

ATF

The Guest



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Zoé Elliott was the kind of woman who turned heads. At a compact five feet five she was neither statuesque nor beautiful, in fact she would have been the first to point out her own physical imperfections, but, on the other hand, she had a presence that made people take a second look. This particular morning she was turning heads in the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms building as she strode purposefully through the foyer and to the bank of elevators which would carry her to the seventh floor. Oblivious to the minor stir her passage had created she punched the button for her destination glancing briefly at her watch as the elevator doors closed.

The office she entered was open plan, studded with desks and partitions -- cubbyholes assigned to various ATF personnel -- a high percentage of which were currently deserted. Zoé scanned the room and spying a huddle of men at the coffee machine made that group her target, raising her voice as she closed in.

"Excuse me, but could someone tell me where could I find Commander Larabee?"

All five men turned as one in response to the question but it was a tall, mustached agent who reacted first and stepped quickly forward to tower over Zoé's diminutive frame. Pointing he indicated an open office door along a short corridor to the left.

"Right in there, Miss."

Zoé bestowed on him the full force of her 1000 watt smile before moving off in the direction he had indicated.

"Thank you."

He turned back to the others to find the quartet struck dumb and staring after the woman as she walked purposefully away from them and towards Larabee's office.

"Very nice," breathed Sanchez quietly, but loud enough for his associates to hear and, to a man, agree.

The group broke apart, each agent moving towards a different bolt hole as the subject of their combined interest disappeared from view, although the one who had responded to her question persisted in staring at the door of Larabee's office into which the woman had vanished until physically nudged in the direction of his own desk by one of the others.

Chris Larabee paused his conversation with agent Ezra Standish as Elliott knocked perfunctorily at the open door and entered the small, very utilitarian, room which served as his office, a raised eyebrow begging the question why she should be there and, at the same time, inviting an answer.

"Good Morning, Mr. Larabee. I'm Zoé Elliott. HMCE." The blank expression on the senior agent's face prompted her to continue. "UK Department of Customs and Excise."

Larabee frowned, deliberately not rising from his chair.

"Should I know something about this, Miss.....?"

"Elliott," she repeated, patiently, already feeling a flare of irritation but unsure if the man was being obstructive or was truly uninformed. "And considering that I have been seconded to this unit for the next six months I naturally assumed that you would at least have been informed of my arrival."

Standish rose sinuously from his perch on the edge of Larabee's desk and turned to carefully scrutinise the woman. He was pleasantly surprised to see a thirty-something, athletic-looking female of middling height with deep blue eyes offset by almost black hair. Although not tall she was physically well put-together and

Standish had no doubts that this agent was one tough little package. At this stage he wasn't prepared to make further judgement but he sincerely hoped that she didn't turn out to be one of the ball-busting bitch brigade with something to prove and a very large axe to grind. With a quick smile, he smoothly excused himself and withdrew to the safety of his own desk, wondering how Chris was going to deal with this obviously unexpected development.

A moment later Buck Wilmington sidled up behind him and stared with undisguised longing at Larabee's now closed office door.

"That looks like walking dynamite to me, Ezra."

Standish smiled wickedly, momentarily showing a gold-clad premolar as he picked up a deck of cards from his desk drawer and began shuffling and dividing them in a casual but nonetheless impressive show of manual dexterity.

"I think you can safely upgrade that to Semtex, Mr. Wilmington and I'm not sure that Mr. Larabee is capable of defusing this particular bombshell. Apparently Miss Elliott is to be the newest addition to the team."

Buck almost snapped to attention, choking on the coffee he had chosen at that very moment to swallow.

"No shit!"

"As I live and breathe. Her name is Zoé and she's a British Customs agent."

Wilmington's expression was a comical mixture of confusion, disbelief, and suspicion.

"What? Why?"

Standish rocked back in his chair as Larabee's office door swung open.

"I wouldn't care to even hazard a guess at this stage but I do believe we are about to find out."

Once initial introductions over and done with and the woman settled at a spare workstation, Chris Larabee found that his office had suddenly become the place to be and, looking up from his desk at his six-member team, he could understand the reason for the accusatory glare that was being levelled at him. Throwing down his ballpoint pen, he raised both hands in a gesture of mock surrender.

"I swear I knew nothing about this, guys. The Judge organised it."

He didn't miss the expressive nuances that suggested collective disbelief and tried again.

"Ask Travis if you don't believe me but, whatever you might think, this is all news to me too."

"Yeah, bad news," he heard someone mutter.

He let that one ride.

Wilmington parked himself unceremoniously on the edge of Larabee's desk and picked up a paper clip which he proceeded to slowly but thoroughly twist out of shape.

"So what's it all about, Chris? Why us?..."

"More to the point," interrupted Standish, "What, exactly, is the purpose of this...exercise. What is her role going to be in the team?"

Larabee rose from his place at the desk and crossed to the window, pausing to look out over the cityscape before turning his back on the impressive vista and leaning the backs of his thighs against the window sill.

"Believe it or not this woman – this agent - has been seconded to the ATF in an exchange of personnel which is supposed to strengthen our ties with overseas agencies doing similar work. The British customs service has an excellent record when it comes to illegal arms trafficking and Travis believes we can benefit from importing some of that expertise."

There was a moment of silence before Buck laughed.

"You mean she's going to teach us our job?"

Larabee looked uneasily at the floor.

"And vice versa I hope. This is supposed to be about sharing not a pissing contest, so better that you trim the ego and can the attitude right now, because for the next six months Ms. Elliott - Zoé - will essentially be one of us."

Vin shifted restlessly.

"On ops too?"

"Everything. Where we go, she goes." He stopped and gave a wry grin. "Within reason. She's just spent the last three months with the FBI in training and orientation to the job. From now on whatever the team does, or wherever the team goes Ms. Elliott will be right there alongside us."

Someone swore softly and a murmur of uncharacteristic discontent rippled through the group.

Larabee had been afraid of this very reaction but before he had a chance to respond Standish had already spoken.

"Excuse me, gentlemen but just what has changed here? If you could, by some stretch of the imagination, manage to cast your mind back as far as twenty minutes ago, you were all drooling over this woman! Now it's clear that the lady isn't merely here as eye-candy, the testosterone levels seem to have dropped considerably. Classic behaviour from insecure males who feel threatened by a woman moving in on their territory."

Larabee barely succeeded in maintaining a straight face as he watched the almost comically changing expressions of the remaining team members. Sometimes, he thought, the Southerner deliberately took a position to the rest of the team just to be ornery, but this time he had to admit that it was spot on. These guys were suddenly being asked to step out of their comfort zone and, after watching their reactions, he could only think that perhaps it wasn't such a bad thing.

Buck rose slowly from the desk to tower over the smaller agent.

"Well thank you for the psychological profile, Ezra? And I suppose *you* didn't even notice that a great piece of ass had walked into the office?"

Larabee mentally cringed, wondering already if they would manage to survive the coming months without Elliott slamming a sexual harassment suit on Wilmington.

"On the contrary Mr. Wilmington, I could hardly avoid noticing Miz Elliot's...assets but unlike you my thought processes occur in an organ above the neck not below the waist!"

Larabee moved quickly to intervene aware that the situation was likely to deteriorate rapidly if Standish and Wilmington were allowed to continue.

"Enough! Whether any of you like it or not, Elliott is here and there's nothing we can do about it. I want you to remember just three things: firstly, that we are under orders to co-operate with this exercise secondly,

that Elliott is now officially ATF whatever her background or your opinions and thirdly, that we still have a job to do. Any of you have a problem with that?"

Apparently no one did.

Larabee's gaze flickered around the room settling finally on the urbane Southerner as the least likely to either cause offence, or commit any social gaffes or inter-agency faux pas when dealing with their newest recruit; and on the plus side he had spent some time in England. On the negative side the gambler had a caustic wit which, coupled with a highly developed sense of irony, sometimes landed him in trouble. Larabee sighed and, having selected his target dropped his gaze.

"Ezra. You'll be responsible for showing Officer Elliott the ropes. Make sure she's kitted out from stores and draws a weapon from the armoury then it's up to you to keep an eye on her. I'll be holding you personally accountable for any fuck-ups."

Standish inclined his head slightly acknowledging his brief without the protest Larabee could have expected from any one of the others save possibly Jackson. The remaining agents let out a collective sigh, clearly relieved that the task had fallen on someone else. For Ezra himself, the fact that Chris had singled him out came as no great surprise. After all, he was the only one who had formed no natural alliance with any other individual in the group and continued to remain the odd man out, circulating through the group but never allowing anyone to get too close. To pair him now with the British agent was not only a way of teaming him with a fixed partner but of avoiding splitting up already well-established pairings.

"My pleasure."

Chris nodded. At least he sounded as if he meant it.

The team dispersed silently and rapidly, not one of them eager to venture into territory in which their familiar parameters had suddenly been changed, but none of them wanting to linger and possibly draw Larabee's ire either. J.D. Dunne and Buck Wilmington retired to their adjoining desks, while Josiah, Nathan and Vin all quickly found reasonable excuses to leave the office within minutes of each other. Standish, sighing, removed his jacket and hung it on the back of his chair before crossing to where Elliott sat a few desks away at a spare terminal. It was shaping up to be a very long day.

Zoé had watched the six men file morosely out of Larabee's office with a degree of amusement. She had worked in a male dominated industry long enough to realise that she was usually far from welcome in new territory and she didn't believe that her current assignment was likely to be any different. One thing she had discovered was that men were men the world over. As one of the agents approached - Standish she thought - she looked up.

"So, you got the short straw, huh?"

Ezra straightened, flexed his shoulders and tried to ease the tightness in his lower back. After spending several hours orientating Elliott to the office, the building and routine operating procedure, he had started Elliott on some routine search work and he had returned to his own desk to work on some outstanding reports. In spite of the supposed ergonomic design of his workstation, prolonged time in front of the monitor always resulted in a literal pain in the neck and, if he ignored the warning signs, a pounding headache. Aware of the pressure already building behind his eyes he pushed himself away from the desk and rose

stiffly from his chair, stretching and feeling the muscles in his shoulders crackle in response. Crossing to the coffee machine he poured himself a generous measure of the dark, strong brew and swallowed a couple of pain-killers; with any luck that would be enough to avoid one of the brutal headaches which would occasionally descend like a pestilence to plague him and put him out of action for an entire day.

It suddenly dawned on him that it was unusually quiet in the office and a glance around the room served to confirm the fact that most field agents had found an excuse to be somewhere else. Engrossed in his own work he had failed to notice the subtle exodus which eventually had left only himself, the English customs officer and a handful of support staff. He sighed wearily. His colleagues had all the subtlety of a sledgehammer.

"Some trick, eh?"

Ezra turned sharply, rigid neck muscles protesting at the sudden movement, as Elliott materialised at his elbow. He raised a hand to massage the back of his neck and pretended not to understand her inference.

"Trick?"

She gestured to the almost empty room.

"That's the effect I have on people."

"I can't imagine why."

The woman paused in pouring her coffee and tilted her head to one side, as she considered the response.

"Do I detect a hint of sarcasm there?"

Standish allowed himself a smile.

"I regret to admit that you do, Ms. Elliott, and for that I apologise."

Zoé filled her cup and returned the carafe to the hot plate as Ezra, squeezing his eyes shut, rode the first familiar wave of nausea that signalled the start of a monster headache.

"Are you all right? God, you're as white as a sheet!"

Her concern he was forced to admit sounded genuine. He drained his the last of his coffee and casually dismissed her question.

"Just a headache."

She dropped her gaze.

"May I talk to you Agent Standish?"

"I thought that's what we were doing." He started to walk back to his workstation.

Elliott looked briefly at her watch and tried a different tack.

"Look, how about some lunch? I'm starving and you look like you could use a break." She looked straight at him. "Not here. I need some air and a change of scenery."

Standish hesitated, then looking around the deserted room he experienced a moment of shame at the behaviour of his co-workers towards this woman and promptly accepted the offer, although at that moment he would have liked nothing better than to lie down in a darkened room and concentrate on riding out the crushing pain that he knew was certain to come. Instead he smiled.

"I know just the place. Allow me to share with you some of the culinary delights of a little restaurant I know not far from here."

He retrieved his handgun from the desk drawer and slipped it into the holster nestled in his left armpit then donned his jacket before locking his terminal. Elliott mimicked his actions almost exactly except she slid her own weapon into a holster in the small of her back.

Together the unlikely pair walked down to the basement car-park chatting easily and leaving some open-mouthed agents in their wake when by chance they crossed paths with Agents Tanner, Wilmington and Dunne returning to the office.

"I understand you were previously with the FBI."

The lunch had been enjoyable but the Southerner had been finding it increasingly difficult to maintain focus on what Elliott was saying and portions of the conversation now eluded him completely; in truth his mind was straying more to the welcoming prospect of bed, a dark room, an ice pack and some suitably powerful pain-killers, but now she had his undivided attention.

Standish lowered his eyes and stared intently at the rosé remaining in the bottom of his glass. Hell, it didn't take long for the office grapevine to bear fruit! He considered the best way to avoid this particular avenue of conversation. In the end he simply went for the truth.

"That's one part of my career that I try not to dwell on."

"I'm sorry. It's just that I like to know a little about who I'm working with. I don't mean to pry."

He raised his head and met Elliott's gaze. He hoped he had succeeded in masking his feelings; the issue of his past was still like a half-healed wound for him.

"I'm sure you don't."

Chastised, she had moved on to safer ground, sorry that she had raised the issue of the agent's former career at all and wondering where to go next with the conversation which had now unaccountably stalled. A few minutes later she crumpled her napkin and dropped it onto her empty plate. Across the table Standish finished off the last of the wine and wearily rubbed his temples. Most of his meal untouched.

"Now, it's my turn to apologise Miss Elliott. I've been very poor company." He sounded tired and although he had masked it well she guessed he was struggling to stay focused.

"No, don't. You've at least made some effort to make me feel welcome." She glanced at her watch. "Look, it's already past two o'clock and you look really crappy. How about we forget the coffee and get you home?"

"Miss Elliott, that is without doubt the best suggestion I've heard all day."

He signalled the waiter for the check.

A short time later Standish leaned back gratefully in the passenger seat as Elliott took the wheel, his vision sparkling with black spots exploding into coloured flares in spite of the sunglasses and the darkly tinted glass of the Jaguar. The pressure in his skull was distracting in its intensity and he inwardly cursed himself for not remembering to routinely carry his tablets with him. Elliott had demanded his car keys as soon as they had left the restaurant recognising, once the colour had completely drained from his face in the bright sunlight, that Standish was in no condition to drive. It was a measure of Standish's state of mind – and health – that he actually complied without protest and allowed her to take the driver's seat. Now the ATF agent felt Elliott lean across him and realised that she was buckling him into his seatbelt. Smart lady to understand that

he was incapable of completing even that small action for himself.

He barely registered the ride, concentrating rather on not embarrassing himself by throwing up as the powerful car surged through the light mid-afternoon traffic, but was aware nonetheless that the woman drove well and was handling the big V12 with ease.

"Come on, Sunshine. You're home."

Elliott had, without any fuss, succeeded in locating his townhouse, parking the car and was now coaxing him out of the vehicle.

He followed her in a blinding technicolour haze, almost tripping on the steps then feeling her arm around his waist as she steadied him then, suddenly, he was out of the glaring sunlight and into the cool, darkness of his own home. With a profound sense of relief Standish stumbled to the couch and, closing his eyes, sank gratefully into the soft leather, stirring a few minutes later as Zoé resurfaced to loosen the knot of his tie, unfasten his shirt collar and lay a cold pack across the back of his neck.

"You look like death, Standish. Migraine, right?"

He nodded slowly and promptly wished he hadn't.

"You have some medication for it?"

"Bathroom...cabinet," he murmured, the effort of speaking an obvious challenge.

The slight slurring of his speech was not lost on the woman.

Elliott was back in seconds, dropping two of the small, green tablets under his tongue before helping him out of his jacket. With a deft economy of movement Zoé stripped him of his shoulder rig, unclipped the cell phone from his belt and removed his sunglasses before rearranging the cushions on the couch.

"Here. Lie down."

He experienced a rush of vertigo as he too quickly changed position then sank listlessly against the leather, fighting rising nausea and craving relief from the pain now thundering in his head.

Zoé looked critically at the man lying on the couch. The day had not quite turned out the way she had expected. The lukewarm reception from her future colleagues had been no great surprise, that was the nature of the job; lunch with Standish had been an impulsive gesture on her part -- an opportunity to get to know the agent who had been designated as her minder -- but winding up playing nurse certainly had not been on her agenda. She shrugged out of her jacket and moved purposefully through the unfamiliar house gathering a few items together; a blanket, washcloth, ice water and a basin. Returning to the living room she tucked the light cellular blanket around the ATF agent and sat down on the edge of the couch before pouring some of the water into the basin, wringing out the washcloth and placing the folded towel over the Southerner's eyes.

"That better?"

"You, Miss Elliott, are an angel," he breathed, "And I take back any uncharitable thoughts I might ever have had about you."

Smiling faintly, Zoé finished unfastening his tie and adjusted the cold pack under his neck, her movements economical and businesslike.

"So, does this happen often?"

"No. Once, twice a year." In spite of his discomfort he forced a wry smile. "Special occasions only."

She could tell it was an effort for him to speak so she merely sat, occasionally refreshing the cold compresses as she waited for the medication to take effect. Fifteen minutes later she could see that some of the tension had gone from his body and that the rhythm of his breathing was subtly changing as he finally relaxed and gave in to sleep. She rose quietly from the couch and taking off her shoes crossed to the kitchen; initial crisis over she could at least take time out to make some coffee for herself.

The kitchen, as with the living area, was immaculate. Looking around Zoé came to the conclusion that either Standish was never at home, employed a housekeeper or was one incredibly tidy individual. After finally unearthing the materials she needed to make coffee in various cupboards, plunger, mill, beans -- no such thing as instant in this kitchen -- she filled her cup and, prompted by curiosity, began to move through the rest of the house.

She had to admit above all else this man had taste as she navigated her way through rooms filled with *objet d'art* that brought to mind a private gallery rather than a home but she soon came to the conclusion that the house reflected nothing of its owner. Zoé felt no representation of the man himself in either the decor or furnishings, only in the study did she see any hint of personality and it was here that she finally sat and felt comfortable. Looking round she knew intuitively that this was where Standish spent much of his time at home; his retreat.

Tucking her feet under her in the huge leather chair she glanced idly at the reading material on the side table -- several magazines devoted to the stock market (why was she not surprised?), a publication on military history (interesting), the New York Times and several books on subjects as diverse as antiques, handguns, the Mayan civilisation and the autobiography of the Dalai Lama. Under the literary detritus she found a well-used deck of playing cards and, resigned to a lengthy stay, she began to shuffle them deftly dealing herself a hand of solitaire.

