligament. Still hurt like a bitch too. Reflexively he raised his hand to touch the inflamed welt around his neck and he was unable to hold back the flood of memories that came rushing back. He didn't try to stop them, letting the images come as they would -- some good, some bad -- prompting a roller coaster ride of mixed emotions. Something to talk over with the shrink, he thought wryly. And he knew beyond a shadow of doubt there was no escaping the psychiatrist's couch this time around. Until he had been assessed, reviewed, examined and pronounced physically and mentally fit there was no way he would be allowed back to active duty -- hell, any duty. Well if jumping through hoops was what it would take to get him back on the team he would become a fucking performing seal. Still, he supposed he'd be in good company: Ezra, J.D. even Zoé would have to go through a psychological debrief. S.O.P. He wasn't too sure about Vin. Agents who were shot in the line of duty had to routinely undergo counselling, he didn't know if it was the same when someone had tried to blow you up. *Who're you foolin'? You're the only one who completely lost it; the one who very*

quietly had a major breakdown in your best friend's bathroom. He still didn't remember exactly what had happened at the apartment but he could not shake the sense of shame that he had so publicly revealed his vulnerability if only to his friends. He sighed and felt the crushing weight of despair settle over him like a shroud. *Time for your meds, Larabee.* One image remained fixed in his mind; above everything else, throughout the horror and the pain, there had been one constant. And when he closed his eyes he could still feel the heat of her body pressed against his and when he slept...Hell, she had even begun to invade his dreams. The psych boys were sure as hell going to have some fun with this one.

"Receivin' visitors, Mr. Larabee?"

Startled from his introspective meditation his heart seemed to miss a beat before bounding away at a rapid pace and once again he was irritated by his hypersensitive reactions to any sound. Jumping like a fucking jackrabbit every time someone breathed! He remembered then what had triggered his initial reaction and turned his head in the direction of the voice. He already knew who it was. There was no mistaking that soft and lazy drawl. Ezra. Standing in the doorway, resting easily on his crutches, he looked tired but the dark circles under his eyes only seemed to emphasise their brilliant colour. And he was smiling.

"Thought I'd been put in solitary," Chris confessed hoarsely, surprised both at how difficult it was to speak and at the awkwardness which hung between them. The last time he had seen Ezra he had been unconscious and a ventilator had been doing his breathing for him. A lifetime ago.

He watched as the Southerner moved forward with a practiced ease, and a degree of nonchalance that only Ezra could achieve considering his injuries. Chris' mood switched instantly from a deep sense of sorrow for the undercover agent to smouldering anger for what he had endured. Knowing that the man responsible for his pain was beyond his grasp, beyond retribution, only increased his frustration; and the fact that he was already dead merely robbed him of the satisfaction of personally meting out his own justice. That he had no name on which to hang his rage added more fuel to a fire already burning out of control. Ezra paused self-consciously under the intensity of his gaze and Chris glanced quickly away not wanting to risk letting the demons loose.

"Geez, Ezra. How much weight have you lost?"

Standish rested again on his crutches and looked down at his lean frame then back to the man in the bed.

"Might I assume that you have not had cause to look into a mirror recently, Mr. Larabee?"

Chris smiled. Typical Ezra.

"Okay, so we both look like shit. Now are you gonna sit down before you fall down?"

"I shall take that as an invitation to remain," he responded, the words laced with a heavy dose of sarcasm.

Dexterously taking both crutches in one hand he snared a chair and deposited it, and himself beside the bed although Chris thought he saw a fleeting shadow of pain cloud the green eyes before the mask slipped back into place. For a moment both men were silent, shared memories crowding into the space between them, neither yet ready to acknowledge the depth of feeling that those memories engendered. Ezra finally drew a long breath and sighed.

"Chris. I think we have to talk."

Larabee plucked distractedly at the sheets, a sudden feeling of dread uncoiling in his gut.

"Yes," he agreed, "We do."

Ezra cleared his throat, momentarily nonplussed; suddenly rendered inarticulate by the very thought of carrying on down this path. Larabee was not an easy man to talk to at the best of times but having chosen this course of action he felt an obligation to see it through more for his own sake than for Chris'. He laughed, a short, humourless sound that only emphasised his chagrin.

"This may be the first and the last time you're ever likely to hear this but...I really don't know what to say. Or rather I don't know how best to say it." He dropped his gaze and waited a beat before continuing. "Unlike Buck who has no difficulty at all in expressing his feelings I confess I find the whole idea of freely unburdening myself to another rather uncomfortable..." He paused again, mustering the courage to proceed. "...but if I don't talk about this to someone I'm going to go out of my fucking mind!"

Larabee did not raise his head.

"You too?" Quietly spoken. An admission. "Do you really think I'm the right man to be talking to, Ezra. Hell, I can't even keep my own shit together." Ezra closed his eyes. *God, what was he thinking of? Maybe he should close the lid on this Pandora's box right now before anything escaped.*

"But you were there, Chris," he whispered, the anguish in his voice a tangible thing. "You're the only one who knows."

The blond man sighed and finally forced himself to meet the Southerner's clear-eyed gaze.

"I know? I know only that I've never been so goddamned scared in all my life, Ezra and that's something I'm not proud of."

Ezra smiled self-deprecatingly.

"I believe I had that particular monopoly, Chris."

"Jesus Christ!" Chris' voice cracked like a pistol shot, "You had a coupla tons of reinforced concrete sitting on top of you, Ezra. Look at you! Still busted up to shit. For God's sake you were back in OR only yesterday. How long before you can walk properly again? How long before you don't have to piss through a catheter? How long before you can get a hard-on again? Tell me that why don't you? You fucking-well DIED up there, Ezra. Don't you understand? YOU...DIED!!"

Ezra recoiled as if Chris had physically struck him, all colour draining from his face and for a moment the two men traded shocked stares. One demon at least had escaped.

"Yes." The words were breathed rather than spoken, raw emotion robbing his voice of any power. "I did. I was in hell. And I was terrified." His too-bright eyes fastened on the other man. "But it was you who brought me back, Chris."

Larabee shook his head, confused.

"Brought you back? Nathan..."

"Remember you said that if I ran out on you you'd follow me all the way to hell and drag me back?" He smiled then, embarrassed. "I can now confirm that a Larabee command transcends worlds. You wouldn't let me go. You gave me no choice. I had to come back."

A slow smile found its way onto Chris' face, although the undercover agent's revelation had startled him.

"Couldn't have you breaking up the team, Ezra."

"I owe you my life."

"You owe me nothing. If you want to know the truth you've got more guts than probably anyone else I've met and if I could be sure of showing half as much courage in the same circumstances I'd feel pretty damn proud of myself."

Standish tried to absorb what he had just heard. *Courage? Guts?* Words not commonly associated with Ezra Standish. He realised Chris had started to speak again.

"You know, Ez. I've always thought of myself as a strong person. I guess other people think of me as being tough, aggressive, hard-assed but look at me now. I lost it so completely that I didn't think I was ever going to get back -- like your hell."

"And who brought you back, Chris?"

Larabee sighed allowing his head to fall back on the pillow and staring at the ceiling.

"Zoé." Ezra noticed Chris' hand clench and the flicker of sadness that darkened his eyes. Another demon loose. "And I couldn't do anything for either, any more than I could for you. Couldn't stop what they did to her."

Ezra's eyes narrowed.

"What did they do to her?"

Larabee continued to stare up at the ceiling.

"She wouldn't tell me. But he wanted her to...us to...shit, Ezra I don't know!"

"You think he raped her?" The horror was evident in his voice although he controlled his reaction.

Chris' eyes, wet and shining, focused on the other man and he shook his head.

"I don't know. I don't think so. But he hurt her. And I did nothing." Disgust.

"Chris, I don't know the details. I wasn't there and I don't presume to know what you went through but I do know that if there was anything you possibly could have done you would have. You just pointed out, and quite forcefully I might add, my own catalogue of injuries. Yet you believe that even given your own physical condition you could have responded in a way that would have changed the outcome? Forgive me if I'm overstepping the boundaries of friendship but that's bullshit."

Ezra was not intimidated by the feral gleam that appeared in Chris's eyes. This was not the legendary Chris Larabee and one of his team; this was two men for once placed on an equal footing by a common experience.

"What do you know?" The tone was bitter.

"More than you could imagine," came the weary reply, "I know all there is to know about self-recrimination; about fear and loathing. Compared to the depth of my experience in these matters you, Mr. Larabee, are but a babe in arms. Trust me."

A silence fell between them, contemplative rather than awkward as each man withdrew to consider the implications of that which had been said, and of that which could not be unsaid. After several minutes Larabee finally took a deep breath, releasing it slowly as he fixed Standish with his hallmark stare, tempered only slightly by the grin that appeared on his face.

"Always an ace up the sleeve, huh?"

Ezra inclined his head, graciously accepting the backhanded compliment and with a casual flick of the wrist tossed an ace of spades on the bed. Chris stared for a moment at the card then shook his head unable to stop the laugh that erupted. *Canny bastard! Only Ezra could pull off a trick like that.*

“Always, Mr. Larabee. Just remember that.”