Standish surfaced tentatively, unsuccessfully trying to cling to the last remnant of sleep. Awake but disorientated he lay quietly for a few moments until he was able to gather his fragmented wits. Resisting any sudden movement, he slowly peeled the damp washcloth from his eyes and was surprised to find the room in total darkness; not the darkness of drapes closed against the intrusion of sunlight but the true darkness of night. A soft glow of light came from the hall just enough to dispel utter blackness. He swung his legs over the edge of the sofa and sat up, movements deliberately slow so as not to antagonise the dull ache still remaining in his head. According to his watch it was 11.30pm so he had been asleep over eight hours. He picked up the bottle of pills from the coffee table, took one just to be safe, and stood up.

Suddenly remembering Elliott's part in the afternoon's proceedings, he wondered if she had caught a cab home, then noticed first her jacket thrown over the chair then her shoes kicked behind a chair and with mixed feelings gathered that she was still somewhere in the house. He wasn't entirely sure how he felt about that. In his present condition he would have preferred to be alone with his misery.

Moving slowly towards the bathroom he was unsure if the urge to vomit was going to take precedence over the pressing need to empty his bladder but, thankfully, on reaching the en suite he successfully managed to answer the call of nature before nausea finally won the debate.

"Ezra?"

Standish squinted as the bathroom light flicked on, illuminating the tiled expanse of the bathroom and fixing him in its glare as he leaned over the toilet bowl miserably retching, glad that he had at least managed to take a leak in private before being interrupted. Elliott was beside him in an instant, one hand solicitously on his arm the other rubbing his back as the last of the shuddering spasms passed and he stood trembling from the effort.

"Christ, you look bloody terrible Standish!"

The Southerner wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, torn between disgust at having someone witness his current sorry state and the surprisingly welcome comfort of the woman's touch.

"Excuse me;" he panted raggedly, "I'm usually at my very best when I'm throwing up."

She turned on the faucet at the handbasin and waited while he sluiced cold water over his face, rinsed his mouth and washed his hands. Looking at his reflection in the mirror he could understand her concern; he had seen healthier looking corpses. He turned as the woman shut off the flow of water and slipped an arm around his waist.

"Come on. You need to sit down before you fall down."

He had to admit that the sensation of Elliott's body pressing against his own was far from unpleasant and given other circumstances he may even have thought of exploring further in that direction but tonight he was merely glad of her support as the two of them exited the bathroom and crossed the short distance to the bed. Elliott switched on the bedside lamp as Standish pulled the loosely hanging tie free of his collar and sank wearily onto the divan only to rise again in faint alarm as the woman popped the button on his pants and began unfastening his shirt. His protest died as the sudden movement sent a galaxy of stars spinning across his vision and he was forced to surrender his dignity and let her continue. Within a few minutes she had efficiently stripped him down to his Calvin Kleins and he was lying in reasonable comfort beneath the covers. He considered himself lucky that at least he had been left with a shred of dignity intact.

Without protest he took another ergotamine tablet that Zoé had retrieved from the living room as well as some anti-nausea medication she had found from somewhere, understanding that she wasn't giving him any option to refuse. Although suddenly he couldn't imagine why he would want to, especially once she sat down beside him and began to slowly massage his neck and shoulders.

"You should go home, Ms. Elliott," he muttered drowsily, "It's getting late."

"Ezra, please call me Zoé. I think possibly the fact that I just undressed you entitles us to be on a first name basis, don't you?" When he didn't respond she realised he was already asleep. "And if you don't mind," she continued, knowing she was talking to thin air, "I'd rather stay here - it's far better than that cheap hotel the Bureau booked me into."

Zoé had woken promptly at sunrise, just as she always, but this morning there was a major difference; she was in Ezra Standish's guest bedroom. She stretched and sighed. *Good one, Zoé.*

After finding the laundry and throwing her clothes into the washing machine she spent fifteen minutes luxuriating in a hot shower then wrapped herself in a towel and padded barefoot out to kitchen. Grabbing an orange juice from the fridge she briefly ducked into Standish's room to find him still sleeping; sprawled untidily across the bed with both arms out-flung and the sheet tangled around his hips, looking relaxed but

also curiously young and vulnerable. Zoé withdrew soundlessly not wishing to disturb him unnecessarily while it was still so early. For the next twenty minutes she busied herself making and eating a quick breakfast as she impatiently waited for her clothes to tumble dry. She had just finished donning her still-warm underwear when she heard subdued voices outside and the unmistakable sound of someone trying the front door. Slipping noiselessly into the living room she slid Ezra's SIG from the holster and waited, aiming the heavy weapon two-handed at the opening door, prepared for any unwelcome intruders.

So it was that Buck Wilmington and J.D. Dunne came upon her as they roughly jostled each other through the doorway having used their spare key to gain entry, abruptly stopping, slack-jawed, at the sight of the custom's officer standing in just a sports bra and briefs pointing an unfriendly looking nine millimeter automatic in their direction. Wilmington raised his hands in mock surrender, a broad grin on his face as Elliott slowly lowered the pistol and thumbed the safety back into position. Dunne seemed to be having trouble finding somewhere to look, while Wilmington unashamedly allowed his eyes to travel the length and breadth of Elliott's compact and muscular form. Ignoring the open scrutiny of the taller man she took a step forward and replaced Standish's gun in the shoulder rig on the coffee table.

"Oh, it's you two. Tell me, are you in the habit of walking straight into someone's house unannounced?"

Buck and J.D. exchanged amused glances.

"Well, we do when it's a friend and we have the key," countered Wilmington reasonably, glancing around and taking note of Ezra's jacket discarded in one chair, gun and cell phone on the coffee table and Elliott's shoes and jacket carelessly cast aside in and around the second chair. "Where's Ezra? Chris is as mad as hell. Ezra hasn't been answering his phone all night and we have a briefing at eight."

Zoé struck an unconsciously provocative pose, hands on hips and pelvis tilted forward, as if she would physically block them from moving any further into the house.

"Asleep -- and I strongly suggest that you put out of your mind any thoughts of disturbing him right now."

Buck winked knowingly and nudged his younger companion.

"Sleepless night, huh?"

Elliott narrowed her eyes and looked levelly at the two men deliberately not reacting to Wilmington's innuendo, until they both started to shift restlessly under her intense scrutiny.

"So, is this just a wake up call or was there something else?"

"No, ma'am. Just that Ezra has a bad habit of oversleeping. If we'd known he had company....." he left the sentence unfinished.

"Trust me, Mr. Wilmington. Agent Standish will be on time – I'm perfectly capable of getting him up." She almost groaned aloud as she saw the flicker of laughter play across Wilmington's face but was determined not to dig herself in any deeper by trying to back-pedal. "Gentlemen, if you'll excuse me I'd like to get dressed."

J.D. beat a hasty retreat recognising the unspoken dismissal, followed by a still smirking Buck.

"See you at eight then, Miss Elliott."

"Indeed, you will Agent Wilmington."

Zoé cursed inwardly as the door closed behind the two men not sure if what had just transpired would hinder or help her. She didn't need to be a candidate for Mensa to know exactly what sordid conclusion

Wilmington had arrived at after seeing her in a state of undress at six in the morning in Standish's house.

She crossed hurriedly to the master bedroom only to find her host already awake, sitting sleepily on the edge of the bed and rubbing the back of his neck. He looked up as she entered the room, his face registering a fleeting expression of surprise before he recovered his usual equanimity.

"Well, Miss Elliott, am I to assume that rather than take a cab to your lodgings last evening you maintained a night-long vigil in concern for my welfare?"

Zoé shot him a glance of pure disdain that might have withered lesser men.

"As a matter of fact I spent a very restful night in your guest bedroom." She replied primly, still feeling foolish after her altercation with Wilmington and Dunne. She moved to sit beside him on the bed, her expression softening. "That is, of course, following a brief interlude during which you threw up in the toilet and finally allowed me the dubious pleasure of getting you out of your clothes."

Standish slowly lowered his head into his hands.

"Dear Lord, yes. I'm so sorry."

She smiled suddenly and squeezed his shoulder.

"Don't be. It wasn't exactly the sort of introduction I'd recommend to everyone but I'll say one thing, it was different. How's the head this morning?"

"Better," he acknowledged, slowly raising his head, "Apart from feeling like I've been run down by a locomotive, I'm fine."

The woman leaned forward and rested her forearms on her knees.

"Wilmington and Dunne were just here."

"Oh?" He registered her less than enthusiastic tone, glanced briefly at her attire and came to the obvious conclusion himself. "Oh."

She sighed in resignation.

"C'est la vie! But, more importantly, Larabee's called a briefing at eight. He was trying to call you all evening."

Standish checked the gold Rolex on his wrist and wearily stood up wishing, for a number of reasons that had nothing to do with his health, he could just crawl back under the covers but knowing that particular luxury was not on anyone's agenda for the day.

"Well, might I suggest that given Mr. Larabee's summons that we move with alacrity. The man definitely does not take kindly to latecomers."

Zoé stood up.

"Does that by any chance translate to 'move your arse woman or we'll be late?'"

Standish grinned mischievously as he walked into the bathroom.

"Couldn't have put it better myself."

Less than ten minutes later Standish shrugged into the shoulder rig settling the harness comfortably across his back and adjusting the Sig to his satisfaction, before donning the charcoal grey jacket of his Hugo Boss suit. Checking his watch he finally collected car keys and cell phone from the coffee table and, as an afterthought, swept up the small bottle of ergotamine tablets. Smiling at Elliott he dropped them into his pocket.

"Ready?"

She sat with her head on one side examining him critically.

"You know you still look terrible."

He deliberately feigned misunderstanding and looked down at his perfectly accoutréd body.

"Oh? I rather like this suit."

"You know what I mean."

He did indeed. The shower had refreshed him but had been unable to erase the dark shadows of fatigue and his eyes remained heavily shot through with vivid streaks of red.

"Is this better?"

He put on his sunglasses and moved to open the door. Elliott wordlessly gathered her few things together and allowed Standish to usher her out to the car, beset by misgivings that the day was about to get very complicated.

Chris Larabee checked his watch for the fifth time in as many minutes. Sanchez, Jackson and Tanner already chatted quietly by the coffee machine; with ten minutes to go three of his men and the team's English guest were still missing. A few minutes later he glanced up as, with their usual lack of decorum, Dunne and Wilmington exploded noisily into the office shouting greetings to the others in between excitable bursts of conversation. Shaking his head slowly he wondered if Buck would ever grow up. Or if he really wanted him to.

"So where's Ezra? Did he come?"

Larabee scowled. He had tried to contact the agent the previous night but his mobile phone had repeatedly diverted to voice-mail and Standish had not responded to the messages he had left on his answering machine, for which lapse in protocol Standish would, in due course, be receiving a verbal warning. Wilmington and Dunne had been charged with the task of ensuring the Southerner put in a timely appearance at the morning's briefing.

"You could say that," grinned Wilmington, obviously not ready to share some joke he and Dunne were having at Ezra's expense.

Innocent of the *double entendre*, Larabee shook his head as Wilmington continued to laugh but on seeing that his boss was not in the mood for jokes Buck was sensible enough to control his laughter and hurriedly assume a more dignified stance.

"Uh, we called at Ezra's place and delivered the message....." Buck confirmed soberly, pausing for effect, "...to a certain visiting custom's officer. And boy, does that little lady look good up close and personal!"

Larabee, in no mood for Wilmington's bizarre sense of humour, was about to snarl angrily at him when a sudden silence descended and the group turned in a single body to stare, speechless, as the final member of the team strolled through the door with his arm draped casually around an animated and smiling Zoé Elliott.

During the briefing Larabee's gaze was continually drawn to the unusually pale countenance of the Southerner who had positioned himself unobtrusively in the corner, and where he now leaned against the wall with his arms folded. Standish appeared to be majorly hung-over and the team leader had been shocked

when the Southerner had removed his designer sunglasses to reveal tired eyes and dark semi-circles beneath his eye sockets. He mentally shrugged; no wonder Ezra had not answered the phone. Yet, Larabee had misgivings about accepting these particular facts at face value. For one thing it was completely out of character for Ezra to allow his social life to encroach on his work and while he had been known at times to drink to excess those rare episodes had never interfered with his duties. But if he had been wasted - was wasted - he would have his hide and nail it to the door of his office for all to see.

"So Josiah and Nathan will work surveillance?"

Larabee realised his concentration had wavered as J.D.'s voice cut through his thoughts and brought him rapidly back to the briefing.

"That's right," he snapped, unhappy that already the morning seemed to be on the skids, "This is Team 3's bust, we're just going along for the ride but it's a big one and could get messy if it doesn't go down clean. We'll be there as containment and to help mop up. Vin, Ezra and me will provide back up while Buck and J.D. are on standby." He turned to Zoé. "You get to choose: Josiah and Nathan or partner me."

"I'd rather not do surveillance," she answered quickly, "I prefer to be where the action is. So I'll stick with you if you don't mind."

Larabee nodded abruptly, he didn't mind one bit, but he hadn't missed Vin Tanner's subtle change in expression which, for his friend, spoke volumes. The Texan was obviously not happy with the allocation.

"Okay, you're with me then. You have two hours."

The team broke up and one by one started to file out of the office. Standish was the last to move from his position against the wall.

"Ezra."

Standish paused with his hand on the door knob, turning at the expected summons to face his boss.

"Sit down."

Closing the door softly behind the others he did as he had been asked and waited for Larabee to speak.

"You weren't answering your phone last night."

Not, the Southerner noticed, where were you? He inclined his head in assent but refrained from offering a response, prompting an agitated Larabee to stand up and run his hand through his hair in exasperation.

"Come on, talk to me, Ezra. You leave work for lunch yesterday with our...guest..., effectively disappear for eighteen hours, stop taking calls and come into work looking like shit! Now I have Buck telling everyone who will listen that you and Elliott spent the night together. Is there anything you'd like to tell me?"

Standish sat quietly and sighed.

"Is there any point? Looks to me like the jury's already out."

"That's crap, Ezra, and you know it! Hell, this is not like you."

The Southerner sat in silence for a few moments before raising his head and meeting Larabee's steely gaze.

"Okay. Elliott and I did go out to lunch. She drove me home because I wasn't capable of driving myself and yes, she did stay the night – but it's not what you think."

Chris leaned back against the desk with his arms folded.

"And what do I think?"

Ezra ran a thumb down the perfect crease in his pants leg not looking at the older man.

"Look, I got sick at lunch. A migraine, if you must know. Zoé took me home and spent the night playing nurse while I either slept or puked! I wouldn't have heard a bomb go off never mind a phone ringing."

"That doesn't explain why Zoé didn't pick up," Chris answered reasonably.

Standish swung his head up and levelled an icy glare at his boss.

"I can't speak for Zoé. Ask her if you must. But that's all there is to it, Chris. End of story. No dramas, no booze, no sex. Disappointed?"

Larabee sighed and shook his head.

"Only you could make life so complicated, Ezra." He walked around the desk and sat down. "Are you all right now? You still don't look so great."

Standish looked mildly surprised.

"That's it? You believe me?"

"Is there any reason I shouldn't?"

"No. I've told you the absolute truth. Ask Elliott."

Larabee ignored the challenge, although he would be asking some questions of his own that had nothing to do with his belief or disbelief of Ezra's version of events.

"In two hours we're going in for a major bust. Can you promise me that you're 100% fit?"

Standish smiled roguishly.

"Never better."

"Liar," accused Larabee without rancour, "Let me down and I'll personally bust your balls! Now get out of here. Oh, and Ezra, get some gear for Elliott. Make sure she has body armour. It won't look good for us if she gets herself killed on the first assignment."

J.D. sat behind the wheel of Wilmington's pickup beating a tattoo on any available surface in counterpoint to the pounding beat issuing from the Chevy's radio. Buck slid lazily down in the passenger seat and backhanded the younger man in the thigh.

"Here they come."

Dunne turned the volume down a notch and watched as a dark blue Ford sedan eased into the kerb fifty yards ahead. Buck swatted at a persistent fly and frowned at his companion.

"Goddamn J.D. if you're gonna park next to a dumpster you could at least close the window."

The younger man merely grinned seemingly oblivious to both the ripe odour invading the vehicle and the swarming insects.

"Hey, it's good cover. Means we got this stretch of the street all to ourselves."

Four men exited the Ford; the two dealers and their personal bodyguards, both powerfully muscled and dangerous-looking individuals.

"That's Paco Giuliano," murmured Buck quietly, identifying one of the heavies, "Glad this is McMurray's baby, kid."

J.D. scanned the almost empty street that was made up of mainly warehouses and a few shop fronts as Wilmington kept his eyes fixed on the four men. After a cursory inspection of the area the quartet entered a

judas gate in one of the warehouses and disappeared.

"So what happens now?"

"With any luck we just get to sit here and watch."

A few moments later, a sleek Mercedes rapidly approached from the opposite end of the street and parked in front of the Ford, five more players boiling from the open doors.

"Aw, Shit! This part isn't in the script. Who the hell are these jokers?" He turned to Dunne. "How many guys did Chris say McMurray's got in there?"

"Two."

"This is not good, J.D. Not good at all." He activated his communicator. "Chris..."

Larabee's voice immediately crackled through his ear-piece: "I see 'em. Maintain station."

The Team 7 leader observed the unexpected development from a second storey window across the street from the warehouse with Tanner, Standish and Elliott waiting in reserve for the signal to move. Tanner and Larabee squatted shoulder to shoulder in conference at the window while Standish leaned easily against the side wall. Elliott, feeling like a rookie, hovered at the periphery of the group her anxiety showing in her movements as she found it impossible to remain still. Catching her eye Standish smiled and winked. Since the briefing she had been trying to distance herself from the Southerner for both their sakes, Standish, she knew, had borne the brunt of Larabee's displeasure over the events of the previous night, and she was determined not to damage in any way the cohesion of the group. If she was seen to be aligning herself with Ezra or, worse, perceived to be pairing off with him either personally and professionally, she was going to have a very hard time commanding any respect from the others. She liked Ezra, she liked him a lot, but she knew better than to crap in her own nest. She ruefully glanced at Tanner and Larabee. Not that it was going to be a problem with either of those two. So far Larabee seemed to be willing to accept her, but on sufferance, and the young Texan agent had barely acknowledged her presence. In fact once or twice she had caught him watching her and the resentment in his eyes had given her reason to be thankful for Ezra's friendship. Impulsively she moved closer to Standish, not failing to notice the flicker in Larabee's gaze as he marked her movement.

"How's the head?" She kept her voice low.

"I'll live. How's the ego?"

Zoé grinned quite aware that he was referring to the belief among the team that they had slept together. She held her thumb and index finger a millimetre apart and they both laughed. The two men at the window momentarily speared disapproving glances in their direction before returning their attention to the street below.

The sound of a single gunshot from the warehouse charged the room with an almost palpable tension. At a signal from Larabee, Standish smoothly made the transition from relaxation to animation in a millisecond and disappeared out of the door. Tanner followed in his wake clutching the high-tech sniper rifle that was a tool of his trade. Waiting in anticipation for her own instructions Elliott was conscious of Larabee barking instructions into his headset microphone then he too was moving, catching her by the upper arm as he passed and pulling her into his wake.

"Come on. We're on."

The Team 7 leader ran for the stairs but surprised her by taking the flight up rather than descending to ground level. Zoé followed, adrenaline pumping freely, keeping as close to the lean ATF agent as she dared. Larabee exited the building through the fire escape and again chose to move upward and finally onto the roof. She noticed that he didn't once look back but assumed that she would not only follow but keep up with his pace. She smiled inwardly confident that she was equal to the challenge any of these men could throw at her as far as fitness and athleticism were concerned.

Larabee dropped face-down on corrugated metal and wriggled, knees and elbows, to the crest of the roof. More gunshots cracked in the still air and she could clearly hear the whine of the ricochets from inside the warehouse. Her headset filled her ears with disjointed commands, responses and general babble but she was able to interpret enough of what was being communicated to realise that the bust had gone to hell in short order. One agent from Team 3 was already down, and in spite of reinforcements it looked like a stand-off was developing. No-one was coming out and, apparently no-one was going in either. Looking from side to side Zoé could see Wilmington and Dunne moving in from the south and on the neighbouring roof Tanner was already drawing a bead on a target within the building. She had no doubt that he was about to alter the odds slightly in the favour of the law enforcement teams. Larabee was talking earnestly into his communicator, and conscious that time was wasting, that every passing minute increased the danger to the ATF men already in the building Zoé quickly scanned the rooftop. A few yards to her left two narrow girders, perhaps six feet apart, spanned the road joining the two buildings; some remnant of an industry that she couldn't begin to guess at but which might just prove to be a lucky break for the good guys. She elbowed Larabee and jerked her head towards the steel beam nearest her, the intention clear. The flinty eyes appraised the feasibility of using it to cross and at once dismissed it.

"Too risky. Getting across would mean too much exposure."

"Not if you do it fast," she argued, "Let me try."

He looked dubious.

"We're not in the circus, Elliott. Just hang ten and wait till we see what goes down here."

"I can do it," she insisted, "If I go over this way, we've got the element of surprise. They won't be expecting anyone to come over the top. It could be enough of a distraction to swing the odds in our favour."

Without waiting for an answer, she skittered crabwise towards the girder and squatted in front of the length of steel. It was slightly wider than a gymnastic balance beam and studded with steel rivets; she checked the soles of her running shoes and, confident that they would not slip on the weathered surface, stood upright. Looking down the length of the girder she momentarily raised herself on her toes and setting foot on the metal ran lightly across its width to land easily on the opposite side. The manoeuvre had taken less than ten seconds.

Larabee watched her progress with trepidation. There was nothing he could do to call her back and there was no way he would have attempted it himself, but she was slight enough and nimble enough - and obviously crazy enough - to pull it off. In fact she reminded him so much of a gymnast that at the very least he was expecting a graceful dismount on the other side but with a quick wave she disappeared over the roof top. With a faint smile Larabee turned his attention to co-ordinating a new attack. When this was over he was going to kick her ass.

With his men alerted to Elliott's presence in the warehouse and redeployed to take advantage of the fact Larabee spared a moment to scan the opposite rooftop narrowing his eyes as he searched for some sign of his wayward agent. Nothing.

"Elliott. Talk to me," he rasped down the mike.

His own men he knew well enough to second-guess their actions, Elliott was an unknown quantity and while she had already proved she had guts there was no telling what her response to any given situation would be. Hell, she wasn't even ATF and at the moment she was alone in the shark's mouth without anyone to back her up. A volley of gunfire reminded him that there was no time for deliberation left to them and he darted across the corrugated surface to join Tanner on the adjacent roof. The sharpshooter squeezed off two shots in rapid succession then paused, his eye still glued to the telescopic sight as Larabee dropped face-down beside him.

"Lost your partner, cowboy?"

"It's called gaining a tactical advantage," replied Larabee, as he picked up the binoculars lying beside his friend and trained the powerful lenses on the building opposite.

"Your idea or hers?" he asked, without letting his attention waver.

Chris grunted a non-committal reply.

"Maybe you should've gone with her."

Tanner's face remained deadpan but Larabee could detect the laughter in his voice. He glanced at the narrowness of the steel beam once again then back at the Texan. There was no way he would have sprinted across that without at least a lifeline.

"Yeah, right."

Elliott peered over the edge of the gutter trying to find the best way to enter the warehouse unobserved. Eyeing the loading platform jutting out from the second storey she tested the gutter for strength and swung over, hanging for a moment before she dropped lightly into a crouch on the floor of the wooden platform hoping the solid thump of her landing had gone unnoticed.. She spoke two words into her headset before flicking it off.

"I'm in."

She knew she was probably breaking every rule in the book but the last thing she wanted was for the static squawk of a communicator to alert the entire building to her whereabouts. She wiped the sweat from her palms and adjusted her grip on the gun. Time to go to work.

To Elliott's amazement and immense satisfaction the second level, a mezzanine floor, was unguarded but the area below her was a hive of activity with a dozen men brandishing arms but deadlocked in a stalemate. Among the diverse weapons on display she identified at least one Ingram and, all too aware of its murderous firepower, she decided to avoid any direct confrontation with that particular individual. Body armour or not she was not likely to walk away from such an encounter unscathed. As tempting as it was to draw a bead on any one of the men below she knew that she was first obliged to make herself known before firing a shot.

One man lay on the floor both hands clutching his abdomen as he moaned softly, his legs drawn up in

obvious pain. ATF. Two men stood off to one side, one holding the other in a choke hold and pressing an impressively large handgun to his neck. She judged the guy with the gun to be the second ATF agent and his captive to be a major player; it was the only scenario that made any sense. Taking a deep breath, she stood up and assumed the firing position.

"ATF! Freeze!"

The reaction to her unexpected appearance was almost comical but it also created sufficient confusion to allow a shift in the balance of power. As heads swivelled in her direction there was a sudden enfilade of gunfire to which she quickly added her own contribution. Two men dropped bonelessly to the floor one after the other - headshot -- and she guessed that Tanner had nailed them from his vantage point across the street. She fired several shots of her own which scattered those still standing, then the world seemed to explode around her ears as ATF agents poured into the building to join the firefight.

She heard the familiar stutter of the Ingram as it poured out its deadly rounds at a rate of a thousand a minute and a moment later she was thrown against the wall as a stray round punched into her kevlar vest driving the air from her lungs. Fighting for breath she felt as if a sledgehammer had struck her in the side and for a moment she thought she was going to be sick, but taking gulps of air she thrust the feeling aside to be dealt with later and scrambled to her feet as the gunfire abruptly died leaving a ringing echo in the cavernous building. Holding her side and leaning over the rail she caught sight of Standish, Wilmington and Dunne amongst the Team 3 agents as they rolled up the operation and secured the area. She suddenly gripped the railing, her whole body shaking from the adrenaline that had flooded into her bloodstream. God, was this what it was always going to be like? The agent who had held the hostage at gunpoint looked up in her direction and she quickly straightened, composing herself before anyone else pinpointed her position, or see that she was still trembling. Taking a deep breath she started down the metal stairs to join the activity below. She tried to make her way unobtrusively towards the Team Seven members but the undercover agent quickly moved in on her.

"Lady, I don't know where the fuck you came from but I'm sure glad you did!"

She half-smiled then looked sadly at the man now being removed from the scene by the paramedics.

"Is your partner all right?"

He looked anxiously after the departing gurney.

"Gotta go, doll. And thanks."

He made a hasty withdrawal and disappeared into the back of the waiting ambulance.

Zoé scanned the area, now a confusion of milling ATF agents, hoping to seek out Standish and the others but stopped abruptly as her eyes locked with the steady gaze of Chris Larabee, Tanner beside him, searching – for her.

Larabee had her pinned against the wall, his extended arm resting beside her head, a move she knew was intended to intimidate her. It worked, but she wasn't going to let him know that.

"I ought to bust your ass, Elliott."

His voice was low and controlled with just the right amount of menace to effectively communicate the fact that she had managed to really piss him off. Zoé crossed her arms in front of her, a defensive move to shield her against his quiet anger.

"I accept responsibility for my own actions," she retorted stubbornly. "It was a good move!"

"Well, I have to take responsibility for everyone's actions and the last thing I need right now is a pint sized rebel who can't follow orders!"

She tilted her head up to look him in the eye refusing to allow him to bully her. *Pint sized?*

"Would you feel better if you hit me?"

Someone nearby choked back a laugh. She thought it was Buck.

"Don't tempt me, Elliott. You put one foot out of line again and you're out of my team. Get it?"

Not waiting for an answer he pushed himself away from the wall and turned his back on her, effectively dismissing her.

"That's it, guys. Show's over."

She wasn't sure if he was referring to her public upbraiding or the bust.

As the four men ambled away Larabee suddenly turned back to her.

"You know you scared the crap out of me with that stunt?"

Then, shoulders hunched, he followed his men out of the building, leaving her alone.

Zoé sat quietly in the back of the SUV wedged between the broad shoulders of Standish on one side and the lean frame of Tanner on the other. Sanchez and Jackson filled the remaining passenger seats while Larabee took the wheel. The five men talked almost incessantly, riding the crest of an adrenaline high while she had already slipped into the trough of that particular wave. She squirmed awkwardly, claustrophobic in spite of the vehicle's generous dimensions, and was silently grateful when Standish responded by pressing himself against the door and rested his arm along the back of the seat to allow her more space. Her side ached where the bullet had punched with such force into the body armour and, while thankful to have been saved from serious injury, she guessed that she would be sporting a sizable bruise for some days to come. Closing her eyes she allowed her head to fall back against the seat and let the sound of conversation as it ebbed and flowed lull her into a meditative trance. She sighed as the Southern agent's fingers absently caressed her hair and came to the conclusion that she could easily get used to being close to this man, even if the others continued to consider her a pariah.

She sat through the debriefing going mechanically through the motions like an automaton then quickly excused herself and escaped to the relative safety of the change room once it was over. This was one place none of them could follow. Looking critically at herself in the mirror she brushed her dark hair out of her eyes as she studied her reflection. Navy fatigues coupled with a white T-shirt did nothing to conceal her female curves and she wondered just what she would have to do to earn the professional respect of these men. Seven separate rites of passage were probably more than she could cope with.

She pulled the stretch cotton tee out of the waistband of the fatigues and examined her left side; a raised fist size bruise had already developed in the space between her lowest rib and her waist. She ran her fingers experimentally over the area and winced, surprised at the pain which lanced through her side. Still, she thought, it was better than a bullet. She sat for a moment on the bench in front of the lockers then, too tired to move, she stretched out and contemplated whether she could last six months.

From behind closed eyelids Zoé reflected on the operation. Her significant, if unorthodox, contribution had

at least been acknowledged in the debrief, although Larabee's acknowledgement was a double-edged sword and she had read in his words the implied criticism of her maverick approach. His initially icy demeanour however had thawed a degree or two once his anger had dissipated and, she recalled, he had been the first to help her off with the bulky body armour on their return to the vehicles. Even Wilmington had tacitly given her his seal of approval with a hearty slap on the back as she had climbed into the SUV after the bust. Sighing, she rested her forearm over her eyes and tried to ignore the pain of her bruised ribs, pondering if she would have to keep proving herself to earn any respect. If that was the case she wondered if she would still be in one piece at the end of it. Nursing her side, she swung her legs over the edge of the bench, stood up and checked her watch: 15.40. She would write her report and then with any luck she could take off for a hot bath and an early night.

In the bull pen, Standish had already shed his fatigues and was sitting at his desk, immaculate even in shirtsleeves and suspenders, his hair still damp from the shower. Wilmington was parading around in a state of high excitement and semi-undress as he continued to recount various aspects of the operation to anyone who would listen while Dunne, already changed into jeans and T-shirt, added his own enthusiastic counterpoint. As she passed his desk Wilmington playfully reached out and caught her around the waist pulling her towards him.

"...and this little filly," he continued, "should be in the Olympic gymnastic squad."

He stopped suddenly as he realised that Elliott had unexpectedly folded, clutching her left side as she hung onto his arm for support. Deftly switching his grip he held her upright then gently lowered her onto his own chair, genuine concern etched on his face.

"Zoé?"

She tried to laugh but couldn't quite carry it off.

"Sorry. You caught me off guard. Took the wind out of my sails."

The big man crouched beside the chair his hands still around her small waist.

"Don't lie to me," he warned quietly, "I hurt you."

"I'm all right, Buck. Just winded." She made a half-hearted attempt to stand but found herself too easily restrained, and suddenly the idea of protest evaporated.

"Bullshit."

Without seeking permission he quickly, but with surprising gentleness, pulled up her T-shirt and revealed the vivid purple and black haematoma just below the ribs.

"Jesus!" This from the young Dunne.

Suddenly, she became the focus of the entire group's attention and seven pairs of eyes reflected various emotions from mild interest through to real concern. The African-American agent, Jackson, broke through the ring of observers to squat easily beside Buck.

"Nate's a doctor," explained Buck, "Can he take a look?"

Zoé smiled tiredly as she looked at the cluster of agents surrounding her.

"I don't see why not. Everyone else is."

Fifteen minutes later Zoé reclined on the couch in Larabee's office with an apologetic and solicitous Buck holding an ice pack to her side as she swallowed the pain-killers urged upon her by the softly spoken doctor.

"I'm all right now. Truly," she had insisted, "I feel so stupid. It's only a bruise."

Nathan had indeed satisfied himself that there was only soft tissue damage and had massaged the haematoma with a heparinoid ointment in order to reduce the blood clot but nonetheless had insisted that she lie down for half an hour or so.

"Just rest up awhile," he advised, "Give the codeine a chance to kick in before you start any more of those acrobatics of yours."

Zoé nodded, for once not in the least inclined to argue. After what only seemed like a moment but which in truth was an hour and a half later she stirred in response to her name being softly called. Opening her eyes she found Standish sitting on the edge of the couch.

"Wake up, Sleeping Beauty, your rescue is at hand. I believe it's time to escape the confines of this miserable edifice and retire to more a more favourable environment."

She yawned inelegantly and pushed herself upright, ignoring the stiffness in her side.

"If that means you're taking me home, lead the way, Prince Charming."

Ezra guided the Jaguar skilfully through the heavy, late afternoon commuter traffic quietly humming to a piece of classical music that Zoé recognised but couldn't name which was playing softly through the car's sound system. As the traffic started to thin out she realised that they were leaving the inner city and following the same route she had taken the previous day to Standish's house.

"This isn't the way to my hotel," she protested.

"No."

"But I thought you were taking me home."

"I am."

"My home. I mean, my hotel."

"I believe you'll be far more comfortable in my guest room."

She thought of the cramped and aging hotel room she had been allocated and having already spent one night under his roof already she knew he was right. It was an offer she would be mad to refuse.

"But I have nothing to wear. All my things are..."

"Taken care of. Mr. Wilmington and Mr. Dunne are at this very moment checking you out of that plague pit that the Bureau calls a hotel."

Zoé turned to stare at him, not sure how she felt about having Ezra call the shots quite so readily.

"Do I have any say in this?"

Standish changed down through the gears as he negotiated the traffic, keeping his eyes on the road as he answered.

"I'm just returning a favour, Miss Elliott. By all means you can look for more suitable lodgings whenever you're ready but for tonight – or as long as you choose - I'm offering my unconditional hospitality."

She searched his face for any sign of an ulterior motive that might signal danger ahead but she could read nothing from that handsome but closed countenance.

"You don't have to do this."

"I don't *have* to," agreed the Southerner, "But I want to."

She impulsively reached across the space between them and squeezed his arm.

"Thank-you." Leaning back and nestling into the black leather upholstery she stared pensively out of the side window. "You know something Ezra? If Buck had offered me the same, I would have refused."

Standish laughed in genuine amusement as he powered through the gears and accelerated away from the remaining traffic.

"That alone, Miss Elliott, makes you an incredibly astute woman."

Zoé combed her still damp hair into some semblance of order and cast an appraising eye over her reflection. Now barefoot and dressed in loose linen pants with a white cotton over-shirt she felt pleasantly relaxed. In fact, if she tried hard enough she could even put aside the thought that she was three thousand miles from home and in the house of a virtual stranger. She could even pretend that the unrelenting pain in her side wasn't there but she couldn't get out of her mind the absolute reality that she was trying to operate in a world she didn't completely understand with a group of men who resented her very existence.

Steeling herself, Zoé followed the sound of voices out to the patio and finally located Standish, Wilmington and Dunne sitting around a barbecue table conducting a lively debate as to the quality of imported beer over the domestic product. She noticed that Wilmington and Dunne upholding their side of the argument each held a can of Coors' while Standish was, predictably, drinking Heineken and extolling the virtues of the imported product. Lowering herself into a vacant chair she cautiously stretched out her linen-clad legs not wanting to aggravate the throbbing ache in her side and wriggled her bare toes.

"Beer, Zoé?"

She looked across at Buck who was offering a chilled Coors'.

"God no!" She exclaimed good humouredly, "It all tastes like dishwater to me but if you've got something stronger on offer I wouldn't say no."

"Ezra here's got just about anything you could wish for. Just name your poison."

"Uh, bourbon?"

Standish rose sinuously and crossed the patio to access the bar in the den.

"Ice or water?"

"Coke."

Ezra arched a critical eyebrow at her in an expression that positively screamed 'philistine' at her choice but nonetheless promptly returned with a heavy cut glass tumbler, while murmuring a protest at the adulteration of perfectly good Kentucky bourbon. The strong, smoky flavour of the liquor struck her palate and she had no doubt that his heavy hand with the spirits had been intentional; in a glass that probably held six ounces at a stretch she judged three ounces of it was alcohol. As a purely social drinker she estimated that after two of Ezra's drinks she would be completely legless. Meeting his eyes over the rim of the glass she was forced to smile at the laughter she saw reflected there. Maybe he knew that too and just maybe the evening would not be a complete disaster after all.

The four of them shared a take-out Chinese meal, several more drinks and an abundance of idle conversation which Wilmington dominated with his outrageously improper stories until slowly, in the relaxed atmosphere, the tensions of the day dissipated. By the time Dunne and Wilmington left shortly after eleven,

Zoé came to the conclusion that she liked both of them; even Buck's continual flirtation with her became more a source of amusement than irritation although that could possibly be attributable to the generous amount of alcohol she had absorbed. Wilmington had apologised several times during the course of the evening for his rough handling of her in the office and she believed he was truly chagrined that he had unintentionally hurt her. It was plainly obvious that Buck was one of those rare specimens of manhood who genuinely enjoyed being in the company of women even if he was suspicious of working with them as equals. Standish on the other hand had become less talkative as the evening progressed and even now seemed preoccupied, still nursing a half-full tumbler of whisky and staring pensively into its depths. Zoé smothered a yawn and stretched out, pleasantly tired but not yet ready for sleep. As if her actions had broken a spell the Southerner lifted his head to look at her and then drained the remains of his drink.