Picking up the card Chris slowly turned it over in his fingers. The intensity of their exchange had stirred up emotions he had never before allowed to surface, never consciously acknowledged and that Ezra was the one to whom he was exposing himself so candidly was in itself remarkable. Yet he knew instinctively that the undercover agent understood. And that he in turn understood the Southerner. For one moment in time they had made a connection so intimate that they had been able to see beyond the façade that each of them presented to the world; and that behind the hardened shell of their disparate personalities they were closer than either would care to admit. Chris thumbed the gilt edge of the playing card and focused his attention on the symbol that had become Ezra’s calling card.

“You know, Ezra, courage isn’t about the things you feel, it’s about the things you do. To be afraid doesn’t mean that you aren’t brave it just means you aren’t stupid - that you value your own life.”

“This worthless hide? “ retorted Ezra, mockingly, and Chris immediately identified that his carefully constructed defences were back in place.

“That the same worthless hide that you hang five thousand dollar suits off?”

The Southerner laughed, winced and caught his breath as his body reminded him in no uncertain terms that he was far from recovered, but continued to grin in obvious amusement.

“My dear Mr. Larabee, have you learned nothing? As my esteemed mother has always maintained: Appearances are everything.”

Chris was unable to resist a smile. Ezra at least was back in business. The two men exchanged a glance briefly held; an understanding that needed no clarification, a promise that required no words.

“Ez, I...”

“McCAFFREY! SEAN McCAFFREY!”

Both men turned as a hyperactive Buck Wilmington burst noisily through the doorway, closely followed by both Nathan and Josiah, more subdued but looking equally as pleased. The significance of the announcement and the exuberance with which it was delivered was not lost on either man.

Ezra shrugged, a mute denial. Chris’ blank gaze travelled between the three men, to Ezra, and back. The name meant nothing to him. He shook his head, puzzled, knowing there was something more; some connection he was expected to make.

“Don’t know the name.”

Buck grinned wolfishly.

“Then how about this one?” he paused for effect. “Peter Landis.”

“Goddamn.” Chris could hardly force the word out.

If he was expected to recognise the name Ezra was failing badly.

“Would somebody care to enlighten me please as to the relevance of this particular name?”

Jackson lowered a hand onto the Southerner’s shoulder.

"A ghost from the past, Ezra. From before you came aboard."

"Goddamn," repeated Chris, shaking his head, "So what's the connection?"

Buck leaned on the foot of the bed.

"McCaffrey was Landis' brother in law. Pissed him off mightily when you -- we -- took Peter down."

Larabee remembered the case. Landis had been selling guns to school kids; anything from Saturday night specials to Uzis. It had been a long and involved investigation terminating in a messy bust which had ended in Chris killing not only Landis but his sister - McCaffrey's wife he now supposed.

"So what took him so long?"

"Just got out of jail, Chris," added Josiah, "For the last six months he's been biding his time, watching and waiting."

"We found enough explosives at his apartment to take out half of Colorado," interrupted Nathan, "And I don't think he had any intention of stopping until he'd done what he set out to do."

"Permit me to hazard a guess at what that might have been, Mr. Jackson," interjected the Southerner, "Eliminating Mr. Larabee here and anyone close to him?"

"Got it in one, Ez," conceded Wilmington, "Damn near managed it too. Four out of seven ain't bad."

"Eight," muttered Chris absently, mind reeling as he contemplated the repercussions of something he'd done nearly four years before. A spectre coming back to haunt him.

"What?"

"Zoé," he answered, "Don't forget Zoé."

The rapid exchange of guilty glances, and subtle changes in expression and body language did not go unnoticed.

"Gentlemen?" prompted Ezra, "Is there something you wish to say?"

Nathan threw him a look that had it been the dagger it resembled would have felled him instantly but Josiah merely shook his head as much in sorrow as resignation.

"Zoé's gone."

Chris' head snapped up.

"Gone? What the fuck do you mean gone?"

"We don't know where she is," confessed Buck, "Just up and left."

Chris speared Buck with a look that would bore through titanium.

"You let her go?"

"Now wait up here a minute. Zoé's a grown woman. I can't be..." Buck suddenly ran out of steam, knowing nothing he could say, no justification he could provide would satisfy Chris.

"You find her." A command.

"We're onto it, Chris," placated Josiah, "Probably just needs some time on her own."

"Vin?" asked Ezra, "He knows?"

Nathan shook his head. No.

"Didn't think that was a wise move right now," he responded quietly.

Larabee's eyes flashed, raking the three men with a steel-blue glare and Buck thought he might have seen a saner expression on a rabid dog.

"Find her!"

The water was scalding, sluicing off her body in cascades as she dragged the sponge repeatedly over her already glowing skin but it didn't matter how much she soaped and rinsed she still felt dirty and she knew that all the expensive toiletries in the world were not going to alter that fact. Turning off the water she wrapped her hair in a towel and slipped into Ezra's bathrobe, sitting down with a jolt on the edge of the bath tub as her legs suddenly turned to jelly. Shivering she buried her face in the robe inhaling the lingering scent of Ezra's cologne -- clean and fresh -- wishing he was there to offer her a shoulder to cry on but knowing that she had to do this alone. She had come to Ezra's knowing that she could not face the East Street apartment. This was as close to home as she had and the clean, orderliness of the place somehow helped to keep her focused, to keep the monsters at bay, although she understood that it was only a matter of time before they caught up with her. If she could run fast enough and far enough she might just be able to leave them behind.

She dressed quickly, tugging on jeans and a sweatshirt and pulling on a pair of loafers before brushing the snags out of her hair and dragging it back into a simple ponytail snared by nothing more sophisticated than a rubber band. Picking up her sunglasses and pocketbook from the dresser she glanced quickly around the room, noticing with a twinge of guilt that she had left blood on Ezra's robe; he was so fastidious she knew it would offend him but she didn't have time to do anything about it now. Maybe he would forgive her that one small sin.

In the living room she hunted for the spare keys to the Jag. Buck had arranged for the car to be brought back to the townhouse after the bombing of the ATF building -- God, how long ago was that now? -- but she couldn't find where he'd left the keys. Knowing Buck probably still in his pocket! She remembered Ezra kept a second set but where? She rummaged through the drawers in the dresser, her anxiety increasing as the need to leave became more pressing. *Damn, she had to get out!* At last she swept up the elusive key chain and dashed from the house, not even aware that tears were rolling silently and unchecked down her cheeks.

The Jaguar purred into life on the first turn of the key and she reversed quickly out of the driveway. The gas tank was full -- Ezra she knew was almost obsessive about keeping the beast topped up -- and she had every confidence that the twelve cylinder workhorse would take her exactly where she wanted to go. Turning on the CD player she sifted through the discs, Massenet just wasn't going to do it for her today. Thank God for Ezra's eclectic taste. She slipped in a disc, turned up the volume and as the pumping beat of Queen's Hammer to Fall blasted through the speakers she floored the accelerator and powered out of the street, the city and finally out of Denver.

Vin woke up alone. He had not even been aware of Zoé leaving and berated himself for allowing her to slip away unnoticed. *Keep it up, Tanner, you're getting to be an expert at being an insensitive asshole.* His ribs ached, his head pounded with a dull headache that threatened to develop into something far worse and he wanted nothing more than to tear the tube from his chest and walk out. The temptation was so strong that only the knowledge that the action would not only be foolish and painful but would ultimately add to his misery stopped him from obeying the impulse. Ezra's bed was empty and the Texan squinted at his watch: 10 o'clock. Jesus, what was he doing sleeping in the middle of the day?

Even Ezra was up and around before him. He wondered how long Zoé had been gone and more importantly, when she was coming back. So much he wanted -- needed -- to say. He thought of the bruises and bites again, the long line of stitches against her smooth, creamy skin and the urge to do violence rose in him like a serpent coiled and ready to strike. *Nothing will ever be the same.* The thought, unbidden, shocked him but not nearly as much as the thought that Zoé might already know that he would come to that conclusion. *Goddamnit! She couldn't think what had happened to her would change his feelings. Could she?*

He took a deep breath, testing. His ribs were still painful but it was getting easier to breathe and he no longer felt the unpleasant bubbling in his chest. The doc had said the tube could probably come out on the fourth or fifth day. Good. Today was the fourth day, and he fully intended to pull up stakes and be gone within the next twenty-four hours. He wondered if Ezra would mind if he stayed at the townhouse, somehow his apartment held no appeal for him and he was sure Zoé would not be ready to go back there either. He'd run it by the Southerner when he got back. Fuck it! Where the hell was everybody anyway?

Ezra rubbed his temples and felt the dull throbbing behind his eyes that signalled the beginning of a tension headache. He had been delaying the inevitable but as another hour ticked by without any further news he came to the conclusion that he could delay no longer. With a deep sigh of regret he retrieved his crutches and carefully got to his feet.

"I really think we should impart the news to Mr. Tanner now. I believe it would be grossly unfair to carry on this charade one moment longer."

Chris nodded a short, sharp indication of his approval and started to manoeuvre himself to the edge of the bed.

"Let's do it."

The Southerner raised an eloquent eyebrow as Chris successfully got both feet onto the floor.

"Do you think this is a particularly wise course of action, Mr. Larabee?"

The blond man looked up, his expression one of grim determination.

"No, but that never stopped me before."

Resigned to the fact that Larabee would carry out his intention with or without assistance Ezra rested on his crutches and extended his hand, easily hauling the older man to his feet using his upper body strength. Chris shifted his weight experimentally, grimaced at the result but found he could stand. Walking proved to be difficult but not impossible and after only a few metres sweat was standing out on his forehead and he was cursing under his breath at every step.

"I feel I'm obliged to remind you that this is not doing your knee any good, Chris."

Larabee rested for a moment using the door jamb for support.

"It's fucked anyway, can't make it any worse."

"A valid point," Ezra conceded, "But one I doubt your physician would agree with."

Slowly the two men moved out into the corridor and almost collided with J.D. The three of them executed a clumsy *pas de trois* and wound up in an impromptu embrace as each tried to steady the other and avoid the very real danger of one or all of them falling in a heap.

"What the hell are you doing here J.D.?" rapped out Chris gruffly, not displeased to see him but concerned for his welfare.

The youngest member of the team looked as lively as ever in spite of having just been on the wrong end of a .44 calibre bullet. He was obviously favouring his left side but otherwise seemed well.

"I got bored. Buck stopped by for a few minutes this morning, told me the news and I've been marking time ever since so I thought I'd come over and check you guys out." He looked pointedly from one to the other, his smile slipping. "You're going to see Vin."

Ezra released his grip on the young man's shoulder and retrieved one of his crutches, which was leaning drunkenly against the door.

"Correct, Mr. Dunne, and is it now your intention to accompany us on our mission?"

Dunne smiled again and moved in beside Chris to offer some much-needed support. After a moment's hesitation Larabee draped his good arm around the smaller man's shoulder and his expression softened slightly.

"Thanks, kid. You alright?"

J.D. slid an arm around Chris' back.

"Fine. Still a bit sore but I'm outta here tomorrow."

Chris suddenly shook his head and seeing the humour in the situation started laughing.

"Jesus Christ! Will you look at us? The three musketeers we are not."

"More like the three stooges," observed J.D. drily.

Ezra's gold tooth flashed in a quick grin.

"Speak for yourself, Mr. Dunne. I for one am able to identify a little more closely with Athos, Porthos and Aramis than Larry, Mo and Curly!" He pointed his crutch down the corridor. "And our D'Artagnan awaits."

"All for one..." began Chris quietly.

Ezra was the first to move, slipping his mask carefully back into place

"Yes, indeed, Mr. Larabee."

*Where do we go from here?
This isn't where we intended to be.
We had it all, You believed in me,
I believed in you.*

*Certainties disappear
What do we do for our dreams to survive?
How do we keep all our passions alive
As we used to do?*

*Deep in my heart I'm concealing
Things that I'm longing to say*

*Scared to confess what I'm feeling
Frightened you'll slip away.*

*You must love me.
You must love me.*

*Why are you at my side?
How can I be any use to you now?
Give me a chance and I'll let you see how
Nothing has changed.....*

Zoé pulled the big car off onto the shoulder and letting the engine idle in neutral allowed the music wash over her, feeling a sudden tightening in her throat. The lyrics were a little too close to home. Maybe she should have stuck with the hard rock that had kept her company thus far; the uncompromising, driving beat that had kept her moving - putting the miles behind her. She had driven fast and hard, the very action of keeping the car under control as she took it to the limit a catharsis. She didn't want to think about love. She wanted to feel power, to be in control, to take life by the throat and shake it into submission. With a sigh she leaned forward and rested her head on the steering wheel. *Nothing has changed.* No?

Leaning back, feeling physically drained, she glanced at the dashboard clock. Had she really been driving for nearly five hours? It came to her then that someone might actually be starting to worry about her. She had left with no other thought than to be free of the claustrophobia that threatened to smother her; first the sympathy, then the questioning looks. Buck, Nathan, Chris, Vin; they'd all seen the bruises, the bites, the scratches and wondered - did he or didn't he? But no one had asked. Fuck them all! She wrapped her arms around herself and shivered. *Damn it, you should have kept driving.* Without the rush of adrenaline, the buzz from pushing the car to the limit of adhesion, to sustain her she felt only sick, tired and hungry. Sighing she reached across to put the car back in gear ignoring the painful tug of stitches under her arm thinking: Where *do* we go from here?

Vin had not spoken for a full five minutes. He had listened to what Ezra had told him without comment and had uttered not one word since. What could he say? There was no way he could possibly package into neat phrases for public consumption the way he felt. He was certain Ezra would have some fine and fancy language somewhere in his extensive vocabulary that would cover it but he did not. He couldn't even resort to anger because he knew why she had gone. The need for space was something he understood and if he wasn't tethered to a suction bottle he would have been inclined to seek a similar escape. The emptiness came from not knowing if she was coming back, not to Denver -- she would have to do that sometime - but to him. Sometimes the tomorrow that you needed to make everything alright just never came.

He could pinpoint the moment it had all started to go sour. He glanced up at Chris, the catalyst, and was shocked to find that his expression seemed to mirror his own feelings then slowly allowed his gaze to travel between the three men. Ezra he knew would be worried sick, however calm and controlled he appeared; Chris would still be blaming himself for everything that had happened since the first explosion including Zoé's vanishing act and J.D.? Well, the kid wore his emotions on his face and right now he was wondering what the hell was the matter with everyone.

Chris. Closed off. Retreating again. *What are you thinking, Cowboy?*
Ezra. Shuttered. Feelings hidden behind that poker face. *Do you know how much she loves you?*
J.D. Confused. Sensing the tension but unsure of its cause. *Was I ever that young?*

"Vin?" He identified Ezra's soft Southern drawl and forced himself to make eye contact. "Do you have any idea where she might have gone."

"She doesn't have anywhere to go," he answered simply, "She just wanted to get away from here."

"It's been almost five hours, Vin."

"It's a big country."

J.D.'s frown deepened.

"Don't you care?"

The Texan's head reared up, the innocent question a painful goad.

"Of course I fuckin'-well care! But excuse me if I don't just up and join the posse and start chasing over half the goddamned state. You think I'm just sitting here because I want to, because I like having this," he indicated the chest tube with disgust, "shoved between my ribs? You think it doesn't tear me apart that I can't do anything?"

"Vin." Chris' quiet voice held a warning, but it wasn't enough.

He rounded on Chris with the speed of an striking rattler, his accusation as deadly as any venom.

"You were there with her, Chris. Why'd you let him do it?"

Larabee paled.

"That's not fair, Vin."

Ezra came quickly to his defence but Chris raised a hand. When he spoke his tone was deceptively mild but the steel was there, sheathed but ready nonetheless.

"No, Ezra. It's alright. It's a question that deserves an answer."

J.D. looked from one man to other, unable to ignore the tension positively crackling in the air.

"Don't do this guys."

The Texan continued to stare evenly at the older man, blue eyes glacial. Chris in turn fixed Vin with a cool, double-barrelled serve of the Larabee glare.

"Why'd I let him? Three words Vin -- I fucked up. And that's the one thing I can still do really well; doesn't take a lot of skill you know. Even a basket case can manage it without too much effort." He distractedly ran his free hand through his short hair, leaving it sticking up untidily in places. "Zoé at least put up a fight but she stopped after McCaffrey broke my shoulder. Don't know if you've tried this Vin, but when you've been hog tied with a rope around your neck that's strangling you and another crushing your balls there's no real incentive to do much more than just keep breathing."

Ezra shot a cautionary scowl at the marksman and reached out a hand to grip Larabee's forearm.

"Jesus, Chris, you don't have to do this."

"Zoé didn't tell me what happened; she said I didn't want to know. Maybe I didn't and she sure as hell didn't want to talk about it. It was better she went with him anyway, you wouldn't have liked the alternative any better. The sick son-of-a-bitch was going to make her choose. Him --," He finally dropped his gaze and his voice sank to little more than a whisper. "or me. And I don't think either of us could live with that."

Vin tore his gaze away from the blond man, his expression taking on a wild and trapped look as his eyes flicked between the other two men but still he said nothing. A thick silence descended; worse than the bitter recriminations which had gone before.

"Gentlemen," began Ezra finally, "This is too ridiculous for words. To apportion blame for events which are beyond anyone's control is not only pointless but destructive. Vin, I suggest you calm down and start thinking rationally before you say or do something you might truly regret. Chris, just for once let it go. Such a burden of guilt is not for an individual to assume."

Ezra had captured their attention. He rarely permitted himself displays of anger but now his quiet restraint had unerringly found its mark. The two protagonists turned to face him, tension dissipating into a bashful awkwardness as they recognised the truth behind the Southerner's words.

"Each one of us has been touched by this madman in some way," he continued, his tone gentler almost regretful, "and his taint will continue beyond the grave if you allow it to. The plan, as I understand it, was to bring about Chris' destruction. Would you carry that on, Vin? As individuals we seem to be experts in inflicting enough pain on ourselves without inflicting it on each other."

"Shit, Ezra." The Texan shook his head. "Make me feel like the biggest bastard to ever walk the earth, why don't you?"