"Well, Miss Elliott, I think the evening went rather well considering the inauspicious start to the day."

Zoé laughed.

"Ezra, why is it you make me feel like a crabby, old, spinster school-teacher? For God's sake call me Zoé."

Standish inclined his head slightly in tacit assent then pushed himself out of the chair and in three strides crossed the distance between her chair and his, offering his hand to help her out of her seat.

"By all means, Zoé. Now might I suggest we withdraw indoors before it gets much colder."

She allowed him to assist her to her feet, relieved that she could stand without too much help, and indeed his hands were icy although she had thought the night quite pleasant.

"God, you're freezing!"

He ushered her inside and closed the sliding door behind them.

"These Georgia bones don't take too kindly to the mountain air."

"Georgia? Well, that explains the old-fashioned Southern hospitality." Zoé realised that he was looking at her with a puzzled expression on his face and she turned to face him taking one of his hands in hers. "Why are you doing all this for me, Ezra?"

He raised his free hand and tucked a stray strand of hair behind her ear.

"Because, my dear, you're young, you're beautiful and you're a long way from home."

She smiled and squeezed his hand.

"And you, sir, are a perfect Southern gentleman."

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"I don't think Chris likes me."

Ezra took his eyes from the road a moment to glance at her.

"Give the man his due, Zoé - he just doesn't know quite what to make of you. To make matters worse you really know how to yank his chain."

"What's the problem?" she retorted defensively, "Don't I have the right hormones? I didn't realise testosterone was a prerequisite for joining the ATF."

The Southerner raised a questioning eyebrow at her sudden outburst and returned his attention to the morning traffic.

"I believe," he explained patiently, "That Mr. Larabee finds it difficult to send a woman, however capable she might be, into a potentially lethal engagement."

"Why?"

"If you must know, for most men there's something inherently abhorrent about a woman dying a violent death."

She twisted in her seat.

"And there's nothing abhorrent about a man dying a violent death? Is my life worth more because I'm female?"

Standish halted at a red light and fixed her with a look which spoke of incredible sadness.

"Not worth more but infinitely more precious."

Elliott looked quickly away, not knowing how to respond to that. She wanted to tell him that was bullshit but somehow she couldn't get the words out.

"All I want to be able to do is operate on equal terms and not to have anyone make allowances for me. Is that so hard?"

Standish accelerated away from the line as the signal changed to green.

"For Chris it probably is. I shouldn't tell you this but he lost his wife and son a few years ago in an accident; killed in a bomb blast. I think you remind him too much of Sarah."

Zoé straightened in her seat and unclipped her seatbelt as Standish drove the Jaguar into the ATF underground parking garage.

"Well, I can't do much about that can I? I'll just keep my head down and do my job and try not to rattle his cage too much."

"I would personally be much obliged if you would do just that. Mr. Larabee can be cantankerous enough without you stirring him up at every opportunity."

They were late as usual. In all her working career Zoé had never been late, but since moving in with Ezra she had not managed to make one day even remotely on time. It had finally stopped bothering her after the first week and she just accepted the fact that unless she wanted to find an alternative form of transport then she was destined to go along with Ezra's leisurely approach to starting work. And on balance he never left early. At least today they were only twenty minutes overdue and it was, after all, Friday.

Zoé quickly went to her desk and checked her email before helping herself to coffee. The office was relatively quiet and she noticed that both Buck and JD were missing from their customary stations, which probably accounted for the unusually peaceful atmosphere. Nathan sketched a friendly wave in her direction and continued typing industriously at his computer. Chris strolled out of his office, a wad of faxes in his hand and, without looking up, addressed Standish.

"Aren't you due in court this morning, Ezra?"

Standish checked his watch as he continued to gather stray files into his briefcase.

"Correct, Mr. Larabee," agreed the unfazed undercover agent without any suggestion of either remorse or concern.

"In exactly fifteen minutes?"

Even Standish understood when not to press his team leader too far, and Larabee's stern expression alerted the Southerner to the fact that this morning was one of those instances. He rapidly gathered the last of his gear together.

"On my way."

Zoé smiled as he made a hurried exit, as reluctant as the rest of them to incur Larabee's wrath, then turned her attention to the stack of files in her in tray. The fact that she was in a different country with a different agency did not alter the basic requirement of attending to the minutiae of everyday routine. Dotting the 'is' and crossing the 'ts' - the attention to detail - was what won or lost cases. There was no point in expending valuable resources and risking lives to bring the criminal element to justice if when the perpetrators were brought to trial the evidence was lacking. With that comforting thought in her mind, Zoé mounted an attack on her own quota of reports.

Chris Larabee watched the Englishwoman as, head bent in concentration, her fingers flew over the keyboard. It surprised him that in the two weeks she had been on board she had succeeded in finding her own niche which, amazingly, had kept intact the finely balanced symbiosis of the group. The introduction of an outsider into the team, more importantly a woman, had the potential for disaster that Larabee had not wanted to contemplate but so far his fears had been groundless. It had taken little time for Buck and JD to be completely won over by her, while she and Ezra had established an almost instantaneous rapport that seemed to be mutually beneficial; and Larabee had chosen not to examine the relationship too closely. If they were anything more than roomies they were keeping it discreet. Both Nathan and Josiah had ultimately accepted her with their usual degree of equanimity in spite of some initial misgivings and while not overly friendly with their guest worker neither were they hostile towards her. Larabee's gaze slid to Vin Tanner a few desks away. Tanner had uncharacteristically and inexplicably proved to be the exception and while he had not entered into open conflict with Elliott, his body language alone left no doubt to his true feelings. The Texan had gone out of his way to avoid any direct association with the woman and their working relationship was confined to bare essentials. Larabee knew that if his friend continued along that track he would be forced to take action before the brewing discontent had a chance to grow into something far more malignant and destructive.

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"I don't think I should go."

The young customs officer stood stiffly in front of Chris Larabee's desk and tried to match his unwavering stare already knowing that she was fighting a losing battle .

"It's not an option, Elliott."

"But I'm not a part of this team."

Larabee raised an eyebrow.

"Then what are you? I thought that was the whole point of the exercise."

She tried again.

"I mean this is a guy thing. Male bonding and all that. I'm not going to fit in."

Larabee sighed and pushed himself away from the desk.

"You've been with us what....two - three weeks now? Time for a little team-building and the way we do that - and let off some steam - around here is to get away for a few days. And as you are part of this team, that includes you."

"And you don't think that me being the only female is a little unfair?"

"On who?"

"On me!"

"Come on, Elliott. No-one's about to take advantage of you. For God's sake you live with Ezra already!"

"That's different," she protested.

Larabee sighed in exasperation.

"This is important, Zoé. Don't make me have to pull rank on you."

The woman straightened and fixed him with a penetrating glare that only partially succeeded in reflecting her extreme displeasure.

"Okay. You win. As I don't seem to have any choice I'll go, but don't blame me if it turns out to be a disaster."

"Fine. And make sure you get Ezra here on time too. We leave at five a.m."

Elliott turned abruptly and strode out of the office, her retreating back a study in contained fury. Larabee shook his head slowly. Women!

They were taking Chris' Dodge Ram as well as Nathan's Suburban this trip in order to accommodate not only the team but equipment and supplies as well. Nevertheless it was an exercise in logistics to distribute equipment and personnel between the two vehicles in spite of the Suburban's huge capacity. Nathan, Josiah, Buck and JD had decided that they were going to travel together come what may leaving Ezra and Zoé to either join the more boisterous of the two crews or make up the second party with the taciturn Vin and their illustrious leader, both of whom could make a stone look talkative. Zoé suspected the decision also had something to do with the fact that the Suburban carried all the provisions which included several crates of beer. In the end Ezra opted for the quiet life in the Ram and Zoé tagged along by default. The seven were obviously quite familiar with the drill, leaving her standing awkwardly to one side feeling slightly out of place as preparations were completed and everyone started to climb into the vehicles. Larabee rescued her by placing a hand on her shoulder and steering her towards the Ram.

"Might as well ride up front with us, Zoé. Believe me, Ezra will be asleep before we hit the end of the block."

Chris ushered her into the front seat then moved around to slide behind the wheel, while Vin climbed in after her. She was thankful that the cabin was more than wide enough to accommodate the three of them as she didn't relish the prospect of riding for several hours sandwiched between the two men, neither of whom she yet felt entirely comfortable around. Vin still treated her with cool reserve as if he hadn't quite worked

out the nature of the beast and whether or not he should be threatened while Chris, although friendly enough, just plain intimidated her. She sighed and fastened her seat-belt; if nothing else this was likely to be an interesting trip.

She woke up with a neck-snapping start, unaware that she had even fallen asleep and embarrassed by the fact that she had obviously made herself quite comfortable against Tanner of all people as the rhythm of the truck's movement combined with the steady murmur of the V8 engine had lulled her to sleep. She quickly pushed herself upright mumbling an apology and brushing her hair out of her face, trying desperately not to manhandle the quiet Texan as she hastily broke contact.

"S'okay. I ain't got nothin' catchin', " he drawled, withdrawing his arm which she only now realised had been draped comfortably around her shoulders.

She moved her head experimentally and winced as cramped muscles protested, rubbing the side of her slender neck in an attempt to ease the tightness there. She stiffened at the unexpected contact of a firm hand descending on her shoulder which began massaging her neck, gentle but sure fingers working to relieve the painful spasm.

"Better?"

Zoé rotated her neck and flexed her shoulder, moaning in a pain/pleasure response triggered by the Texan's touch. She turned, slightly puzzled, to look at the usually reserved agent and gave a final shrug of her shoulder as he withdrew his hand.

"Thanks." She transferred her gaze to the road ahead and cast a glance at Larabee who was starting to apply the brakes and she realised that he was turning the Dodge into the thickly wooded area to the right of the road. "Where are we now?"

He pointed ahead.

"About ten miles up this track is where we're headed."

"You mean we're there?"

"Yes, ma'am," interjected Tanner, "and going just about as high as you're likely to get in these parts of the Rockies."

She quickly discovered just how right Vin was. The four room cabin stood in a small clearing surrounded on three sides by dense evergreen forest and the rugged peaks of the Rocky Mountains, the fourth side was bordered by a lake. The two dusty vehicles stood to one side of the cabin, luggage and equipment having been disgorged onto the gravel parkway as the trucks were unpacked. Walking slowly across the dewy grass she dug her hands in the pockets of her fleece lined jacket and watched her breath mist in the cold, crisp air. This was one of those days when it felt good to be alive and she realised that she was glad that Chris had pressured her into making the trip with them.

On reflection Zoé had to admit that she genuinely liked all the team but she had some misgiving as to whether the feeling was reciprocated. While she had developed a close and easy going relationship with Ezra, and Buck continued to flirt outrageously with her, she remained uncertain about her place within the team. J.D. seemed always to be in awe of her, both Nathan and Josiah treated her with professional courtesy but so far she had seen little of their true colours and Vin had managed to successfully keep himself out of reach, always giving her the impression that she was an unwelcome intruder. Or something

unpleasant he'd picked up on the sole of shoe and now couldn't get rid of. She paused and looked up at the clear blue sky. In the drive up he had shown a part of himself that she had not suspected existed in the Texan marksman; a gentle and caring person lurking beneath the veneer of studied aloofness. Chris on the other hand she felt was destined to be her antagonist in the group; the two of them ever and always on opposite sides of the fence.

"Zoé!"

She turned and waved, walking slowly back towards the cabin at Larabee's summons to help.

The seven men and one woman stood in a circle each looking apprehensively at the upturned hat in front of them. Chris was being truthful when he had told them the trip was not just going to be a vacation. He was determined that they would first endure a few "team-building" exercises and from the evidence before them it seemed that Larabee had planned the day with a thoroughness that would have done a military tactician proud. Zoé was already shuddering to think what physical jerks she was going to be subject to as a result. The idea was that they should draw lots, first to decide on random pairs which would then either be designated 'hares' or 'hounds'. The hares would be given a thirty minute head start to reach a particular geographical goal, retrieve a pre-determined object and return to the camp. The hounds had the task of trying to either catch the hares before they could achieve their objective, reach the goal before them. Zoé knew this to be an S.A.S. exercise which in the UK was invariably conducted in the inhospitable Brecon Beacons in Wales. Looking around she decided Larabee had probably gone one better on location than even the elite British army unit.

Larabee looked around at the group.

"Okay, folks. Let's get this show on the road. J.D., Nathan, Zoé and Buck pick a scroll."

Jackson was the first to step forward and select a slip of paper. He rolled his eyes.

"What did I do to deserve this? Ezra!"

The Southerner merely grinned.

"Just your lucky day, Mr. Jackson."

J.D. plucked a scroll out of the hat and quickly scanned it.

"Chris."

Zoé reached out a split second before Buck not wanting to be the last to choose and unfurled the rolled paper.

"Vin."

That left Buck and Josiah as the last pair. She raised her eyes and looked at Chris. Somehow he had managed to contrive a situation where the team were forced into partnerships that they would not normally have chosen. This would be a true test as they each worked with a partner with whom they were not entirely comfortable.

Larabee started to hand out sealed envelopes to each couple along with a canvas haversack.

"Okay. Vin and Zoé, Nathan and Ezra you're the hares. Buck and Josiah will be the hounds for Nate and Ezra, JD and me will be chasing down Vin and Zoé. Hares have five minutes to read your instructions before timing starts. This is all you are allowed to take with you. The aim is to reach your objective and return by

sundown without being caught by the hounds."

Ezra started to rummage in the canvas bag but Nathan retrieved it and pulled the Southerner away from the group.

"No, Ez. There isn't a Winnebago in there. We have to do it the hard way like everyone else. Let's go."

Larabee smiled and glanced at his watch.

"Let's move it people. Your five minutes starts now."

Zoé found herself standing with her designated partner as he read the instructions Chris had handed to him before passing the sheet of paper to her with a wry smile.

"Hope you remember what they taught you in the Girl Scouts, Zoé." He hoisted the rucksack on his back, took a quick glance around to get his bearings and set off at a jog towards the trees to the right of the cabin. "Come on."

She sighed and tucked the paper into her pocket. She didn't think this was the right time to tell him that she had never been in the Girl Scouts.

Tanner travelled at a punishing pace leading her through the forest and away from the marked trails until her own harsh breathing rasping in her ears finally drowned out any other noise and she began to develop a stitch in her side. So automatic had her actions become that she failed to notice the Texan stop in front of her and she crashed heavily into him. He looked critically at her then dropped into a squat, pulling her down beside him.

"We'll take five."

Zoé wiped the sweat from her face with her sleeve.

"Can we afford to?"

Vin glanced around and checked the compass.

"I reckon we've put a good buffer between us and them, but Chris will be on our trail like a bloodhound so we can't waste too much time."

He put away the compass and offered her the water canteen which she accepted gratefully.

"Do you know where we are?"

She drank and offered the canteen back. Tanner took a mouthful, evidently prepared to let pass the implicit criticism of his skills, and recapped the bottle.

"We're about two hundred metres from the waterline on the eastern side of the lake."

It took a moment for the information to compute.

"You mean we're almost back where we started?"

"S'right. We doubled back. It'll take them a while to realise we're not in front of them anymore."

Zoé rubbed the aching muscle of her calf.

"Look, Vin. I have to trust you on this because I sure as hell don't know where we're going but if we get separated I'm lost!"

He smiled and quickly sketched a map in the dirt.

"Okay. This is where we started; we're here and this is where we're headed. Between us and the target is a river, right here, and then a hard climb here to this point. The worst thing we can do is go in a straight line."

She hunched over the lines drawn in the dirt.

"But then all Chris and J.D. have to do is go from A to B and will get to the target first."

Tanner erased the line drawing with a fallen branch lying nearby.

"No. J.D. is probably as bad as you at this, and Chris won't just settle for reaching the target first. He'll want to run us to ground."

"If you know him so well, what's to stop him second-guessing us."

He rose and offered his hand to help her up.

"Nothing."

Zoé gratefully allowed him to pull her to her feet and brushed the dust from her jeans.

"Great."

Tanner, she noticed, slackened his pace slightly and rather than leave her to flounder in his wake, drew her alongside keeping a guiding hand on her arm as they made their own trail through the trees and undergrowth.

"How good are you at climbing?" he asked suddenly.

"Define good."

He cocked a dubious eyebrow in her direction and she could see him calculating just how much of a burden she was going to be. Zoé smiled and decided to put him out of his misery.

"I'm no expert but as a matter of fact I do climb recreationally; usually indoors these days though."

He nodded briefly, apparently satisfied and they continued in silence for a while.

Gradually Zoé became aware of a noise that was getting louder as they moved northwards; a sound which she finally identified as fast moving water.

"There's a river here." She made the question a statement.

"And we've got to get across it," agreed the Texan, "I'm not sure how wide it is in these parts but it's moving pretty fast by the sound of it."

She freed herself of his grasp.

"You're not going to ask me to swim are you?"

"Don't rightly know until I see it," he responded truthfully, "But we might have to get a little wet."

Zoé stared at him as if he had grown another head.

"You're joking, right? It's fucking freezing."

Vin started to move again and she knew that he was not. These guys certainly took their games seriously.

Standing beside the rushing water, she was taken by the wild beauty of the place. The river wasn't particularly wide and Tanner was scouting for a likely place to cross. Finally he sat down on a rock and started taking off his boots.

"I reckon we can walk across. My guess is that it's no more than waist deep."

He systematically began to strip off his clothes, packing them into a remarkably small bundle, until he stood in just a pair of swimming shorts. She couldn't help but think that Tanner must definitely have been a Boy Scout - he took preparedness to new heights. She couldn't help thinking that he could have at least

given her some pointers.

"I'll check it out first."

He waded out into the water, hesitating only a moment as the water crept inexorably towards his crotch, then pushing across the current to reach the other side. The water at its deepest point reached chest height and when the bank started to rise once more he turned back.

Tanner stood shivering on the bank, his body a mass of raised gooseflesh as he gathered his boots and clothing together.

"Come on. Gimme your clothes."