"Nonsense, Mr. Tanner," replied Ezra glibly, tongue firmly in cheek, "I believe that particular position is already held by Mr. Larabee, unless of course you wish to challenge him for it."

Chris smiled at the undercover agent. Who needed shrinks with Ezra around?

"Vin?" He waited for Tanner to make eye contact before he continued. "Whatever you think of me, I *am* sorry about Zoé. Not for what I did, but for what I didn't do."

The Texan dragged his eyes away and allowed his head to fall back on the pillow, staring desolately at the ceiling.

"At least you were there."

Nathan slowed to a halt, pulling into the side of the road with a heavy sigh.

"Buck, how long do you plan on us following this here road? We've been at this for," he looked at his watch, "four hours now. You want me to drive clear into Utah?"

Buck rubbed his eyes between thumb and forefinger.

"No. I know when to call it quits. If she doesn't want to be found there's no way on God's earth we'll ever track her down." He glanced sideways at the man beside him in the driver's seat. "But you can break the news to Chris."

Jackson stretched and yawned.

"Wanna switch? I could use a break."

"Sure thing. Just give me a minute -- gotta water the horses."

Wilmington threw open the door and wandered out of sight into the shrubbery flanking the blacktop. Nathan took the opportunity to stretch his legs and leaned against the car looking into the distance as he waited for Buck to return.

The throaty roar of a powerful vehicle working through the gears as it came down the mountain broke the stillness, getting louder as it approached at what Nathan estimated to be a fair speed. As it came closer he could hear the tortured squeal of rubber from overtaxed tyres and he slowly shook his head, imagining a vehicle pushed the limits and a driver barely in control. He heard Buck scrambling back

through the bushes towards the car and turned. Time to be heading back. He reached for the door handle but paused as the air was filled with the now thunderous blast of a big engine being throttled back, gears screaming in protest as the driver negotiated the treacherous corners, the very air vibrating as the sound reverberated off the surrounding rock.

"Someone's in a hurry," observed Buck, his hand resting on the roof as he gazed up the road in the direction of the fast approaching car.

A flash of sunlight on glass, the throbbing beat of driving pistons, the brief shriek of protesting rubber and the speeding vehicle was upon them -- alongside them -- past them. Midnight blue and chrome, low slung, doing ninety. The breeze of its passing rocked the SUV and the two men stared in open-mouthed shock, brains registering the reality at the same instant. Ezra's Jaguar.

"Fucking hell!" yelled Buck, diving into the driver's seat and pumping the big vehicle into life, "She's gonna kill herself."

Nathan snapped his seat-belt closed as the other man swung violently into a U-turn and began the chase, deftly catching the cell phone that was thrown his way.

"As long as you don't kill us, Buck. Now who am I callin'?"

"See if you can get the highway patrol to intercept. There's no way we're going to catch up. She's clocking at least ninety and the only way I'm gonna get this baby down the mountain at that speed is to go straight down the side."

Nathan punched in the numbers wondering if Zoé might not end up doing just that before she reached the bottom.

The Jag was twitchy on the corners, over-steering, the back end sliding out and trying to flick the car around but each time she brought it back, teasing it with brake and throttle, coaxing it to obey. The sensation of speed was heightened by the keening of the wind through the open windows and she revelled in the pure rush of adrenaline that coursed through her veins.

Zoé had seen the Suburban parked on the side of the road - recognised both it and its driver. She knew Nathan had seen her; how could he miss the great cat streaking past? Laughing softly, she eased off the accelerator a degree, turned down the music that pounded hypnotically from the state-of-the-art sound system and allowed a modicum of sanity to return. Over the next few miles she slowed progressively until the raw speed had bled away to a regulation 55 and she could see the Suburban closing on her in the rear view mirror. Feeling a sudden pang of remorse for having behaved like a spoilt brat and taken off without a word she braked and guided the car off the road. Of course they would have been worried but at the time she hadn't cared, now she could only be glad that it was Nathan who was pulling up behind her. Chris, she knew, would have torn bloody strips off her without a moment's hesitation and made her feel like a recalcitrant schoolgirl in short order. She smiled fondly. Even having seen another, very vulnerable, side of him the bastard still scared her speechless at times. Taking a deep breath and wondering just what she was going to say, how she was going to explain something she hardly understood herself, she opened the car door and stepped out. *Oh, my God.* Not just Nathan but an understandably disgruntled Buck.

The mustached agent looked fit to be tied, crossing the distance between the two vehicles in a few long strides, Nathan following more slowly as he spoke into the cell phone.

"What the hell did you think you were doing? You could've killed yourself! Then where would that leave me, huh? Having to tell Chris that you'd driven off the mountain, that's where and I'm too fond of my own hide to want to do that in a hurry." Buck ranted continuously in the kind of monologue he usually reserved for berating J.D. before sweeping her into a bear hug that left her breathless. "Jesus, woman, I've seen some scary stuff in my time but following you down this mountain damn near gave me a heart

attack." He held her at arms length, his eyes taking in every detail then added gently: "You okay, Princess?"

"I'm fine." She hesitated, seeing the doubt in his eyes. "Well, alright then, maybe not that fine. But at least I'm heading in the right direction."

"You know you didn't have to take off like that?"

"Yes I did, Buck. I had some baggage of my own to unload, and I couldn't do that with Chris or Vin -- any of you -- crowding me."

"Did you stop to think about Vin, about Chris? What you were doing to them?" He was more puzzled than angry.

She pulled out of his grasp and moved a few steps away, distancing herself.

"Buck, I've done nothing but think about them. Only I had to take care of me first, don't you see?"

Nathan moved forward and caught her by the shoulder, turning her around to face him.

"You're right, Zoé. But it might have helped to talk to someone."

She turned, her blue eyes huge in shadowed sockets.

"That's just it, Nathan. Everybody was avoiding talking -- you all wanted to know but no-one really wanted to hear."

Zoé saw Buck lower his head and mutter a barely audible: "Shit!"

A moment later Nathan's arm slipped comfortingly around her shoulders and he drew her aside.

"What can I say, Zoé. No excuses. So many people have been hurt by this I guess it's easy for someone to fall through the cracks. None of us intended to let you go through this on your own but we're not talking about a few cuts and bruises here. You think it was ever goin' to be easy for Vin to ask you something like that, or Buck? You think it's easy for me?" He sighed. "I just want you to know this: we're here now."

The woman sighed heavily.

"You were always there. I know that now." She angrily dashed a single tear which had escaped, from her cheek and looked up at the tall, dark agent. "Can we talk, Nathan?"

He nodded slowly not taking his eyes off her, keenly aware of the conflicting emotions playing across her face.

"Are you sure it's me you need?"

"You're the doctor, Nathan," she replied simply, "Yes, it is you I need."

Jackson turned to Buck.

"D'you wanna take the Jag? Zoé's riding with me."

Wilmington understood the suggestion was not negotiable and readily agreed.

"Sure thing. Meet you back at the hospital?"

Nathan looked to Zoé for confirmation that she was ready to do that and she nodded, smiling wanly.

“Tell Vin to move over. I’m on my way.”

Buck saluted and climbed into the low-slung coupé, pulling backout onto the blacktop and disappearing from view before either Nathan or Zoé had made a move towards the waiting SUV. Finally, Jackson ushered his charge towards the Suburban.

“You want to just sit a while?”

“I think so.” She allowed Nathan to help her into the cab then turned self-consciously to him. “Promise me that you won’t tell anyone else, Nathan. I couldn’t bear it.”

He took her hand in both of his.

“Zoé, trust me. This is just between you and me.”

“God, Nathan, I feel so stupid. I don’t know where to start.”

“Just take your time, say whatever you feel comfortable with. We’re not on any schedule and I don’t have another client waiting.”

She smiled and looked around the spacious interior of the SUV.

“Maybe you need to think about changing your consulting rooms, Doctor Jackson.”

She fell silent again and Nathan, leaning easily against the driver’s side door, waited patiently giving her the time she needed. For a few minutes Zoé stared out of the window at the glorious view and Jackson noticed that she was perfectly controlled; no fidgeting, no tell-tale body movements that would indicate a state of high anxiety just complete calm. She might as well have been waiting for a bus.

“You know, I didn’t put up a fight.” She kept her eye on the mountains.

“I heard you broke one guy’s nose.”

She shook her head.

“Not then. That was at the beginning, before he smashed Chris’ collar-bone to bring me into line. Just to get Chris going he started talking about what he planned on doing to me; playing mind games and trying to get Chris to react.”

“And did he?”

Zoé turned to him then her face an inscrutable mask.

“No, but I could see he was having a hard time sitting back and watching while these two gorillas kept pawing at me and talking dirty.”

“What about you?”

She concentrated on a spot on her jeans, rubbing the fabric with her thumb.

“Well, it wasn’t fun but it wasn’t the end of the world either. A quick grope and someone slobbering in my ear doesn’t exactly constitute a major crisis in my book. No worse than a bad date really when I think about it.”

“You both played it cool then,” he continued, making it a statement of fact, “So what happened to escalate the situation.”

“First he started by yanking Chris’ chain suggesting that he was going to rape me, then he decided it might be more fun if he could get Chris to...” she hesitated, “to perform with me instead. Said I’d have to choose between the two of them.”

“And how did you feel about that?”

She laughed. A sharp, brittle sound.

“Poor Chris, I think he would rather have died first and to be honest I don’t think he could have. But it wasn’t really an option, just another psychological weapon.” She sighed. “So they tied Chris up -- really hurt him, Nathan, then just left him in a corner like some piece of garbage - and this is where the fun really begins.”

Nathan kept his expression neutral and waited for her to continue, noticing she had neatly skirted the issue of how she had felt about the prospect of being paired with Larabee.

“This is the part where I didn’t fight. And I didn’t fight because he did give me a choice. In the end it came down to me or Chris.”

“Chris?”

Zoé nodded and Nathan heard the first sign of emotion in her voice when she spoke.

“This was one sick son-of-a-bitch we’re talking about here. He said he would either have me or he would have Chris and he didn’t particularly care which. One tight piece of ass was as good as another, in his words.” She sighed, remembering. “Chris was already in bad shape, hurting emotionally and physically, how do you think he would have coped with being sodomised by this great fucking ape, right in front of me? I had no choice. I just couldn’t let that happen.”

Jackson suddenly wished himself anywhere but in this position of trust yet Zoé had placed enough faith in him to unburden herself and he knew he had a responsibility to maintain his objectivity. He guessed she was right about Chris and had to admire her for protecting him when the price she was expected to pay was so high.

“He forced you to choose between two unacceptable alternatives, Zoé. It guaranteed a no win situation whichever way you decided to go.”

“So I let him do it, Nathan. I let him screw me,” she continued as if he had not spoken, “In fact I begged him to do it. I would have gone down on the devil himself if he’d asked me to. For God’s sake, I do it all the time with Vin don’t I? What’s the big deal? Two minutes of sweating and grunting and it’s over.” Nathan didn’t try to interrupt the flood of words, knowing that she was intent on reducing the experience to its coarsest level as a means of dealing with it. “But the bastard wanted more than sweat; he wanted the blood and the tears to go with it. Wanted me to regret every minute that I hadn’t let Chris take it for me. So after tying me up just in case I changed my mind he did the deed so to speak.”

She quickly dashed a hand across her eyes, flicking away errant tears that had dared to escape and blinking looked up at the roof and laughed, a sound that cut Nathan as deeply as any knife.

“You know, I’m probably one of the few women in the world who have had the unforgettable experiencing of making love to a loaded Magnum forty-four. Ten and a half inches sure hits the G-spot.” The last two words came out as a strangled sob and Zoé folded, hugging herself as if she could hold all the hurting inside.

Nathan moved across the seat and gently pulled her towards him expecting resistance but finding none. His own immediate gut reaction he buried deep, his concern for her physical condition uppermost in his mind. His mind teemed with questions he wanted to ask -- Did she have any pain? Had she been bleeding? -- but he recognised that this was not the time. The last thing she needed was an interrogation however well-meant.

“Zoé, let it go.”

She looked up at him, abject misery painted across her tear-streaked features.

“What am I going to do Nathan? I’m scared.”

He softly rubbed her back and felt her move closer, relieved at least that she wasn’t afraid of physical contact.

“First, you’re going to let me take a look at you as soon as we get back to Denver, right?” She nodded her agreement. “Then I think you need to sit down and do some talking with Vin.”

She pulled back for a moment, shocked at his suggestion.

“I can’t ever tell him about this, Nathan! He won’t understand.”

Nathan sighed and tightened his hold on the woman’s slim shoulders.

“You underestimate him, Zoé. Give him a chance and you might be surprised.”

For a few minutes she was quiet and he could feel the rise and fall of her chest against his own ribs as she remained pressed against his side. Finally she roused and straightening, sighed heavily before adjusting her clothes, finger-brushing her hair and squaring her shoulders. The mask was back in place.

“We should go now.”

Nathan knew then she had taken up the burden again, he just hoped it might be a little lighter for the sharing.

Zoé leaned her head against the window and stared out at the scenery flowing smoothly by, not seeing, just allowing the flood of colour and sensation of movement to soothe her. She had talked, now it was time to think.

In a short while she would be back in Denver and then she would have no choice but to confront her fears. Her mind recoiled at the thought of revealing to anyone else what she had told Nathan, especially to Vin. How did you tell someone you loved that you had willingly succumbed to rape? How did you deal with the anger and hurt? How did you get back the love? He had believed her capable of betraying him once, of giving herself to another, and now she had proved him right. God, she had been so sanctimonious- so moral - vilifying him for a one split-second of doubt! She thought back to the moment in the apartment when Vin, so full of concern, had burst through the door and the silent accusation -- the confused hurt -- she had seen in his eyes. Now, looking back, she understood. Her own reaction at the time had been defensive, protective of Chris who had been through so much already without being doubted by his best friend but she knew the episode had been devastating for the quiet Texan. For him love was exclusive, reserved for one person, for Zoé there were degrees of love. She knew her close relationship with Ezra had concerned him at first but he had recognised eventually that there was nothing sexual between them and she had finally made him understand that loving someone wasn’t always the same as being in love with them. Whether he was able to make such a fine distinction with Chris was another, far more complex, question. She smiled fondly, her thoughts drifting. Chris. Wet, cold and afraid he had been seeking comfort not sex. Although she reflected in other circumstances she might have considered such a perfidious liaison; Chris was certainly all man. Poor Vin, so insecure.

Vin was an enigma. He could kill without compunction; that was his job and he was good at what he did -- took pride in it even. He could snuff out a life like a candle flame and still sleep at night yet he could be so vulnerable, so easily hurt by a careless word or action. In the realm of relationships he was an innocent and the complexities that the events of the past week had introduced to their lives had left him floundering. Yet he had still been so loving, so gentle, making no demands while she had cried out her

pain in his arms at the hospital; so why did she think he wouldn't understand now? . *Oh, Vin. What are we doing to each other?*

She sighed and closed her eyes focusing on the dull pain deep in her belly and the burning between her thighs and she wondered if she would ever want to make love again. The thought of Vin's hands and mouth working their magic on her body had always delighted her, aroused her, but right now she knew the merest touch would start her screaming. Vin didn't deserve that -- and he didn't deserve not to know either. She rubbed gently at her abdomen, soothing the cramping pain that had started to take hold of her and realised that she had made her decision.

She owed him the truth. The cold, hard, painful truth.

I need you Vin.

It was quiet again. Just him and Ezra, and Ezra was asleep - or playing possum. J.D. and Chris had been ejected -- albeit under protest -- to allow the doctor, who had firmly maintained that he needed neither unsolicited advice nor an audience, to finally remove Vin's chest tube. After that relatively simple procedure the Texan had been sent for an x-ray and when he got back, the Southerner was in bed again and dead to the world. He noticed that Ezra still looked unwell, but given that he had been in surgery only twenty-four hours before that shouldn't really surprise him. He must have been running on sheer willpower alone yet still had managed to be the voice of reason and step in to prevent him actually making a bigger asshole of himself than he already was by trying to bust Chris' chops. He probably deserved some rest; to check out from the madness for a while and give himself a chance to heal. The Texan knew he still had nightmares. On the long nights when he had lain awake he had heard the undercover agent tossing and moaning in his sleep, unable to escape the memories that reappeared when the mind could least resist them. He knew all about that.

Tanner fingered the dressing covering his ribs where the tube had been taken out and inhaled experimentally still guarding his ribs which hurt like hell in spite of the medication taking the edge off the pain. It felt different but his moment of panic when the tube had first been withdrawn that he wouldn't be able to breathe had quickly subsided. The recollection of the hole being punched into his chest still brought him out in a cold sweat and he wondered if Ezra felt the same. The Southerner had joked about "extra orifices" but he guessed that Ezra was as uncomfortable as he was with having tubes inserted in his body however necessary they might be.

He leaned back emulating the Southerner and closed his eyes, utterly drained, prepared to find some peace in sleep but his mind had other ideas. No rest for the wicked or so the saying went and Vin decided right then that he must be the epitome of evil if that were the case. To say he was worried was possibly the understatement of the millennium; rather he was slowly going insane as the hours ticked away with no news.

Where are you, Zoé?

The sense of loss eclipsed anything he had ever known before as a grown man and the depth of his feelings shocked him. When had he fallen so completely for this wild and independent spirit? For the first time he felt he might have some small insight into Chris' pain on the loss of his wife and son. No, not the child. His mind struggled with the concept of coming to terms with that kind of loss and he found that his imagination could not stretch quite that far. No wonder Chris had been devastated. All he wanted now was to see her again, to forget the crap that somehow had gotten in the way, and to stop the hurt -- for both of them. *It's just a part of me that's wondering whether I mean any more to you than a convenient lay.* God, Zoé if you only knew.

So tell her.

I need you Zoé.

“You got pain, Honey?”

They were in the carpark at Mercy Hospital, the leisurely descent from the mountains having finally come to an end. Nathan had opened the passenger-side door and was leaning in, concern etched on his dark features as he touched a hand to Zoé’s face. She swung her legs slowly around and paled bending suddenly forward at the waist as she started to get out of the cab.