Understanding, she unquestioningly mimicked his earlier actions and stripped to her underwear then handed her gear over and followed the lean ATF agent into the water. She would have taken time to admire the Texan's nicely toned body but the cold hit her like a physical blow and her breath caught in her throat as she fought to maintain her balance against the strong pull of the water. As the water level rose to her armpits she thought her heart would stop altogether from the shock but she pushed on, glad that Tanner had assumed responsibility for keeping the clothing dry. If it had been up to her she would have already dropped them in the water several times as she struggled to keep her head above water. Cursing she wondered if Tanner had forgotten that he had a good six inches in height on her, the more cynical part of her suspected that he was probably enjoying her discomfiture. By the time she had battled the current to reach the opposite shore, Vin was already waiting to help her out. She stumbled up the shingle bank, glad of his strong grip hauling her to the welcome security of dry land. Her teeth were chattering uncontrollably and she felt the wind blowing through to her very bones as she crossed her arms defensively over her upper body to ward off the icy chill. To her surprise Tanner quickly pulled her close to him wrapping a well-muscled arm around her shoulders as he reached for his t-shirt and began to rub them both dry. She attempted a shaky laugh feeling a little self-conscious at the close physical contact but Tanner seemed not in the least perturbed and she finally came to the conclusion that false modesty had no place in a situation such as this. Tanner was one of those men who just did what was necessary and she was beginning to doubt that he had even noticed that her nipples were standing to attention through the soft fabric of her bra. At least she hoped he hadn't.

"If you expect me to do that again," she managed to get out between clenched teeth, "I'm taking the long way round."

He released her and turned to pick up his clothes with a quiet chuckle then moved to a discreet distance where, turning his back on her, he promptly dropped his wet shorts and tugged on his jeans. Turning her own back on him she pulled off her bra and panties and finished drying off with Tanner's now decidedly damp t-shirt before shrugging into her shirt and jeans. A few minutes later the pair had redressed although Zoé couldn't decide if she would have rather kept on her wet underwear rather than experience the unpleasant sensation of going without.

Tanner had pulled the compass out once again and was checking his bearings.

"Ready?"

She nodded, hoping that movement would drive away some of the chill she still felt.

Zoé rested against the rocky outcrop and wiped the sweat from her forehead with the sleeve of her shirt,

muttering a litany of curses and casting doubts on Tanner's legitimate ancestry. The Texan was as agile as a mountain goat and although Zoé was no slouch when it came to fitness, she was finding it hard to keep up as Tanner swarmed across the face of the rock like a spider. Taking a deep breath she followed doggedly, ignoring the ache in her calves and the broken fingernails as she clawed at hand-holds that were barely more than irregularities in the rock surface. Five minutes later she hauled herself onto a small plateau where Vin already sat drinking shallowly from the water canteen. She dropped down beside him and reached for the bottle.

"How are we doing?"

Vin leaned back on one elbow and stared out at the magnificent vista spread before them. She tilted her head to one side watching Tanner and suddenly realised that the Texan was enjoying himself. In fact, she decided, it was more than that - he truly belonged here.

"I reckon we'll be back at the cabin long before Chris and J.D. get anywhere near us."

She stretched out full length beside him on the warm rock glad of a rest however brief and closed her eyes.

"So it's all down hill from here, right?"

She could hear the laughter in his voice as he responded.

"Just about."

Taking a deep breath of the crisp mountain air she smiled without opening her eyes.

"Liar!"

The pair were quiet for a few minutes each relishing a moment of utter calm as the wind whispered softly through the firs and moaned through the rocky outcrops surrounding them. Finally, Zoé raised herself on both elbows and looked around.

"Vin, this is so beautiful."

"Yes."

The timbre of his voice had subtly changed and she turned back to him but his gaze rather than taking in the view was focused on her. Like a rabbit transfixed in the glare of a car's headlights she momentarily froze, seeing an almost feral hunger in those intense blue eyes. Caught in a strangely elongated moment of time Zoé waited, recognising both confusion and indecision in the Texan, as unconcealed longing vied with the possibility of rejection to gain the upper hand. As if in slow motion Zoé found herself reaching out and, sliding a hand around the back of his neck she drew his face towards her own giving him the approval he was looking for. The kiss, tentative at first, increased in both persistence and passion as they each responded to awakening primal urges, hands eagerly exploring the contours of the other's body. Suddenly overwhelmed by Vin's unexpected ardour and the sensory overload she was experiencing, Zoé breathlessly drew away and hurriedly began adjusting her clothing to conceal her embarrassment, no longer sure of herself and faintly alarmed by her own behaviour. *How could she have let that happen? What was he thinking of? What was she thinking of? Tanner - of all people !*

She jumped up and moved away to the edge of the precipice as if distancing herself from the man would somehow change what had just happened.

"Shouldn't we be making tracks," she asked abruptly, her voice a little unsteady as she tried, and failed,

to regain her composure.

Vin slowly sat up. Whatever his own thoughts his expression revealed nothing to her.

"I thought you wanted to rest."

Zoé straightened her jacket and tried to avoid making eye contact; letting her professional persona take control and set her once more on an even keel.

"Vin. I didn't freeze my butt off in that water and lose half my fingernails climbing up this fucking rock to let them catch us here!"

Tanner with his usual economy of movement rose to his feet and collected their gear, the ghost of a smile playing across his lips.

"Let's go then."

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Ezra glanced down at the rip in his pant leg with resigned tolerance, more concerned with the damage to the material than any injury to his person, while Nathan looked on in undisguised amusement.

"Two hundred dollars," he muttered savagely, "What a waste."

Jackson took a perverse delight in tormenting the Southerner about his wardrobe and here was an opportunity he wasn't about to miss.

"Man, you've got more money than sense if you put on expensive threads to go hiking upcountry. Don't you ever wear anything that doesn't have a designer label? You know, a pair of Levi's or somethin'?"

"Excuse me?" Ezra retaliated, immediately rising to the bait, "You don't truly believe I would enter a department store to buy clothing?"

"If all you're going to do is rip it up out here, you might as well go to a second-hand store."

Standish looked at the doctor as if he had just suggested that he eat a worm.

"That's all I would expect from someone as sartorially challenged as yourself."

Jackson grin broadened.

"Are you saying I dress badly?"

He looked down at his well-worn but practical denim jeans, his checked shirt and woollen jacket.

"Mr. Jackson, I'm saying that your idea of fashion leaves a lot to be desired."

"Hell, Ezra. We're not going to the opera!" He pointed to the ragged tear. "You know red just isn't your colour."

Ezra turned his attention back to his leg where blood was now seeping from the tear not only in his pants but in his leg. Swearing, he quickly mopped at the blood with a pristine white handkerchief and stared accusingly at the man beside him, muttering darkly.

"Some doctor you are."

Jackson shook his head and started to walk away.

"Come on, Ezra. It's just a scratch."

Standish followed the bigger man further into the trees wondering if he walked slowly enough whether Buck and Josiah would catch up and put an end to this tiresome wilderness jaunt. At least that way they could be back at the cabin well in time for supper and a friendly game of cards. He made a mental note to find a way of paying Larabee back for putting him through this misery, sparing a moment to wonder if Zoé was faring any better with Tanner.

More than a mile away from where Standish and Jackson struggled through the timber, Zoé stared wistfully at the solid wall of rock in front of her and wondered how much more her protesting muscles could take before they rebelled altogether and went out on strike. She swivelled her head from one side to the other but the expanse of weathered rock seemed to have no end to it. She was heartily sick of the mountain and its unforgiving barriers; tired of playing games and of being chased for miles by unseen pursuers in a race for an unspecified prize. She knew now that she had been right to tell Chris it was a guy thing and she had been right that she didn't fit in. Tanner was probably regretting having drawn her as a partner. But there was nothing for it now but see this through to the end, there was nowhere to go but up and no one to go with but this man who had managed to shake her convictions so thoroughly in a moment of time that she was beginning to think had been a dream.

"I'm hoping you're going to tell me that you have a master plan which does not include me climbing up this vertical face."

Tanner dropped the rucksack to the ground and walked slowly backwards and forwards thoughtfully examining the rock surface before them.

"Yeah, I do."

"You do?"

"I'm going up alone."

She sat down and wearily pulled the canteen from the rucksack.

"That's not a master plan, Vin, that's just leaving me behind."

She held out the water bottle and the Texan drank deeply, before passing the canteen back to her.

"This is it, Zoé. We're right where we're supposed to be, but whatever we're supposed to collect is up there." He held his arm up to indicate the top of the bluff. "I'll stake my life on it."

Elliott tilted her head back and stared at the rock rearing up behind her head.

"That's just what you might be doing."

"It's no big deal. I've been free climbing up here for the last three years."

"Well, Sherpa Tensing, off you go then. Just don't be too long and for God's sake don't fall or I'll be stuck up here forever."

He grinned suddenly and she was struck once again by the transformation from the taciturn agent she had been introduced to in the city and this man, totally at ease with nature and the outdoors. If anything Tanner seemed to thrive on the challenges they had met and overcome and if she admitted the truth she had complete confidence in him to get her safely home.

"Don't worry. I'll be back."

"What if Chris and J.D. find me first?" she called after him as he scrambled up the rock.

He looked down from a perch already ten feet above her head.

"They won't."

True to his word he was gone less time than it took for her to start seriously worrying and Chris and J.D. were nowhere in sight. She had just begun to nibble on her second strip of leathery dried fruit when a shower of stones heralded Tanner's timely if somewhat unorthodox descent. The ATF agent landed heavily a few feet from her accompanied by a mini-avalanche of loose stones, earth and assorted debris from the rock above; jeans torn at the knee, knuckles skinned but with such an expression of triumph on his face that Zoé didn't need to ask whether or not he had been successful. She asked anyway.

"You got it?"

Tanner crouched down beside her and taking hold of her hand, dropped a small object into her upturned palm. She stared at the brass shell casing then up at the Texan, not knowing whether she should laugh or cry.

"You're telling me that we climbed half way up a mountain to get this?"

Vin sucked on a grazed knuckle and reached across to pick up the rucksack.

"You sound disappointed. Where's your sense of adventure? It's the thought that counts."

Zoé tucked the cartridge into her jeans pocket.

"Would you like to know what I think?"

Tanner slung the rucksack over one shoulder and standing up, held out a hand to help her up.

"I'm almost sure I can make a wild guess. But first would you like to know what I think?"

Zoé tilted her head to one side and allowed the Texan to draw her to her feet.

"What's that?"

"I think...that we've won."

She smiled, in spite of the sudden sense of loss she felt as Vin released her hand.

"And it's all down hill from here, right?"

"Just about."

Tanner slid his arm around her shoulders giving her a quick hug and she realised that she didn't mind one bit.

Chris Larabee stopped and raised his head to look at the mountain rising in front of them.

"He's made it."

J.D. caught up to the older man and followed his gaze.

"Made it?"

"Vin."

"No way!" protested Dunne, "We're right on his tail."

Larabee turned an indulgent gaze on the youngest member of the team.

"J.D. believe me, we're chasing shadows." He checked his watch. "He's had us suckered from the word go."

"But he had Zoé....."

J.D. trailed off not wanting to sound critical of the Englishwoman's capabilities but unable to reconcile himself to the fact that she might possibly have been able to match not only Vin's talents but his stamina as

well. He frowned and thought back to the exceptional agility she had displayed on their first op and wondered if even Chris had not underestimated her abilities. He realised Chris was looking at him, waiting for him to finish. He shook his head and moved forward not prepared to pursue his first thought any further but finally unable to contain his puzzlement.

"I don't see how...he can't be so far ahead..."

Larabee smiled knowingly after a long moment's thought.

"He went across the river." Dunne looked at his leader as if he had uttered some profanity but Chris nodded, suddenly sure. "That's it, J.D. They went across the river and my guess is they went straight up Simpson's Bluff."

"Okay, what do we do now?"

Larabee pulled the compass from his pocket and turned towards the declining sun.

"We get them on the way down."

Vin stopped, putting his hand out to stop Zoé moving any further and signalling for silence. He tensed, listening, then moved his head in a slow arc like an animal onto a scent. The Texan had been wary since they left the bluff, avoiding the established trails and circling in an ever decreasing spiral until Zoé barely knew which direction they were pointing at any given moment. They had even walked for a while in a stream bed and had crossed and recrossed the watercourse several times with Zoé silently giving thanks that this was a more manageable body of water which didn't require the shedding of her clothing or necessitate getting anything more than her boots wet. Their descent was furtive and executed with a great degree of stealth as opposed to their outward bound attack on the summit which had been a flat out race to avoid a successful pursuit. She looked at her watch and wondered how much longer she would have to endure crawling around the undergrowth before the game was finally over.

"Almost home."

Zoé looked up quickly. *Damnit, she'd swear this man was psychic sometimes.*

"Then why have we been sitting here for the last twenty minutes?" she hissed, keeping her voice low.

"Just making sure we get a clean run. No surprises."

The two of them sat comfortably shoulder to shoulder in a bower of greenery, looking down into the valley where, less than half a mile away, the cabin - Zoé's personal nirvana - stood like a lone sentinel.

"What sort of surprises?"

"If Chris couldn't catch us on the way up, he'll try and get us on the way down."

She smiled in spite of her weariness.

"And we're not going to let happen are we?"

"Damn right!"

Suddenly in one smooth motion the Texan was on his feet in a crouch staring intently in the direction of the cabin his body as tense as a wound spring and resembling so much a hound on point that she expected to see the hackles rise on the back of his neck. A moment later she heard a deep echoing rumble that she finally identified as the pulsating throb of engines in concert - motorcycles, more of them than she wished to contemplate. As her brain made the connection between what she was hearing and what she was seeing

she realised that the natural basin in which the cabin sat was progressively filling with countless machines, and without any prompting from Tanner she understood that something was seriously amiss. Vin swore and shouldered the pack, wordlessly urging Zoé to her feet and almost dragging her along behind him in his haste to cover the remaining distance to the cabin. She understood his sense of urgency. A dozen or more bikes in her estimation constituted a gang and as far as she, or probably anyone else on the planet, was concerned that spelled trouble. As she was pulled along in Tanner's wake, the Texan finally abandoning any pretence at stealth in exchange for speed, she had one thought and one thought alone. *This is a very bad idea.*

To Zoé's intense relief Vin had no immediate intention of signalling their arrival to the bikers and once again they resorted to skirting along the tree-line, staying out of sight while an army of drunken, leather and denim-clad bikers crawled ant-like over the cabin and the two parked vehicles. Zoé winced as several of them systematically began to vandalise the Suburban while a second cadre broke into the cabin. Vin instinctively started forward only to find himself restrained by the sleeve.

"Are you mad? In case you hadn't noticed you're outnumbered 15 to 1. Ezra certainly wouldn't give very good odds on that outcome and Chris would have your hide nailed to a fence post."

He hesitated, knowing that she was right and torn between the need to act and the impossibility of a satisfactory outcome.

"All our weapons are in there, Zoé. I can't risk them getting to them."

She understood his very real fear of the ATF handguns ending up in the hands of these two-wheeled terrorists but given the alternatives it was better to let the guns go than to put a life -- she made a mental correction, his life -- at risk.

"But they're secured, Vin. Let it go."

"Do you think that's going to stop them. There'll be nothing left of this place when they've finished." He fished in his pocket and pulled out his cell-phone.

"At least wait until we can get some help," she persisted, genuinely frightened that Tanner would act on impulse.

It was as if she had not spoken.

"You wait here. See if you can raise the others. I'll try and get closer."

Zoé caught the phone as it tumbled through the air towards her and before she could utter another word, Tanner had melted into the trees and was gone. Cursing she thumbed through the numbers in the phone's memory and tried to summon help before the bikers discovered that they were no longer alone and that there was a now cat among the pigeons. Almost distraught with frustration, she repeatedly stabbed at the numbers only to be rewarded by a "no signal" message or the continuous ring of an unanswered phone. Finally she crept forward, loathe to remain on the periphery knowing that Tanner was going into the fray unsupported.

Shoving the useless phone into her pocket she moved cautiously, edging ever closer to the two ATF vehicles. On the gravel parkway, the Suburban now leaned drunkenly to one side with both its left hand side tyres slashed, its doors hanging open and its interior a scene of wanton destruction. Zoé paused to wonder as she carefully skirted around the damaged vehicle if the gang had been aware of the identity of these men

whose domain they had invaded whether they would have pursued their goal so determinedly. Larabee and his team were not the men she would have chosen with whom to pick a fight. She looked back into the trees. Larabee. *If you're anywhere near, we need you now.* She froze, in heart-stopping panic as the shrill notes of the cell-phone's ring echoed across the clearing. Swearing roundly, she dug into her pocket to retrieve the offending instrument with the faint hope of silencing it before her position was betrayed. No luck there. Already a couple of the bikers had turned searching for the source of the alien sound and were starting to move in her direction. Hitting the off button, she considered what rule of karmic law had decreed that someone should finally respond to her calls at this particular moment. Now she had to make a choice - stay or run.

She chose to run.

At least she could draw off some of their man-power and level the odds for Vin although she was not sure that she was capable of evading a determined biker posse for long. First she doubled back to where she had left the rucksack and set off at a determined lope away from her rapidly approaching pursuers. Finally an angry shout went up and she knew the hue and cry was on. She was struck by an ironic sense of *deja vu*, only this time there was no Vin to lead her. This time she was on her own.

Chris Larabee's curiosity was well and truly piqued. His cell phone had begun to vibrate in his pocket as he and J.D. had been alternately sliding and stumbling down a treacherous patch of scree into a dry gulley in order to cut twenty minutes from their return journey. Now the flashing LCD readout informed him that he had missed one call. *Tell me something I don't know.* He thumbed a button and the screen flashed alternately Vin's name and cell phone number. J.D. moved to look over his shoulder.

"What's up?"

"Vin tried to call."

Dunne dusted off his jeans and looked ruefully down at the grazes covering the palms of his hands.

"Probably calling to tell us he's got supper on!"

"If it'd been Ezra I'd say you were right," a brief smile touched his lips then his frown returned, "but Vin? I don't think so."

Dunne looked up at his leader picking up on his unease.

"You think something's wrong?"

"That's what I'm about to find out."

Larabee hit the send button and waited for a connection. A few seconds later he shook his head.

"Diverted to voice mail. Phone's switched off or out of range."

Speed dialling from the phone's memory he tried to raise the others; Buck and Ezra he knew had kept their phones as a safety precaution. Finally on the second attempt Buck responded.

"Shoot, Chris! You trying to give our position away? What's up and this had better be good."

"You heard from Vin?"

"Nope. Trouble?"

"I don't know. Are you far from base?"

J.D. heard the snort of laughter from his best friend.

"Damned if I know, Chris. Talk to Josiah."

Josiah gave a position not too far from their own.

"Okay. You try and get a fix on Ezra and Nathan then get back to the cabin ASAP. We're coming in."

He terminated the call and hefted the pack more comfortably on his shoulders.

"So you do think something's wrong?" asked J.D. carefully.

"I don't know if something's wrong but I do know something's not right."