“Just cramps, Nathan. I’ll be okay,” she protested but no real conviction.

He reached out his other hand to stop her from going any further.

“Uh huh! Hold it right there, darlin’. Okay, is exactly what you are not.” In a practiced motion he slid his powerful arms under her and picked her up. “Stop trying to be so goddamn strong, Zoé. You’ve got nothin’ to prove. Not to me, anyway.”

She slipped an arm around his neck and finally surrendered, exhausted and in pain.

“Not strong, Nathan,” she whispered quietly, “Just bloody-minded and stubborn.”

He laughed and kicked the door shut.

“Let’s get this show on the road, hey?”

Buck was waiting for them at the entrance.

“Been looking out for you. Told the guys you were on your way. Everyone’s knows -- even Josiah’s here.” He fell into step beside Jackson and lowered his voice. “She gonna be okay?”

“Reckon so but I’ll feel a lot better once she’s been checked out properly.” He paused and glanced up at the mustached agent. “You wanna tell Vin she’s here?”

Buck waited impatiently for an elevator to arrive. *You wanna tell Vin she’s here?* Sure thing, Nathan! The guy’s already half out of his mind with worry and I’m the lucky one who gets to tell him that you’ve just had to *carry* Zoé into ER? He thoughtfully chewed the end of his mustache, unable to get the image of the ashen-faced woman out of his mind and wondered if Vin was up to handling this latest development. Seeing her so small and vulnerable in Nathan’s arms had finally brought home to him the plain truth that she was not okay and his mind reeled at the implications not only for the Texan but for all of them. Unless he had missed his mark, things were about to get a whole lot more complicated.

The elevator bell chimed announcing its arrival and he stepped inside, stabbing the button for his floor with more force than necessary in his frustration and drawing glances of both sympathy and understanding from the other people in the car. After all, this was a hospital and emotions were often openly on display for one reason or another. He hoped Josiah had been a calming influence on Tanner because when he’d left a scant half hour before Vin had been as jittery as a junkie on speed and driving Ezra quietly mad with his continual pacing. Without the chest tube to anchor him he had become a living example of perpetual motion. He smiled suddenly wondering how those two had managed to remain in the same room for so long already without coming to blows. While he knew the Southerner was equally concerned for the outcome his consummate skill at maintaining his composure to Vin, translated into a picture of indifference which in itself had been enough to draw a few barbed comments from the on-edge Texan. Without Josiah there to act as a buffer he guessed the two men would eventually drive each other to distraction.

Three heads swiveled as one as he walked through the door and the force of their combined emotions struck him like a solid wave.

A pause. Buck swallowed, considering how best to start.

“Well, Mr. Wilmington, do you have some news to impart or do you intend to keep us in suspense for the rest of the evening?”

Buck shot an unfriendly glance at the undercover agent. *Damn, Ezra can't you ever just let anything ride?*

“They're back. Nathan took Zoé straight into ER.”

“And the significance of that is?”

Ezra again. Trust him to cut straight to the chase.

“Shit, I don't know, Ezra! I saw her for about two minutes but I don't think she's in great shape. Nathan was carrying her.”

Predictably, Vin was on the move before Buck even finished what he was saying. Buck swore and reached out a hand to catch his arm as he pushed past him aiming for the door, a picture of single-minded determination.

“Hold on now, Vin. Just take it easy. No sense in rushing in.”

The Texan wrenched free and, wild-eyed, rounded on the mustached agent.

“Get your fucking hands off me! I need to see Zoé now.”

Buck backed off quickly, holding up his hands in surrender. In his present mood Tanner was likely to come out swinging, broken ribs or not, and Wilmington didn't want to have to fight him. The need for Vin to be with Zoé was understandable but Buck had intended that he arrive in a less agitated frame of mind.

“Fine. Go. I'm sure what she needs right now is to have a raving lunatic barge into ER after her! No doubt she can find a moment to deal with your shit before she starts thinking about herself.”

Vin looked as if Buck had sucker-punched him and out of the corner of his eye Buck saw Ezra raise a surprised but nonetheless approving eyebrow.

“Not exactly subtle, Mr. Wilmington,” he murmured, “but certainly effective.”

Tanner was guarding his ribs, panting slightly, paying for the sudden and violent over-reaction to Buck's hand on his arm the pain of which seemed to have momentarily taken the wind out of his sails. Wilmington's second try was met with tolerance if not complete acceptance as he lowered a hand onto the Texan's still heaving shoulder.

“Jesus, Vin. We're on your side but you're not the only one having a hard time of it, pard. I think you'll be doing Zoé a mighty big favour if you just settle down and put your own feelings on the back burner for a spell. Ain't goin' to do her any good if you go ploughing in there all hot and bothered, and stirrin' the pot. So you just listen up, Vin, 'cause if you cause that girl any more grief I'll personally beat the crap out of you.”

Tanner didn't quite smile but the fight instantly went out of him and he had the good grace to look apologetic.

“Sorry, Buck. Can't think straight. I just want to see her.”

Wilmington nodded, understanding.

“And I reckon you’re the one person she just might need right now.” He grabbed Tanner’s robe and thrust it into his hands. “You gonna be able to keep your shit together, Vin? Tell me now, ‘cause if you can’t we’re not going anywhere.”

For a brief moment Vin’s eyes blazed as he took the robe from Wilmington, his jaw clenched in suppressed anger.

“I don’t need you telling me what to do, Buck,” he snarled, “Whatever you might think the last thing I want to do is hurt Zoé.”

Buck shook his head and took pity on the Texan who was struggling awkwardly into his dressing gown.

“Geez, Vin, “ he sighed dramatically and intervened, “if you can’t even dress yourself how’re you gonna be any good to Zoé?” He adjusted Vin’s collar and straightened the shoulders before throwing a comradely arm around the Texan’s shoulders and dropping his voice for Tanner’s ears only. “I know you love that girl, Vin, so how about you go right in there and show her.”

Vin cocked a sceptical eye at the mustached agent and tied the belt of his robe with a savage tug.

“Anyone ever tell you you’re full of crap, Buck?”

Wilmington looked back at Ezra and Josiah, a smile of satisfaction on his face as he ushered Tanner out of the room.

“Many times.”

Zoé didn’t need a doctor to tell her that something was seriously wrong; she could feel the heat radiating from her own body and she was feeling light-headed and feverish. She could hear Nathan’s gentle voice admonishing her for not allowing anyone to examine her on her last visit to ER, for not seeking the medical attention that she so obviously needed, for being stubborn and not letting anyone help. It was no good trying to explain to him that the last thing she had wanted at the time was to permit herself to be exposed -- physically and emotionally -- to have to confess what had been done to her to a complete stranger; to be examined, investigated and judged by people who could never hope to understand how she felt. She wiped a stray tear away. Damn. No matter how hard she tried to stop them, one or two would always make their escape. Hell, she didn’t even understand it herself, all she knew was that she had needed to get away but she also knew now that she had only succeeded in delaying the inevitable and as a result here she was silently suffering alone and, although she was loathe to admit it, frightened.

The door quietly opened and she tiredly started to turn her head thinking how nice it would be to just go to sleep.

“Nathan?”

The touch of familiar lips on her forehead corrected her mistake. Certainly not Nathan. Vin. She sighed and lifted a hand to ruffle Tanner’s hair.

“What are you doing here? You shouldn’t be ...”

He moved his lips against hers and silenced her protest; a gentle kiss that demanded nothing of her then drawing back, stroked her cheek.

“I’m right where I want to be.”

She turned her head away towards the wall.

“You might change your mind when I tell you what I did.”

Zoé felt his arms go around her and he pressed his face into her shoulder.

“It doesn’t matter. I don’t care about anything that might have happened...” he stopped suddenly, “No, that’s not right. I do care about what happened but I care more about you. I love you Zoé.”

She swallowed hard fighting the tears that threatened to flow again.

“I hope you love Chris too,” she whispered finally, “Because if you don’t, you’ll never understand what I’m going to tell you now.”

“At least give me the chance, Zoé. I deserve that much, don’t I?”

Zoé’s hand found his and squeezed.

“Yes. You do.”

She didn’t cry this time and Vin found her stoic control harder to bear than her tears and while his head told him that it was her way of dealing with it, his heart was being torn in two. He held her close, letting her take her time and slowly she fitted the pieces into the puzzle for him and with each piece he felt a little part of her spirit die.

“Do you believe that I love you?” she had asked him once her story was finished.

Not did he love her or a declaration that she loved him, words that were often too easy to say, but whether he believed in her love for him. He was not a man given to readily expressing his feelings, always unwilling to put his emotions on display but he was almost undone by the simple question. One that demanded trust, its essence establishing the very basis of their relationship. When he spoke his voice was hoarse but he needed only one word.

“Yes.”

She had taken his hand then and kissed it.

“You know that Chris isn’t to blame don’t you?”

“I know.” That was hard to admit considering he had laid the blame squarely at Larabee’s feet only hours before. He paused giving her the reassurance that she so desperately needed wondering if he should continue. “I also know he wouldn’t thank you for making the decision you did.”