Zoé zig-zagged through the dense undergrowth and finally stopped, catching her breath, when she found the ground suddenly vanished in front of her as the earth dropped with sudden finality into a deep chasm. If she even managed to get to the bottom without injuring herself on the way down she doubted she would be able to find a way out on the other side where vertical banks rose twenty feet into the air. There was no choice but to turn back. She could hear several bodies crashing noisily through the forest making no attempt to conceal their passage, their very numbers assuring safety. Feeling very much like a hare chased by a pack of hounds she retraced her steps trying to maintain a safe distance between herself and her pursuers, doubling back towards the cabin where she hoped Vin had fared better than herself.

Certain that at last she had managed to place a buffer between herself and the men chasing her, Zoé crouched in the shadow of a gigantic fir and once again pulled out the cell-phone. She dialled, already having decided that if no one answered this time that she would call 911 and hope for the best. The connection made, she listened impatiently to the ringing tone, willing Larabee to answer.

"Well, what do we have here?"

Zoé's hand closed around the cell phone keeping the connection open but hiding it from view as she slowly turned to face the owner of the voice. If there was only one she had a fair chance of dealing with him. Two hundred pounds of solid beef stood before her, grinning inanely and obviously delighted by his find.

More trouble than you'll believe, brother.

She took a step backwards and let the hand holding the phone drop to her side. She assessed the potential danger with a practiced eye; he was big but she had the advantage of speed and agility, and certainly she believed she had the upper hand in the intellect department. A burst of static from the unit in her hand momentarily drew his attention and she fainted right, then darted left before he could react. His infuriated roar as she slipped away convinced her that the last thing that she wanted to happen was to end up anywhere within his reach. *Vin where are you?* Unmindful of the low branches that whipped at her face and plucked at her clothing she forced a path through the trees, swinging around in a curve that would take her back towards the cabin. She risked a glance over her shoulder and a second later slammed into a solid object with such force that she staggered backwards and almost lost her footing. The cell phone flew from her hand and landed several feet away in the mulch out of reach. *Shit!* A second biker had stepped out from behind a tree to put an end to her headlong flight, which strategy while simple had proved most effective. Before she could regain secure footing once more, both men had closed in on her and she was well and truly trapped. Two pairs of hands grabbed her before she could think of evading them again and immediately she slipped into attack mode, no holds barred kicking, gouging, biting and scratching. One of her captors swore as she sank her teeth into his arm while his cohort tried unsuccessfully to pull her away. Finally she was

forced to yield when one of them grabbed a handful of her hair and slammed a fist into the side of jaw. Her vision greying, tears springing to her eyes from the force of the blow she sank bonelessly to the ground. *Vin? Ezra? Help...*

Unable to use physical strength against the bikers, Zoé settled on passive resistance. She feigned a grogginess she did not feel and hung limply, a dead weight on the two men forcing them to drag her bodily back to the gathering. The left side of her face was numb and she wondered if her jaw was broken but any thought of her own pain quickly evaporated as she realised that the activity across the clearing was more than a celebration. That the cat-calls, whistles and cheers were an expression of blood lust which could only mean one thing.

They had found Tanner.

Zoé moaned as the mass of bodies surged forward and she glimpsed Vin, already beaten and bloodied but still fighting, being forced to his knees and trying to avoid the various weapons and booted feet of his captors.

"Vin!"

Zoé couldn't prevent the cry from escaping as, still restrained herself, she watched Tanner eventually fall beneath the onslaught of fists and boots of half a dozen men. Powerless to offer any comfort let alone aid to the fallen agent she struggling frantically like a trapped animal in an effort to free herself, but her only reward was a backhanded slap to her face which made her ears ring and split her lip. A meaty paw groped under her shirt and she sagged unresisting as rough hands fondled her, repeating the litany in her head that it didn't matter what they did to her as long as Vin was all right.

Only a few yards away but out of reach Tanner had become very still and she hoped that he'd had the sense to play possum. She swayed, her knees rubbery as she considered her probable future in the hands of these animals but, without warning, she was suddenly released and thrown roughly aside, her shoulder painfully striking the gravel as she hit the ground. The roar of a score of bikes starting up and progressively leaving filled her ears and she finally understood that they were really going although what had caused the sudden change of heart she couldn't say. What's more, she didn't care.

Scrambling onto her hands and knees she clutched at her now half-open shirt and stumbled to where Tanner lay. Reaching out she touched the bruised and bleeding face. One eye was already swollen shut and blood streamed from his nose and mouth. His right cheek had been laid open and from the damage she suspected one of his assailants had used brass knuckles. Curled defensively on his side with knees drawn up he lay with one arm protecting his belly and the other between his legs.

"Vin?"

Torn between wanting to comfort him and needing to raise the alarm to summon help she vacillated between the two options for several moments. Pragmatism finally won and she flew into a frenzy of activity, hoping that the rest of the team were not too far away. The vehicles' alarms had been disabled but she found and activated the siren in Chris' Dodge, more than satisfied with the shrieking ululating wail it produced, shattering the silence and echoing off the mountains. For good measure she sat for several minutes at the wheel and sounded the horn until, finally certain that her efforts would attract attention of one kind or another, she turned her attention to the prostrate Texan. Carefully kneeling beside him she shrugged

out of her jacket and laid it over his upper body, then pulled his head and shoulders onto her lap and began to wipe the blood from his face with the tail of her shirt. He stirred, softly moaning as she touched his lacerated cheek and tried to turn his head away.

"Vin!"

His good eye fluttered and as the grey curtain clouding his senses receded he curled in on himself even more as if to hold in the pain. Coughing, he cleared his mouth of blood and spat onto the driveway before stirring enough to look up at Zoé. His vision was blurred but he could see the blood on her lip and as much as he wanted to reach out to her he couldn't quite make his limbs respond to the messages his brain was trying to send. He knew she was crying and that worried him. He wanted to get up, hold her and tell her that everything was all right but his muscles were conspiring against him and the best he could manage was to lie in her lap and bleed, which required no effort at all.

Don't do this to me, Vin! Zoé adjusted the hopelessly inadequate covering over Tanner and tried to make him more comfortable. He had not lost consciousness but she had been unsuccessful in her attempts to get him to his feet and she was worried that his injuries were even worse than she had first thought. He now seemed to be finding breathing more difficult and in spite of the chill he was sweating. For the hundredth time she raised her eyes to scan the treeline hoping to see any or all of the team. *Christ, where are you? What's taking so long?*

Ezra and Nathan were the first to return. Buck, once he had been able to raise them on the cell phone, had forewarned them of possible trouble and the pair had responded by moving at the fastest pace they could maintain given the terrain; then the wail of the siren had urged them to even greater speed. Now they pulled up short from an extended sprint, shocked by the scene of devastation before them. Personal belongings were strewn across the parkway and lawn, the two vehicles stood, doors hanging open, forlorn and abandoned and the whole area around the cabin resembled the aftermath of a riot. Ezra finally elbowed a bewildered and breathless Jackson and pointed to two figures huddled on the ground. Both men again broke into a trot and in silent accord the two men responded to the situation, the Southerner immediately turning his attention to Zoé while Nathan knelt over the Texan.

"I couldn't get him to move, Nathan, so I just tried to keep him warm. There were so many of them and Vin -- we -- tried to stop them getting the weapons, but I couldn't make anyone hear me and then they heard the phone ring and I lost it when they came after me. He was fighting but there were too many..." Zoé was curiously inarticulate, unable to maintain coherence in her relief that she was no longer alone and that the enormity of what had happened could at last be shared.

Still trying to make sense of what she was saying Ezra put a comforting arm around her shoulders and pulled her close, making soothing noises as he raised questioning eyes to look at Nathan. Jackson was intent on checking Tanner's injuries but spared a moment to glance at Standish, his eyes reflecting not only concern, but a smouldering anger. Zoé's flood of words suddenly stopped as she was drawn into Ezra's embrace and, melting against him as the tension drained out of her, the tears began.

Moments later the remaining four agents rolled out of the forest like a human juggernaut, having joined forces several miles out, and without pause raced breathlessly to the tableau playing out on the lawn amid

the surrounding devastation. Larabee skidded to a halt in front of them and quickly looked from Tanner to Elliott concern, anger and confusion vying for control of his expression.

"What the hell happened here?"

Tanner weakly turned his head towards the familiar voice. With blood and mucus still dripping from his mouth and a blackening eye swollen shut he looked like nothing more than a punch-drunk prizefighter.

"Sorry, Chris." He allowed his head to fall back again. "Bad call."

J.D. his inherent enthusiasm for once stunned into silence, looked in amazement around the clearing until Chris' voice brought him back to reality.

"J.D! Turn that fucking siren off!"

Buck snapped the cell phone shut and addressed no one in particular.

"Paramedics will be here in twenty minutes."

At the opposite end of the room Chris paced back and forth, talking animatedly on his own cell phone and exuding the raw energy of a caged tiger, while Nathan did what he did best - damage control. Vin lay on the sofa in the living room in a state of undress as Jackson methodically assessed his friend's injuries and did what he could to ease the hurt. Zoé sat on the floor and held an ice pack to the Texan's bruised eye with one hand while holding a pressure dressing over the laceration in the opposite cheek with the other. Finally, Nathan covered him with a blanket and moved away to where Larabee was angrily terminating his last call.

"Well?" snapped the Team 7 leader.

This man, already in a dark mood, would not want to hear what Jackson was about to tell him but he continued anyway.

"Whoever it was worked him over pretty damn good, Chris. Looks like he has a fractured zygoma..."

"A what?"

Nathan, pointed to the bony rim under his eye.

"Here. The cheekbone."

Buck, not averse to eavesdropping, moved closer to the two men.

"Why didn't you just say so, Nate? Sometimes you're worse than Ezra..."

"Buck!"

Chris was not a man to mess with when angered, and Buck wisely chose silence in response to his best friend's irritated snarl.

"I think there's every chance that he's got some internal bleeding," continued Jackson evenly, "someone sure danced a number on his kidneys."

"How bad?"

"Bad enough. He's pretty shocky right now. I'll be a lot happier once he's in a hospital."

"And Zoé?"

Jackson was momentarily caught off guard, not expecting the sudden change in subject.

"Roughed up a bit but she won't let me take a close look."

Larabee scowled.

"But she is okay?"

Nathan nodded slowly, uncertain of Chris' motives and already sympathising with Elliott. Larabee looked as if he was about to kick some serious ass.

Ezra, standing off to one side and talking quietly to Josiah, stopped in mid-sentence as Larabee strode towards Tanner and the woman who had yet to leave his side, taking half a step forward before Sanchez reached out a cautionary hand to restrain him and shook his head. Ezra relaxed slightly but there remained about him an awareness that suggested he was ready to champion Zoé's cause should Larabee's behaviour prove anything less than exemplary. Buck smiled having seen the brief exchange. Ezra might be smaller than Chris but given the circumstances he wouldn't have been prepared to wager against the feisty Southerner if it came to a fight.

Chris dropped to one knee beside the sofa and rested one hand on Elliott's shoulder as he allowed himself to finally take a close look at the damage done to the man who probably meant more to him than any other of the closely knit team.

"Hey, Vin."

Vin opened the eye which was still functioning and smiled briefly at Larabee.

"Hey, Cowboy. You lost the bet, pard."

Chris frowned, not sure what the Texan was talking about or if indeed he was completely lucid.

"Bet?"

Vin slowly moved his arm and held his hand out palm up in front of Zoé. Elliott shifted slightly and dug into the side pocket of her jeans, then covered Tanners upturned palm with her own, maintaining contact for a long moment in which the pair exchanged a silent glance that nonetheless spoke volumes to not only Larabee but to every man in the room. As the woman drew her hand away, Vin held up the brass cartridge case that they had brought back from the mountain.

"We win."

Larabee was not surprised by the Texan's quiet revelation and in truth he had fully expected the Tanner/Elliott pairing to meet their objective but other more immediate concerns had driven the purpose of the day's exercise from his mind. What did surprise him was Zoé's reaction.

"Bet?" She looked from one man to the other. "You wagered that Vin couldn't make it?" she spat, eyes narrowing to slits. "But of course! How could he ever be expected to when he had me tagging along like an albatross around his neck? God forbid that a woman might be able to hold her own in this macho world." She stood up breathing rapidly as she squared off against the still kneeling figure of Larabee. "You bastard, Larabee. You manipulating, Macchiavellian, son of a bitch."

At various stages around the room six stunned ATF agents watched open-mouthed as the Englishwoman launched a verbal attack on the man whom they had collectively learned to treat with respectful awe. The blond man slowly rose to his feet, his expression flat and his eyes like two chips of flint. Tanner reached out, his attempt to interrupt the confrontation ignored. Several feet away Buck leaned towards Ezra.

"She's dead meat."

Ezra looked from Zoé to the much taller Chris. *David and Goliath.*

"Care to make a small wager on the outcome Mr. Wilmington?"

Zoé continued her frontal assault with apparent disregard for either her personal safety or the potential

consequences of such an attack.

"I don't appreciate being set up even by the omnipotent Commander Larabee. Still, I suppose it was an interesting exercise to see if the rookie, the useless baggage, could go the distance partnered with a man who would barely give her the time of day. Well, that one really backfired on you didn't it? You don't seem to understand that people are not pawns you can move around on a chess board to suit your own ends..."

"That's enough!" Chris' voice cracked like a whip and his arm shot out, gripping Elliott around the arm as if he was going to shake her. For a moment Zoé stopped and matched him glare for glare before finally shrugging out of his grasp.

"You're right. It is. I've just about had enough of team-building, enough of this fucking job and enough of your sanctimonious bullshit!"

Having delivered her parting shot she turned and ran from the cabin.

Buck, leaning on Ezra's shoulder, held out his hand.

"I think I win," he whispered conspiratorially.

"On the contrary, Mr. Wilmington," replied the astute Southerner softly, "The battle is far from over. This was just the opening salvoe."

Vin was struggling to get up, obviously distressed by the altercation and carefully nursing his battered ribs but nonetheless determined to follow Zoé. Larabee equally determined that he should stay, was able to restrain him with little more than a hand on his shoulder.

"Let her go, Vin."

"Chris, I gotta..."

"You're staying right here." He signalled Nathan with a jerk of his head and the medic immediately took over. Tanner would be going nowhere except to the hospital. As Chris commanded, so it would be done.

"Chris. Don't let this happen. Go find her."

Larabee rubbed his eyes, suddenly looking tired then nodding once at his injured friend strode towards the open door.

Chris scanned the area in front of the cabin but of Elliott there was no sign. *Damn!* The light was fading and he was in no mood to go chasing a stubborn, wayward and, more to the point, angry female in the dark. *Fool woman would probably break a leg!*

He knew he was being unfair, that Zoé was in fact an excellent agent, but her accusations had stung him more than he cared to admit even to himself. *Macchiavellian? Manipulating?* She had him to rights there; after all the whole 'hare and hounds' exercise had been manipulated to force Vin to work with Zoé. And she had also been right in that nothing had not gone quite according to plan. Whatever had happened on the mountain had certainly forged an association that had not previously existed, but there was something more to it than surviving a baptism of fire.

"Zoé!"

He tracked around the back of the cabin and widened his search, knowing she couldn't have gone too far. He also guessed he would be the last person she would want to see right now.

Zoé sniffed and wiped her eyes with her sleeve, cursing the tears that insisted on spilling over onto her

cheeks. Dammit -- she would not cry! *God, had she really called Chris a manipulating son of a bitch? It might be the truth as she saw it but it wasn't the smartest thing to say.* Stumbling she cast around the undergrowth, certain she had dropped Vin's cell phone somewhere near this spot. For some reason, which even she would have been at a loss to explain, it had become very important that she find that phone. Her jaw throbbed feeling as if someone had swung at her with a sledgehammer and her head pounded, mostly from the punch but also from the emotional roller-coaster ride she had been through. Dropping to her knees she ran her hands through dry leaves and moist detritus. *It's got to be here somewhere.*

"Zoé."

Her name was spoken so quietly, so close that her head jerked up in alarm and in response her efforts to locate the missing cell phone became more intense. *Chris? Please let it not be Chris.* But she already knew his voice and that he had come to find her. *Why couldn't he just leave her alone?*

"Lost something?"

The voice held no hint of anger, if anything the tone was gentle. Still, she crawled further away delaying the coming confrontation, sifting through the thick carpet of leaves as if he had not spoken.

"The phone. I lost Vin's phone," she muttered, more to herself than replying to Chris' question, "I know it's got to be here. This is where I dropped it. I remember this place."

Then he was there, right in front of her physically blocking any further progress and forcing her to stop. Sitting back on her heels she raked a hand through her hair but avoided looking directly at him. This was the man who was going to bust her ass right back to Britain. After her little outburst she'd be lucky if she spent the next five years doing anything but check luggage at a regional airport. *You really blew it, girl. Don't make it any worse.*

"Get up." She ignored the hand extended to her. "Please."

The spark of defiance that flared just as quickly died but she remained kneeling, a curious lethargy suddenly taking hold of her as the adrenaline wave she had been riding for the last couple of hours finally bottomed out. Larabee's voice faded out and although she knew he was talking, the words no longer made sense, instead coming from further and further away until there was nothing but the sound of the wind rushing in her ears and the sound of her own breathing. Vision greying, she closed her eyes and finally surrendered sliding effortlessly to the ground at Larabee's feet.

Shit! Chris darted forward and, dropping to one knee beside the woman's crumpled form, slid one arm under her shoulders and shifted her position slightly so that she lay on her back, head lolling bonelessly over his arm. Brushing her hair away from her face his eyes were drawn to the dusky stain along her jaw, and he gently brushed his thumb over the blackening bruise, marvelling that she hadn't been put out for the count earlier. He felt a sudden pang of guilt that he hadn't paid more attention to her needs but his concern as always had been for one of his own -- for Vin. Not one of them, except maybe Ezra, had paused to consider what this pint-sized dynamo had also had to endure. Then, she had gone and behaved like a perfect bitch, with all claws out and going for the jugular, by which time he could have gladly decked her himself...No, that was a lie. He had never struck a woman and he didn't believe that even Zoé could drive him to that extreme. Sighing, he slipped his free arm under her knees and straightened, amazed at how small she was in his arms then started back towards the cabin before the light failed completely. Time to start building some

bridges. On his second step he heard the familiar sound of plastic being ground underfoot and without having to look he guessed what he had inadvertently crunched beneath his boot-heel. *Well, at least I found Vin's phone.*

It was noisy and bright, and she was cold. Slowly, she floated back out of the depths of unconsciousness and tried to make some sense out of the disorientation she was experiencing. She knew was lying down but her senses told her she was moving which seemed strange until she made the right connections and realised that she was being transported in the back of a vehicle. Her awakening senses were being bombarded by various stimuli that her brain was having trouble processing; sound, smell, taste, touch all a confusing melange from which she could make no immediate sense.

"Zoé?"

Yes? *Who is it?*

"Zoé, can you hear me?"

Of course I can hear you. Now go away, I'm tired.

Something covered her mouth and nose and she breathed in a fine mist of moist air. *Oxygen?* She took several deep breaths and the express elevator that was carrying her from one state of consciousness to another suddenly reached its destination and disgorged her unceremoniously into the waking world. Blinking owlishly she hyperventilated for several seconds then, suddenly claustrophobic, snatched the mask from her face and tried to sit up.

"Steady," cautioned an unfamiliar but friendly voice, "Just take it easy."

With an effort she focused on the paramedic sitting beside her, then looked beyond him where, to her relief, Vin lay quietly with eyes closed on the opposite stretcher, a cardiac monitor attached to the electrodes on his exposed chest and an IV connected to his right arm, looking very pale but relaxed. She wondered if he had been sedated. Slowly she lowered herself back onto the yielding surface of the stretcher and pulled the blanket over her, too exhausted to do more than slip back into a doze, lulled by gentle motion of the vehicle.

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Chris Larabee was not by nature a patient man but he had learned over the years that waiting was an inevitable part of life and had at least perfected an outward illusion of control that projected to others a sense of calm. Few observers ever guessed at the internal struggle to maintain that equanimity. Now, with no reason to maintain the facade, he allowed his restlessness free reign and paced relentlessly back and forth. But the constant motion merely fuelled his agitation and increased his desire for action - preferably of the violent and physical kind. Recognising the danger of such emotions he forced himself to sit, the recollection of Buck rescuing him from numerous bar-room brawls in the weeks and months following Sarah and Adam's deaths when he had fallen into a pattern of self-destructive behaviour, still too fresh in his memory to ignore. Running his hands through his short blond hair, Chris took a deep breath and threw his head back against the couch to stare at the ceiling. *Get a grip, Larabee.* God knew he was no stranger to hanging around in hospital waiting rooms; in the three years that the team had been together not one of them had escaped

injury and now he could even add Zoé to the tally, but he had never before had to wait alone. At least some elements of the team were always there, a surrogate family on whose support he had come to depend. Right now he could use some of Josiah's homespun philosophy, J.D.'s unflagging optimism or even a little of Ezra's mocking sarcasm, but all he had were his own thoughts to keep him company. Not generally given to self-recrimination he found himself nonetheless wondering if Zoé's accusations weren't closer to the truth than he would care to admit.

The transition from sleep to wakefulness was instantaneous, the never-forgotten legacy of his Navy days, yet to a casual observer nothing about the man changed. His breathing remained deep and even, his eyes hooded slits, yet every sense was alert and attuned to the environment, every muscle ready to respond.

"Well, ain't that the cutest thing you ever saw?"

Buck! Chris stretched expansively and sat up, making a point of looking at his watch.

"Bout time you got here. What took so long?" He registered the fact that neither J.D. or Josiah were part of the group. "Where're the others?"

Buck dropped himself onto the couch beside Larabee.

"Josiah and J.D. are trying to put the Suburban back together. Took 'em a while to unscramble the electrics in the Ram before we could get it going. Still sounds like a sick cow but at least we got here. How's Vin?"

Chris distractedly raked his fingers through his hair.

"He's in OR. Having his face put back together."

"And Zoe?" This from Ezra. "Or shouldn't I ask?"

Larabee fixed the Southerner with a glare but for once didn't rise to the bait.

"Mild concussion."

"That's it?"

Chris shrugged.

"That's all I know."

Three sets of eyes focused almost simultaneously on Nathan who immediately raised both hands as if fending off an attack.

"Okay. I'll see what I can find out."

As a medical man, although his field of expertise was now in forensics, Jackson was usually able to overcome the barriers to open communication which universally existed throughout the medical profession and for that reason was always designated chief information-gatherer for the group in these situations. So elected, he strode out of the waiting room leaving the three agents to wait together, hoping that Standish would have enough sense not to provoke the obviously strung-out Larabee.

"Anything from the local boys?" asked Chris, referring to Wilmington's earlier conversation with the police.

"They're following up on it. Seems this gang has a history. Generally confine themselves to vandalism and small time theft. Guess Vin was just in the wrong place at the wrong time."

Ezra looked up from the deck of cards that had, as usual, appeared in his hands the moment he sat down.

"I'm sure he'll be relieved to hear that, Mr. Wilmington."

Buck chose to ignore the sarcasm and contented himself with throwing a look in Ezra's direction that rivalled anything Chris could produce for pure venom.

"Have you seen Zoé yet?"

Chris, intent on Buck's question, failed to notice the Southerner's eloquently raised eyebrow or the wickedly amused smile that flickered across his lips and if he had, their significance would have been lost on him. He shook his head, a slight frown creasing his forehead.

"No. Why?"

Buck bounded energetically to his feet and crossed to the window.

"Just wondered how the lady was feeling. Sparky little thing, ain't she?"

Ezra rolled his eyes and continued to move the cards almost sensuously through his fingers. *Lord, this man has all the finesse of a herd of stampeding Texas longhorns.*

Larabee's face assumed a slightly baffled expression.

"Sparky?"

It was a comment on Larabee's state of mind that he hadn't already smelt a rat and Buck, having enough sense to realise he was heading into dangerous territory, decided to abandon the conversation and promptly latched onto the re-appearance of Nathan as a suitable diversion.

"Hey, Nate. What gives?"

Jackson lowered his tall frame into the seat vacated by Buck moments earlier.

"Good news, people. Nothing too serious. Vin's out of Recovery. The fracture's been reduced and he's had a few stitches put in his face. Lots of bruises, a couple of cracked ribs and contused kidneys but no lasting damage. Reckon he'll be hurtin' real bad for a few days yet but he'll probably be released in a couple of days – maybe even tomorrow. Zoé's been admitted with mild concussion and dehydration. She'll be fine once they get some fluid into her and she's had a chance to sleep." He lowered a gentle hand onto Chris' shoulder. "Which is exactly what I'd recommend for you too."

Larabee indeed looked ready to drop but with a sigh he rose to his feet.

"I'm fine, Nathan. I just need..." he hesitated as if unsure that he should continue, "I have to see Vin – and Zoé. I've got to talk to Zoé."

Jackson nodded, aware that Larabee would not be satisfied until he had assured himself of the well-being of the two agents and only when that was achieved would he look to his own needs. It was a measure of the older man's fatigue that he tolerated the tall doctor's solicitous arm around his shoulders as they walked out of the waiting area.

Ezra keenly watched the pair walk away, although the movement of his hands manipulating the deck of cards continued without a break in rhythm.

"If I didn't know better, Mr. Wilmington, I'd say our fearless leader and man of steel is about ready to fold."

Buck, for once serious, chewed thoughtfully on the end of his moustache.

"And if I didn't know better, I'd have to say I think you're right."

Vin tried, and failed, to find a comfortable position somewhere on the firm hospital mattress. He couldn't lie on the side of his damaged cheek, not so much because he had been warned that he shouldn't but

because it was too damn painful anyway. After careful consideration he came to the unhappy conclusion that there was nowhere on his body that didn't hurt and finally reached a less than satisfactory compromise by lying in an awkward, semi-prone, position that put most of his weight on his left hip. The doctor had managed to reduce the fracture under local and while Vin was able to understand the benefits in avoiding a general anaesthetic, the experience was one that he would just as soon not repeat. Now, as the lidocaine wore off, the left side of his face throbbed with savage efficiency as if the nerves, having been temporarily neutralised were now making up for lost time with renewed vigour. The analgesia he had been given, which had initially sent him spiralling into the clouds on an amazing high, had finally levelled out and although it had taken the edge off the pain for a while the deep visceral ache was once again filtering through and he knew he was coming in for a rocky landing. Out of habit he started to lift his wrist to check his watch but then he remembered the nurse had taken it off when she put in the intravenous line. Not that it mattered what time it was, he told himself, he wasn't going anywhere in a hurry.

"Hey there Mountain Man."

Quiet words, spoken so softly that he was at first afraid it was merely a figment of his imagination -- being spaced out had its drawbacks. He was reassured when a hand closed over his own and he felt the reality of human contact. Forcing sluggish eyelids open, he focused on the form beside the bed. *Chris?* He wanted to smile but instead settled for a hand clasp as the least painful alternative. With an effort he turned his body slightly to look at one of the few men he had ever claimed as friend.

"Hey, Cowboy." It was harder than he expected to articulate the two words. "You okay?"

"Am I okay?" He made a sound that could have been a laugh, but the catch in his voice lead Tanner to think he may have been mistaken. "Coming from someone who looks like he's been through a meat grinder that's real funny."

"That good, huh?"

Chris lowered himself carefully to the edge of the bed and rested a hand on the injured man's shoulder.

"Take my advice, and stay away from mirrors for a while."

Vin eased onto his back, ignoring the flare of pain through his upper body and raised himself on one elbow.

"Is Zoé all right?"

Chris ducked his head.

"If you mean did I beat up on her, the answer's no. But she is in the next room with concussion."

Tanner's sudden attempt to sit up failed miserably and he fell back cursing bitterly, nursing his ribs and making a mental note not to try that again anytime soon.

"C'mon, Chris. Help me out here. What's going on?"

Larabee took a moment to grab an extra pillow and wedge it behind the man in the bed in an effort to make him more comfortable.

"Easy, now. She's okay." Chris stared past Tanner into thoughtful infinity and absently scratched the stubble on his cheek. After a long moment of silence Larabee focused his gaze once more on the injured Texan. "Want to tell me what happened on the mountain?"

Vin shifted his weight slightly and experimentally explored the stitches in his lip with his tongue while

Chris waited patiently for the answer that would inevitably come. Not a man for idle chatter Tanner never wasted words and Chris knew it was important to him that he find the right ones irrespective of whether the process took several minutes or several hours. He would wait as long as it took. Several long minutes of silence passed before Vin finally stirred.

"They reckon you can give a man enough rope and he'll hang himself." He paused and fingered the bruising on his chest. "And you made sure you gave me plenty didn't you?"

Larabee tilted his head, the gesture wordlessly inviting Tanner to continue.

"It was no mistake that Zoé and me wound up partners, was it?" He didn't wait for, or expect, either confirmation or denial. "And I was so pissed that I did everything I could to make it hard for her. Tried every low-down trick I know, and then some, to make her look bad and I wound up feeling like an asshole."

Larabee suppressed a smile. He could certainly identify with that feeling.

"She has that effect on some people."

"You see," he continued softly, "I had all these reasons why she shouldn't be a part of this team but she kept reeling y'all in. Hell, she had Ezra hook, line and sinker from day one! The more she found her feet, the more I wanted to knock them right out from under her."

Larabee had rarely heard the usually affable Texan express his emotions so bluntly.

"So what changed your mind?"

Vin grinned crookedly.

"Didn't matter what I did or said, she just took it right on the chin and kept comin' back for more. It was like the lower I sank, the higher she flew. I reckon that's when it hit me, after I made her strip off and haul ass across the river, that it was me who had the problem; and it wasn't that I didn't like her..."

"It was that you liked her way too much," finished Chris.

Vin's response was almost a whisper.

"You got it, pard."

Chris took a long, hard look at his best friend.

"So, you gonna do anything about it?"

"Already have."

A slow smile spread over Larabee's face and he shook his head. Vin, in spite of their closeness, still had the capacity to surprise him on occasion.

"Way to go! Should've known from the way she flew at me like a tigress back at the cabin but I guess since she now thinks we're both lower than a snake's belly you've got yourself a hard row to plough."

"Always did. I ain't exactly given her any good reason to do anything other than spit in my eye."

"You and me both." Larabee reluctantly stood up. "I'd better go see how she is but I reckon I'll stay out of spittin' range."

The two briefly clasped hands, a gesture of intimate solidarity, then Chris moved quickly to leave.

"Hey, Cowboy!" Larabee, one hand already on the door handle, looked back at the summons from the battered figure in the bed. "Thanks."

Zoé pressed the button on the remote control unit and plunged the television screen into darkness,

wishing she had a similar device to switch off her overactive brain. Sleep remained as elusive, as disjointed fragments of the day kept playing over in her mind like a bad video which she could neither turn off nor turn away from. Too tired to move and too wired to sleep she slipped instead into a twilight trance reliving the very moments that she wanted more than anything to forget.

The whisper of the door opening registered but triggered no immediate response; for that would have required a co-ordinated effort of thought and action which she found impossible to even consider. Even the intrusion of a weight settling on the bed beside her failed to engender any reaction. Her capacity to speak, to think, to feel, to be seemed to have suddenly deserted her and in a remote corner of her exhausted brain a tiny spark of fear flickered into life. Would she become so detached from her body that she ceased to exist? Was it possible to die from apathy? Then she found herself enfolded in a pair of strong arms; the sensuous feel of soft fabric over hard muscle as her cheek pressed against the secure warmth of a masculine torso, the lingering aroma of Dolce & Gabbana, commingled with a faint odour of whiskey, the smell of oiled leather and the familiar speech pattern leaving her in no doubt as to her visitor. *Ezra*. The tension drained from her as she yielded to the embrace taking comfort in, and drawing strength from, the physical contact.

I'm so glad it's you.

She didn't know if she had spoken but the Southerner continued his soothing monologue, only half of which registered with her, but she nonetheless recognised the sentiments and finally the cadence of his words, coupled with the slow but rhythmic caress of his hand on her back lulled her into a reluctant sleep.

Chris Larabee hesitated momentarily unsure of whether he should advance or retreat. Hovering in the doorway of Zoé's room he was initially uncertain how he should interpret the unexpected tableau that greeted him. Ezra lay in apparent comfort on one side of the bed with a sleeping Zoé nestled against him, her head pillowed on his chest with one arm circling his body and her leg effectively pinning his left thigh. The Southerner had his left arm curved protectively around the English woman while his right hand rested on her raised hip. The relaxed intimacy of the scene prompted him to consider that the rumours still circulating about the two agents might not be too far from the truth and he paused to reflect on the result once Vin was factored into the equation. A weary sigh escaped him. Team building was one thing, but this was something else entirely and he just didn't have the energy to deal with it. He had just made up his mind to leave when he heard Ezra's soft Southern drawl.

"Do come in, Mr. Larabee."

Chris, bone-weary himself, experienced a fleeting moment of envy for Standish. Not only had he found himself a bed in typically Ezra fashion but he even had someone with whom to share it.

"Not interrupting anything am I?"

To his surprise Ezra laughed quietly.

"Really, Chris. If I was both foolish and reckless enough to disregard the strict departmental regulations regarding the co-habitation of agents, don't you think I would choose a more appropriate, not to mention comfortable, location in which to flaunt my...peccadilloes."

Chris pulled up a chair, and reversing it straddled the seat, resting his forearms across the back.

"I reckon you would at that. So why are you here?"

Both men kept their voices low but looking at Zoé, Chris doubted that anything short of an earthquake

would rouse her.

"She needed a friend."

Larabee was surprised by the uncharacteristically simple reply, but not surprised by the inference that Ezra judged himself to be the only person that currently fit that particular description, and he suspected that Standish's intention in coming to Zoé's room had, all along, been to act as a buffer between the woman and himself. Chris lowered his forehead onto his arms and closed his eyes. *What kind of a man did Standish really think he was to believe that Zoé needed to be protected from him?* It irked him that his reputation for being a hard-ass sometimes got so much in the way that he was judged before he had ever had a chance to redeem himself. With an effort he raised his head again.

"Well, she couldn't have found one better."

Larabee surprised even himself that he had uttered the words for, while completely sincere in his observation, he was not in the habit of expressing such sentiments so openly. Standish, he could tell, was searching his face trying to detect any suggestion of artifice, the merest hint of irony. He could even tell the moment the Southerner decided he was offering an honest assessment and in doing so paying him a compliment. A slight inclination of the sandy head told him that the offering had been accepted.

"I thank you for that vote of confidence." Shifting his position slightly but without disturbing the woman, he slipped a hand into his jacket pocket and withdrew a familiar silver hip flask which he held out to the senior agent. He smiled. "You look like you could use a little southern comfort of your own."

Larabee reached out and with a nod gratefully took the elegantly chased container. The first swallow burned a trail of fire down his gullet and hit his empty stomach like a burning meteor. He knew Nathan would caution him against drinking in his present state but as the alcohol spread its warming tentacles through his system he chanced another long pull. *Only the best for Ezra of course.* He took one last swallow and, passing the flask back to the Southerner, rubbed a hand across his face.

"What a fucking disaster! If I'm ever crazy enough to suggest anything like this again Ezra just shoot me before I can do any serious damage."

"I'll be sure to file that request away for future reference, Mr. Larabee." Ezra raised the flask in a salute sinking a generous shot of his own before capping the now near-empty container and replacing it in his pocket. "And might I inquire how Mr. Tanner is holding up?"

"Better than he looks, that's for sure," Chris responded with a wry grin, "but nothing short of total anaesthesia will keep him in that bed for long."

Ezra glanced down at the sleeping form moulded against him almost as closely as a Siamese twin.

"Correct me if I'm wrong but I get the distinct impression that Mr. Tanner and Miss Elliott may have managed to put aside their differences and, shall we say, come to a mutual understanding during today's...yesterday's...trek into the wilderness."

"Something like that. How'd you guess?"

"I like to pride myself on possessing some small talent for being able to read the subtle nuances in other people's behaviour, but a blind man on a galloping horse would have noticed the very obvious cessation of hostilities between the two parties in question." He smiled broadly, flashing his gold tooth. "Of course, in the process I do believe your own relationship with the lady in question may have lost considerable ground."

Chris scowled fiercely.

"Vin reckoned I gave him enough rope to hang himself; but it looks like the noose ended up around my neck."

At that Standish laughed out loud not only enjoying the rare occurrence of seeing Larabee wrong-footed but anticipating the successful outcome of his wager with Buck Wilmington. He had every confidence in Zoé's abilities to cook a serving of humble pie which he fully expected Chris to eat.

"Sir, you have my condolences."

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Five a.m. and the waiting room of the County Hospital resembled the aftermath of an all night party. Chris lay full length across one couch, mouth open and snoring lightly in the depths of apparently untroubled sleep; Buck was sprawled between two chairs, torso and feet supported but with his long legs stretched over thin air and Nathan had curled on the floor like a vagrant, his head resting on a pilfered hospital pillow. Empty coffee containers and candy wrappers littered the floor, scattered among old copies of auto magazines and yesterday's newspapers. For some reason the three men seemed to occupy more space than their physical mass would suggest was necessary, but as there was no one with whom to share the area the ATF agents were left in peace. If the hospital staff were at all concerned by the take-over they chose not to voice any objections.