Her sigh had been weighted with regret.

“It’s like Nathan said, Vin. A no win situation. I know I did the right the right thing although I understand that you’re probably the one who ended up being hurt the most.”

He had wanted to deny it but she had succeeded in hitting a nerve. In truth it was tearing him apart and she knew it.

“I should have been there.”

He had been surprised when she had laughed softly.

“Oh, Vin. Would you have given up your cherry to keep me from a fate worse than death?” Zoé had always had the capacity to shock him, especially in her casual approach to all things sexual and she had succeeded again. She often teased him about American’s being puritanical at heart. He had muttered something noncommittal in reply and she had stroked his cheek. “You’re blushing just thinking about it, Vin Tanner.”

He had known she was right. While he might have been prepared to go out fighting, he doubted that he could willingly have surrendered himself. He had tightened his arms around her.

“You’re a very special lady, you know that?”

“I know right now I feel pretty crappy,” she confessed.

The fierce heat of her body against his had finally registered and he had been relieved when Nathan had arrived on the scene. She was going to OR.

He had leaned down to kiss her reluctant to relinquish his hold.

“I need you, Zoé.” A barely breathed whisper.

She had given a contented smile then.

“Not as much as I need you.”

The overcast sky, threatening rain matched his mood; the impending storm would reflect it completely. He walked slowly, his outward appearance at odds with the dark rage boiling within him, not noticing either the wind that plucked mischievously at his clothing or the heavy drops of rain that intermittently pelted him. Dressed once more in street clothes he at least felt his own master again, walking gave him time to think. He had not left the grounds but just getting away from the crushing atmosphere of the hospital had helped him to quell the primitive urge to hit something -- someone.

He looked at his watch. A couple of hours Nathan had said. A minor procedure. He would have gone into OR with her if he could have but Nathan had finally chased him off and he’d had to be content with the fact that Nathan would at least be with her. He had discharged himself then; against medical advice and against the advice of his friends but he had needed to regain some control and languishing in a hospital bed robbed him of that. A small gesture of defiance but enough to set him on a more even keel.

He dug his hands into the pockets of his denim jacket and put his head down against the steadily increasing rain. She had wanted him to understand and he had, but acceptance did not come quite so easily. Not that he loved her any less, in fact he had felt her pain so keenly that he wondered if they had not somehow, somewhere along this torturous path been forged into a single entity but that she had knowingly offered herself up to save Chris from a similar indignity left him in an emotional no-man’s-land. He weighed up the choices again: Zoé or Chris. Hobson’s choice. He wondered bitterly which way it would have gone if Chris had been made to choose. He stopped suddenly, oblivious to the now steady downpouring of rain, wanting to believe that Chris would have given himself up rather than let Zoé suffer. Just as she had made the decision to protect him, he would have done the same, wouldn’t he? Even to the point of taking it up the ass? Vin found he had come to the end of his ability to follow a logical progression, instead his emotions took over and he was back to square one. That he couldn’t change anything that had happened did not stop him from agonising over the details again and again.

A forty-four Magnum. Jesus! He shook his head, flicking water out of his eyes and started to move again. He wished, not for the first time, that he could at least have had the satisfaction of killing the bastard. He was only sorry that in the end his dispatch had been so quick and merciful. Mercy was not a quality he was ready to associate with a rapist -- Zoé’s rapist. He allowed a surge of black rage to flow through him, over him and in letting it go he regained a sense of equilibrium as with sudden clarity he realised that he could do nothing about changing what had gone before, his power lay in the ability to change the future. The choice was now his. He could let this forever be an obstacle to both his love for Zoé and his friendship -- and love -- for Chris, or just like Ezra had said he could take hold of what he had with both hands and make the most of every minute of every day that he was given No looking back. No regrets.

He made his choice.

Chris had been wrestling with his feelings all evening. He had managed to avoid the emotional highs and lows that had been so much a part of him of late but it had still been a rough ride. He couldn't get Zoé out of his mind and his altercation with Vin had left him not only confused but angry. Josiah had already spent some time with him talking about what had happened after the bombing trying to work him through the worst of his fears. Post-traumatic stress. He would have laughed at the idea a few months -- hell, a few weeks -- ago, now it was far too real to do anything but take it seriously. Jesus! He had truly believed he was losing his mind. His memory was still playing tricks -- there were gaps in some places and in others the images were so vivid that he was able to relive the moments with startling clarity; not that he wanted to. He wanted desperately to remember what had happened at the apartment but the fragments that came to him had only muddied the water. He wanted to forget the horror of looking into lifeless green eyes, the memory of which still brought him out in a cold sweat. Fuck! When had he allowed these men to get so close? He stared almost accusingly at his knee once again raised, immobilised and surrounded by ice packs. *Damn you, McCaffrey, I hope you're burning in hell right now! It was me you wanted, you bastard, yet you took down four of my family.* He closed his eyes and allowed his head to fall back on the pillow. Family? *I lost one in Sarah and Adam, this second one is for keeps.*

"Hey, Cowboy. Got a minute?"

He cracked open an eye considering it a bonus that Vin's unexpected entrance had not caused the volatile reaction he might have expected even twenty-four hours before.

"Got all the time in the world, pard. In fact I'm a captive audience." He gestured to his leg. "Bed rest."

Chris took note of, and understood the significance of, the wet hair and rain dampened clothes. Vin had been thinking. At least he hadn't jumped in a car and taken off into the sunset, the older man thought ruefully.

"Been thinking," offered Vin finally.

Chris nodded.

"Guessed as much."

"You know, I was ready to tear your heart out and feed it to you," the mild Texan confessed, carefully avoiding Larabee's eyes.

"Guessed that too."

"I owe you an explanation -- and an apology."

An eloquent tilt of the head on Larabee's part invited him to continue.

"You don't remember what happened at the apartment do you? I mean the..." he hesitated, "...the breakdown."

Chris felt his heart skip a beat. Was this a missing piece of the puzzle about to be set in place?

"No. I remember you telling me I was a mean drunk," he smiled at the recollection, "we talked and I went to bed."

"You don't remember getting up late, arguing with Zoé?"

Larabee's eyes clouded.

“Arguing? I was being an asshole, right?”

“Depends if you want to believe Zoé’s version. I think she might have told you to do the anatomically impossible and then she left you to find your own way to work. Only she was so mad she left without the car keys and had to go back. Lucky for you she did.”

Chris shook his head frowning as he searched his memory.
“I don’t remember.”

“She got worried when you didn’t come out of the shower. Found you sitting in the corner of the stall, with the water so cold by all accounts that if you’d have been a brass monkey you’d’ve had a serious problem.” Tanner continued. “Nathan says you were in a catatonic state brought on by stress. Zoé called me; said I should bring Nathan.”

“That’s all?”

Vin shifted uncomfortably.

“It would have been, but I did something really stupid.”

“That has to with me?”

Tanner sighed and rubbed a hand over his face.

“When I got to the apartment Zoé had managed to get you onto the bed and, you won’t believe this, but for a minute I thought you two had been screwing.”

Chris’ eyes widened for a moment, then he started to laugh very softly.

“Shit, Chris,” Vin defended himself, “There you were stark-fucking-naked and all over Zoé like a rash, what was I supposed to think?”

“So. Nothing happened.” His eyes suddenly narrowed and he paled slightly. “Did it?”

“No. Nothing happened. But Zoé was pissed that it’d even crossed my mind. Said I was wondering if she’d ever sleep with you.”

“And were you?”

Vin sighed again.

“Yes.”

Larabee smiled.

“I’m flattered, Vin. You think an old war horse like me is any competition?”

“You never know with women,” the Texan replied gruffly, looking acutely embarrassed.

“And do you think I would?” Chris’ voice was soft, almost challenging

“Truth?”

“I’d appreciate it.”

“Yes” No hesitation.

Chris didn't try to hide his amusement.

"You know, you're probably right, but," he fixed Tanner with a steely glare, "and hear this, Vin, only if she was a free agent."

He could almost hear the sigh of relief escape the younger man.

"Well, to get back to the story, we had a major fight. Said lots of things that both of us meant at the time and I walked out. Next thing I was blown twenty feet in the air and wound up with busted ribs and tryin' to breathe through a lungful of blood. Things moved pretty quickly from there and we sort of lost each other in the mess."

"That isn't the reason you wanted to rip out my heart though is it?"

Vin leaned forward resting his elbows on his knees, staring at the floor.

"Zoé will kill me if she ever finds out I talked about this with you but I just have to get it out in the open."

Chris waved a hand dismissively. A gesture to begin.

"She finally talked about what happened with McCaffrey."

Larabee closed his eyes. One of the memories he would rather forget.

"Do you want to tell me this, Vin?"

He looked up then, blue eyes twin chips of ice.

"I have to, for my own sanity."

Chris nodded, agreeing and Vin continued.

"You were right there, Chris. You guessed she'd been raped didn't you?"

The older man gnawed his lip.

"It was fairly obvious. Those guys had been leading up to it all night. I already told you McCaffrey wanted her to choose between him and me. I wouldn't have done it, Vin, even if he'd've killed me."

The blue eyes were on him again.

"She chose to be raped, Chris, so he would leave you alone. That was the choice she was given. If she didn't let him fuck her, he'd have fucked you instead." He snorted. "She didn't think you were in any shape to go through that."

Chris' expression reflected his deep shock.

"She did it for me?" Disbelief.

"He raped her with a loaded forty-four Magnum." Fact. Raw and uncompromising.

Chris shut his eyes. He could see the Blackhawk revolver in McCaffrey's hand; the gleaming barrel, just over ten inches of blued steel and he felt sick.

"Jesus Christ!"

Vin looked away again, his shoulders slumped, his voice barely a whisper.

“I’d like to think that if you’d have had the chance, if you’d have been given the choice that you’d have done the same for Zoé as she did for you.”

Larabee raised his head and stared at the young Texan. This then was what it was all about. Vin was playing the “what if” game.

“I’d like to think that I’d be man enough to do it, Vin, but the truth is I don’t know. It would be easy for me to say yes because I don’t really have to make the choice. That’s a big ask.”

Vin managed a smile, looking relieved.

“I’m glad you said that, Chris. I don’t know I’d’ve believed you if you’d just said a straight out yes. I’ve been thinking on it myself and I don’t think I could.”

Chris rubbed his leg absently. God, his knee hurt!

“So you wanted to rip out my heart because I hadn’t done anything to stop Zoé being raped, but you know now that there was nothing I could do, right?”

“Right. So I just wanted to say I’m sorry. There’s enough shit going down without me adding to it.”

“Vin, there’s nothing you could say that I haven’t already said to myself a thousand times over. And as long as I live I’ll still be wondering what I could have done to make it different.” He rubbed his eyes tiredly. “It’s something I have to live with.”

Tanner glanced at his watch.

“Zoé should be out of OR now.”

Chris understood. Vin had squared things away. Life could now go on and what they had spoken of just now would probably never be referred to again between the two of them.

“She’s going to be okay?”

Vin nodded.

“Both of us are going to be okay. I feel it. You?”

“I’m not done for yet, Vin. This old dog’s still got a few tricks up his sleeve.”

The Texan stood up.

“You’ve been around Ezra too long.”

Chris nodded and smiled.

“I think maybe you’re right.”

Vin sketched a quick two-fingered salute and left as quickly as he had come.

Leaning back with a sigh Chris closed his eyes again. Another demon faced and laid to rest.

Four Weeks Later:

The morning was cool and a light mist still hung in the air. From the front porch Chris watched the first rays of light creep over the treetops and heaved a contented sigh before sipping at the scalding coffee he had just brewed. In spite of the chill of the morning he wore only a worn and frayed pair of jeans and he shivered slightly thinking maybe he should have at least grabbed a t-shirt before venturing outdoors. Ignoring the goosebumps rising on his exposed skin he leaned on the porch rail and looking out across the valley he allowed the serenity of the wilderness to embrace him, feeling totally at peace. Finally his eye wandered to the six vehicles standing dew-covered in the driveway and dotted across the sparse lawn -- the first time they had all been assembled in this place in many long weeks. Familiar, comfortable shapes that increased Chris' sense of ease; only J.D.'s Kawasaki motorcycle was missing -- it seemed out of place at the ranch -- and, the watching man thought ruefully, the battered Jeep that had been Vin's preferred mode of transport before it had been dispatched to the great junkyard in the sky. In its place stood a slightly newer but equally well-used Wrangler, although at least this one still had its doors. He believed Zoé had something to do with that. He warmed his hands on his coffee mug and smiled a slow, satisfied smile of contentment. Not too long ago he had been facing the very real prospect that they might never all be together again. The thought had been a sobering one, and he had realised then just how much each one of them meant to him; from Buck who had been his right arm for too many years to count, to Zoé who had spent just five months in their company and who, in a few short weeks would be leaving them again. He didn't care to contemplate the impact of her departure on the team just yet, not only for Vin who clearly stood to lose the most, but also for Ezra, Buck and if he dared to admit it, himself. Well, he would for once take Ezra's advice and adopt what the Southerner called the Scarlett O'Hara rule: he would think about it tomorrow. For now he was satisfied to live each day as it came.

He heard the soft click of the front door closing behind him. Company. That it should be Ezra surprised him less than it would have done a few short weeks ago. The Southerner took up a position at Chris' right elbow, emulating his stance and leaning on the rail, his own hands clasping a steaming cup of coffee and for several minutes both men stood in contemplative silence each lost in his own thoughts.

"Thought you were Vin," Chris said finally, "He's the one usually up with the sun."

"Mr. Tanner, I believe, is otherwise engaged with the lovely Miss Elliott." Ezra paused and took a sip of his coffee. "I can state this with a degree of certainty considering this modest abode of yours has rather remarkable acoustic qualities."

Chris laughed.

"In that case we might not see them until lunch."

Ezra raised an eyebrow.

"Good Lord! A most generous estimation of Mr. Tanner's prowess indeed." He looked at his watch. "I'd allow another fifteen minutes at the outside. Care to wager on it, Mr. Larabee? Say fifty bucks?"

Chris looked sideways at the Southerner weighing the odds, then stuck out his hand to shake on it.

"You're on."

The sun continued its majestic ascent, becoming a blazing ball of orange hanging in a clear sky and rapidly burning off the last of the mist. For several minutes neither man stirred, content to be a part of the magic, to feel the confirmation that they were indeed alive.

"You know, Chris, I always took all this for granted. But I came to realise that while all this may be here for another thousand millennia I certainly won't be."

Larabee drained his cup.

"Know the feelin', Ezra. It's called coming to terms with your own mortality. Been there a few times myself."

Standish smiled then.

“Humbling experience, isn’t it?”

Chris turned so his back was to the rail.

“What’s up, Ezra?”

The Southerner turned and jumped up to sit on the rail, moving with a great deal more flexibility than Chris had seen in him for a while.

“Should there necessarily be something amiss, Mr. Larabee?”

“Ezra, I reckon I’ve gotten to know you a whole lot better these past few weeks and it doesn’t take a genius to know somethin’s bothering you.”

Standish ducked his head. An admission of guilt.

“Must be losing my touch,” he muttered glibly, “Next thing I’ll be wearing my heart on my sleeve.”

“No fear of that, Ezra, you ain’t got a heart.”

Both men laughed, comfortable with the moment. Finally Ezra looked at the older man and took a deep breath.

“You know, Chris. I’ve never really had a family.”

“You’ve got Maude,” Chris pointed out, quickly wishing he hadn’t as he saw the cloud passed over the Southerner’s clear green eyes.

“Maude is only family in the sense that she gave birth to me and so claims the title of mother by default. I mean real family.”

Chris nodded. Already he felt he knew where Ezra was leading because his own thoughts had been drifting that way.

“I’ve never even really had a place I called home and you know something? It never bothered me. In fact a couple of years ago I wouldn’t have cared if I never got to see a sunrise, I wouldn’t particularly have cared if I died because I had nothing really to live for. People I met were just a part of my existence, to be used as I saw fit to further my own needs.” He dropped his gaze, unable to maintain eye contact. “You know after the Atlanta fiasco I seriously considered taking my trusty Sig and blowing my fucking brains out -- but in the end I didn’t have the guts.”

“I’m glad you didn’t,” interjected Larabee quietly, “Because then I’d be missing one of the best undercover agents I’ve ever worked with,” his voice dropped even lower, “and I’d never have had the privilege of having you as a friend.”

“I don’t know if I ever really thanked you for giving me a second chance: Ezra Standish, FBI pariah. I know at the time I believed I’d just descended from one level of hell into another. Even now I still don’t know how you managed to swing it or, more to the point, why but I do know that I can never repay that faith in me.”

“Shit, Ezra. You pay me every time you come back from a successful bust so don’t go getting all sentimental on me!”

The Southerner laughed.

“What I’m trying to say is that -- without being the least bit sentimental -- I’ve finally found myself a place in the greater scheme of things. A sense of rightness about the way things are.”

Larabee nodded, understanding. It had been a long time coming but Standish had finally made the leap of faith it took for him to realise that he truly belonged. He reached out and grasped the younger agent’s shoulder in a reassuring squeeze.

“Just remember, Ezra. We’re all in this sorry mess that we call life together. What else are family for?”

Both men looked up as the front door swung wide and a tired looking Vin emerged; barefoot, dressed in jeans and a sweatshirt with a mug of coffee in his hand. He looked up in sudden surprise at the two men.

“Hell, Ezra! Didn’t expect to see you up at this time of day. You wet the bed or somethin’?”

The Southerner grinned broadly and jumped down from the porch rail wincing only slightly as he landed.

“Let’s just say I’ll blame it on the excellent sound carrying qualities of knotty pine and the inventiveness, athleticism and enthusiasm of my immediate neighbours.”

Vin frowned, suspecting that Ezra was having a joke at his expense but still trying to unravel what he had said.

“Goddamn, Ezra. Just talk plain for once can’t you?”

The Southerner pointedly consulted his watch and stared evenly at a grinning Chris Larabee.

“I do believe you owe me fifty dollars, Mr. Larabee.”