The shrill, persistent tones of a cell phone that broke the silence initially went unheeded by any of the three men. Then, after a short pause, the insistent ringing began again, finally rousing Jackson from his sleep. Momentarily disorientated he looked in confusion around the room before making sense of the location, and the sound which had disturbed him. Neither Wilmington nor Larabee showed any signs of having heard the phone let alone having any intention of responding. Having come to the conclusion that the phone was not his own he scrambled across to where Chris slumbered peacefully on and frisked him. Eventually he had no option but to ease his hand into the man's pocket and retrieve the offending object, silently hoping Larabee wouldn't waken, as he struggled to close his hand around the Motorola and get away unscathed. Chris was likely to hit first and ask questions later.

"Jackson," he growled into the now silenced cellphone.

Josiah.

What was happening? The Suburban needed a new tyre and wasn't going anywhere unless they could get one in town. Yes, they'd fixed under the hood and done what they could with the interior but he'd need to make an insurance claim. Nathan filled Sanchez in on what he knew and promised to call back as soon as he was properly awake.

Closing the phone with a snap, he leaned back on the couch and squeezed his eyes shut wondering if J.D. and Josiah had managed a decent night's sleep. He, for one, was getting too old for this crap! Stiffly getting to his feet he picked up the pillow from the floor and threw it at Wilmington, but even that wasn't enough to rouse the scruffy agent from sleep. Deciding he needed coffee, Nathan fed the required number of coins into the machine and received in exchange a less than satisfactory brew in a styrofoam cup. The best

he could say was that at least it was wet, hot and had enough caffeine in it to give him a kick start.

Minutes later Buck surfaced, bleary eyed, finally roused by the smell of coffee and struggled to extricate himself from the far from comfortable position he had wound up in. Groaning, he massaged his back and attempted to stretch the painful knots out of his muscles.

"Hell, Nate. Feel like I've spent a night in the drunk tank – I think I've even got the hangover!"

Nathan chuckled and sipped at the strong brew that was masquerading as coffee; he had to admit that it was even worse than the stuff that Vin managed to produce. Buck did indeed resemble someone who was recovering from a night on the tiles and Jackson was sure that if Wilmington went one more day without a shave that he would have the makings of a substantial beard.

"That's because your body's trying to tell you something."

Buck stood up, raking his fingers through his hair.

"Yeah, and what might that be?"

"That it needs sleep, it needs fuel and it needs rehydrating."

"Why, thank you for those few words of wisdom Doctor Jackson. How much do I owe you for that very astute observation?" He cast a glance at Larabee's still sleeping figure. "I reckon Chris must be listening more closely to his body than me. He's still dead to the world."

Wilmington stretched expansively and headed for the exit, still working the kinks out of his lower back.

"Get me a coffee will you, Nate. I gotta water the horses."

Zoé rose slowly through the layers of consciousness, like a diver pausing at intervals for decompression, until she finally broke through to the surface. Thoughts still sluggish she stirred lazily, moulding herself more closely to the warm shape next to her, fingers unconsciously exploring the curves on which her hand rested. As memory returned, she smiled and opened her eyes. Ezra. Not a dream as she had imagined but real flesh and blood. Still lying with her, still holding her. How many hours had it been?

"Good morning, darlin'."

She stretched then.

"Don't you ever sleep?" She felt more than heard the rumble of laughter in his chest and raised herself on one elbow to look at the Southerner. "How long have you been here?"

Standish leaned forward to awkwardly read the dial of his watch over her shoulder.

"A little over seven hours."

Zoé settled down again, resting her head in the hollow of his collarbone, needing to remain close.

"Thank you."

"The pleasure was all mine."

She laughed a little at his irony, guessing he had spent an uncomfortable night, then drew back a little to look at him.

"Always the perfect gentleman."

"A failing of mine I must confess."

She raised herself onto one elbow and, tucking her legs up under her in that curiously flexible manner of women, finally manoeuvred herself into a sitting position, relieving Standish of her weight. As he flexed his

left arm, in which sensation had ceased to be an issue quite some time before, and shifted his own position to allow some blood to flow into his equally numb leg Zoé reached out and placed a hand on his shoulder.

"You saved me, Ezra."

"Zoé, I..."

"No, please don't say anything," she interrupted quickly, "It's important that I tell you this. I was so scared...so frightened that I was losing myself but you...you came looking for me and brought me back. Back from that dark place where lost souls go. My knight in shining armour who slayed the demons." With a sad smile she leaned forward and, with such tenderness that it took his breath away, kissed him. "And for that I'll always love you."

The urbane and sophisticated Southerner, for whom words were not only a weapon but also his first line of defence, found himself suddenly robbed of speech, a phenomenon that anyone who knew the undercover specialist would find difficult to believe. As she drew away, she brushed a thumb lightly across his lips.

"Now I just have to face a few demons in the real world and that I have to do alone."

Ezra composed his features into something that he hoped didn't reflect too much the scrambled state of his emotions. Lord, this woman had more surprises up her sleeve than his mother! With an effort he recaptured the ability to convert thoughts into words.

"Just remember, darlin'," he said quietly, "I know a few things about demons myself."

Vin was not in the least surprised on waking to find Nathan sitting beside his bed flicking through his medical chart, the surprise would have been if he had wakened and not found anyone there. Still fuzzy-headed from the medications he nonetheless felt a little better than he had a few hours before.

"Hey, Nate."

"Well, Good Afternoon! Thought you might be planning on sleeping the clock round."

Vin gingerly eased himself into a more comfortable position.

"Yeah, well that's what happens when a nurse keeps coming along and sticking a needle in your ass."

Jackson laughed, knowing Tanner was not the best patient in the world and thinking that it was probably a blessing that he had been so heavily sedated with pain-killers.

"It's for your own good, Vin," he reminded him sagely.

"Yeah, yeah." The Texan winced as his ribs took the opportunity to remind him that they were in no condition to be abused and would prefer it if he didn't move at all. "What time is it? When can I get out of here? How's Zoé?"

Nathan shook his head in mock despair.

"It's one o'clock. Zoé's already been discharged and I guess they'll let you out when your kidney function is back to normal."

"Hell, Nate, that ain't nothing. Been kidney punched before."

"Not like this you haven't, believe me. So just take it easy."

Tanner couldn't contain his sigh of exasperation.

"I'm fine, Nathan. Really."

Jackson moved his chair closer to the bed and placed a large hand on the Texan's forearm.

"Vin, you ain't near dying but you sure as hell ain't fine neither! In fact you're one sorry-looking son of a bitch from where I'm sitting."

Tanner grinned crookedly through his stitched lip.

"Chris said I should stay away from mirrors." He sighed again. "Truth tell, Nathan, I don't think I could get out of this bed even though I'd like nothing better. Don't think I've ever hurt in so many places at once before."

For Tanner to make that kind of confession Nathan knew guaranteed that he was speaking the absolute truth.

"Guess it's about time for another shot in the ass then, my friend."

Any protest he was considering died in transit from his brain to his lips when the door to his room whispered open and he anticipated the unwelcome if necessary attentions of the nursing staff that invariably left him feeling either embarrassed or humiliated. Having another person so intimately involved with your body and bodily functions did that to a man.

"Is it alright to come in?"

"Zoé?"

The almost shy exchange of meaningful glances between the two was not lost on Nathan who rose as the Englishwoman crossed the room and hastily made his excuses to leave. Leaning close to the Texan he squeezed his shoulder and whispered:

"Two's company, brother. Guess I'll hold off on getting that medication, huh?"

"Guess so." Vin paused for a moment. "Just not for too long, okay?"

Zoé, he noticed, still wore the clothes she had trekked through the mountains in, with the addition of Ezra's wind cheater and a few stains which he thought might be his blood but as she leaned down to plant a light kiss on his undamaged cheek he could smell the clean, woodsy scent of freshly shampooed hair which now tumbled loosely around her shoulders. As she moved away her lips brushed his ear, successfully concealing her next words from Nathan.

"You know it's all your fault that I still have no underwear and it's bloody uncomfortable!"

Smiling innocently she sat down in the chair Nathan had vacated and casually crossed her legs while Tanner struggled to maintain his composure knowing that to let the laughter which threatened to erupt actually surface was to invite in the very pain in that he was trying to keep at bay. Cradling his ribs he managed a few short spasms of laughter which he finally overcame with minimal impact to his injuries.

"You," he accused, when his breathing was once again under control, "have a mean streak in you."

Apparently remorseful that she had been the cause of furthering his pain she reached out and put a hand on his chest but at best she only managed a back-handed apology.

"Sorry. But you deserved that, Tanner." She tipped her head to one side in critical appraisal. "I promise not to do that anymore though until you're fit enough to fight back. I don't want to take unfair advantage."

"I'd appreciate that. Don't you know it's understood that you don't kick a man when he's down?"

Zoé gently rubbed her hand across his exposed chest, an action Vin found curiously comforting although the sensation it caused in the pit of his stomach led him to believe that it might be unwise for her to continue for too long.

"Maybe you should have told those bikers that."

For a moment he thought he was going to be sick as in his mind he relived the moment when the fist, armoured in brass, connected with his face and he felt the pain exploding in his head while unseen assailants systematically beat him to a pulp. He squeezed his eyes shut and fought the rising nausea, unconsciously seeking Zoé's hand which he gripped with an intense desperation until gradually both the vision and the nausea passed.

"Vin!"

He opened his eyes and was shocked to find Zoé leaning over him pale and obviously worried.

"Jesus, you scared me. Are you alright?" She answered her own question, her voice revealing her irritation. "Of course you're not alright! Shall I get someone?"

He shook his head and tried to regulate his breathing so it didn't send wave after wave of pain through his cracked ribcage.

"No. I'll be fine. Just give me a minute."

He inched painfully onto his right side, from experience knowing that actually lying on the side of his damaged ribs eased the discomfort. Zoé fussed and adjusted his pillows finally sitting on the bed behind him and soothingly rubbing his back with one hand while with the other she reached to press the call bell.

By the time the nurse returned with Vin's scheduled analgesia, he was more than willing to be stuck with as many hypodermics, and in any part of his anatomy deemed necessary, as it would take to rid him of the once again relentless pain. It still amazed him how quickly the transition from relative comfort to screaming agony could be and made a resolution not to be so damned stubborn in future.

Zoé continued her gentle massage letting Vin know she was still there. The nurse flicked the screen around the bed then, glancing at Zoé, paused.

"If you'd like to wait..."

The Englishwoman raised her head, a slightly puzzled expression on her face until she realised what the nurse was suggesting.

"I'm not going anywhere. Just give him the injection."

"I don't think..."

"For God's sake," snapped Zoé, "I've seen his butt before. Just give it!"

The nurse shrugged, obviously not happy about having a spectator but nevertheless quickly administering the analgesia and just as quickly leaving after drawing back the screens again.

Vin turned his head to look at Zoé over his shoulder.

"You are such a liar," he accused sleepily, "When did you ever see my butt?"

She slid a hand around to his chest and for a moment paused in rubbing his back.

"Remember at the river...?"

He looked over his shoulder, feigning offence.

"That's taking an unfair advantage."

She smiled and lowered her voice.

"Well, now I've seen it twice." Resting her cheek against his shoulder she slipped her hand under the sheet and let it slide easily over his hip. "And a very nice butt it is too."

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Buck slid further down in the passenger seat of the Ram and threw a cautious glance at the man beside him piloting the vehicle. Chris was in one of those dark, introspective moods that made a man, even a man such as Buck Wilmington, think twice about making conversation. In his present state of mind the wrong word could set a body to thinking it might have been more prudent to just go out and stir up a nest of diamond-back rattlers with a stick.

Wilmington had not been surprised at Chris' cantankerous attitude on waking in the hospital waiting room; after all he'd been feeling a might ornery himself. They had all spent an uncomfortable night which coming as it did after a particularly harrowing day left everyone in less than the best of spirits. Now as the Dodge powered back up the mountain towards the cabin, Buck couldn't help but feel that there was something he had missed along the way. They had left the hospital early, and in a stroke of good luck had actually managed to find a replacement wheel for the Suburban. Certainly Chris hadn't appreciated his advice that they would need a complete wheel not just a tyre unless he had plans on working half the day with a pair of tyre levers...hell, that wasn't anything to get pissed about. He chanced another glance in Larabee's direction.

"Somethin' on your mind, Buck?"

The slow, quiet growl didn't come out so much as a question but rather a demand.

"What?"

"I said, is there somethin' on your mind? You've been angling that sideways look in my direction for the last ten miles."

"Somethin' on *my* mind? Hell, Chris. You're the one who's been actin' like a grizzly with a toothache since we left town."

"Can't a man take some time to think?"

Buck straightened in his seat.

"From where I'm sitting I reckon there's a mighty fine line between thinking and being downright hostile."

Chris glanced away from the road for a moment, a familiar feral glint in his eyes.

"I know you and I go back a long way, Buck..."

Wilmington knew exactly what was coming but decided to ignore the implicit warning in Larabee's tone and carry on regardless.

"And that's exactly why I can tell that you're worryin' something to death like a hound dog with a piece of gristle - can't swallow it, can't spit it out - but if you don't do one or th'other pretty soon it's gonna stick right in your craw and choke you."

"Thank you, old buddy for that bit of homespun philosophy. Now shut the fuck up and stay out of my business."

Buck took a deep breath. Too late to bail out now, he'd stirred up the rattler's nest and would have to rely on some fancy footwork if he wanted to escape the encounter with his hide at least still partially intact.

"Shoot, Chris. You reckon you're the only one who gives a flying fuck about what happens to the team! We're all in this together, remember? This is not the time to be going solo."

Chris' hands tightened on the wheel and Buck silently gave thanks for the fact that keeping the car under control won over Larabee's obvious desire to punch out his lights. He barely hesitated in upping the ante by throwing in his wild card.

"That little lady sure gets under your skin doesn't she, Chris? Like a burr under a saddle blanket. Hell, she's already got Ezra tamed and Vin's as happy as a dog with two dicks."

Wilmington was prepared for a reaction but he did not expect the sudden deceleration as Larabee stood on the brakes and was thankful he had remembered to fasten his seatbelt otherwise he would have been launched headfirst through the windshield. In a detached way he also considered it fortunate that the ATF had a dental plan as he believed with absolute certainty that if Chris had his way he was about to part company with a number of his teeth. The big Dodge shuddered to a halt and both men exited the vehicle; one calmly resigned to his fate the other a walking time bomb with a short fuse.

"You've got a big mouth, Buck."

Wilmington could see Chris' hands clenched into fists and wondered if it would actually come to that. He had the advantage in size but from experience he knew Chris had the advantage of pure meanness and he sure as hell didn't want to put it to the test. It was a fight neither of them could hope to win in the end.

"Is that what you want, Chris? A fight?" He shifted his weight slightly squaring his shoulders in anticipation. "Is that how you're gonna deal with whatever it is that's crawled up your ass? You wanna see more blood this weekend?"

Wilmington braced himself as he saw the flicker in Larabee's eyes. *Shit!*

The sound Chris' fist made smashing into the Ram's front fender as he channelled his anger away from his friend made Buck flinch; the resulting dent made him glad that same fist had not after all connected with him. He waited as Chris hunched over the damaged fender until the sudden droop of his shoulders signalled voluntary capitulation. When the blond head turned slowly to look at him and Buck saw the feral light was gone and with it the anger, only then did he move forward. He wished for a moment that Josiah was there - he always seemed to know just what to say to put things in perspective. Right now he just felt plain stupid for having provoked Chris to such extreme measures and now was wondering how he could possibly reverse the situation. The sight of the blood slowly dripping from Chris' right hand onto the blacktop prompted him to action and he added to his wish for Josiah's mediation skills the medical talents of Nathan. Without a second thought he pulled a handkerchief from his back pocket. Chris hissed through clenched teeth as Buck tended his injured knuckles.

"Well, if you wanted blood, now you've got it. 'Cept it's your own; for which I'm truly grateful. Anyone ever tell you you're a mean bastard Larabee?"

"Only you," he grunted, swearing colourfully as Wilmington took a closer look at his now rapidly swelling hand.

"Y'know Chris, I reckon it's a good thing we'll be heading back to the hospital real soon."

"Why's that?"

"'Cause I think you just busted your hand."

"Yep, I'd say that's busted alright." Josiah looked up from his inspection of Chris' loosely clenched fist.

"Best get some ice on it."

Uncharacteristically meek, Larabee silently allowed the big man to usher him inside to the kitchen where with typical Sanchez practicality he hunted in the freezer and returned with a pack of frozen peas which he moulded over the damaged hand with surprising gentleness.

"I'm not even going to ask how this happened," he rumbled in his usual even-tempered fashion and Chris wondered if Buck would think him such a mean bastard if he knew that Josiah had the capacity to make him feel like a headstrong and obstinate kid.

"It happened, Josiah, because I'm a stupid, mule-headed, mean spirited son of a bitch who sometimes has trouble seeing what's right in front of him."

Sanchez patted his shoulder without the slightest change in expression as he moved away to join the others.

"Don't worry, son, your secret's safe with me."

Chris flexed his fingers just to remind himself of the reality of the pain. There was no one to hear his barely whispered bitter recrimination.

"And who forgets what friends are for."

You ready to talk or should I leave now and take my beer with me?"

Larabee had the grace to look abashed as Buck lowered himself onto the stoop where the blond man had retreated to metaphorically lick his wounds and handed over an already opened can of beer. Chris accepted the offering with his uninjured hand and took a long swallow before responding.

"You should've just taken me out, Buck. You've had to do it before." He grinned wily. "More than once as I recall."

The mustached agent just grinned back and shook his head.

"Uh uh, not this time, sport. You weren't drunk. 'Sides you didn't need any help from me. You did a passable job of it all on your ownsome."

Chris lifted his head and squinted into the rising sun. He didn't show any immediate inclination to speak further but Wilmington didn't press, instead he leaned back and stretched out his long legs enjoying the sun content to sit in companionable silence.

"I made a bad call, Buck." He paused to drain the last from his beer can. "I made a serious tactical error."

"Hey, it wasn't your fault that Vin and Zoé walked into a band of Hell's Angels. That wasn't in anybody's gameplay."

Larabee tilted his head to one side and frowned.

"I didn't mean that."

It was Wilmington's turn to be puzzled. *What the hell was Chris going on about?*

"Then what?"

"I made the mistake of underestimating Zoé."

Oh, that! Yeah, I see where you're coming from now, pard. Guessed that little filly had somethin' to do with settin' a firecracker under you." Buck's resultant friendly slap on the back and hearty laughter brought a scowl to Larabee's face. "No offence, Chris, but you just don't know how to handle women. Hell, reckon

you're just steamed because she had the bal...the nerve to go toe to toe with you and managed to put a dent in the old ego."

He hesitated a moment, judging Chris' receptiveness - after all he still had a good left hand -- and decided to plough on.

"In case you hadn't noticed Zoé has been bustin' a gut for the best part of a month to prove she can cut it."

"Don't you think I know that?"

"Come on, Chris. She's doin' okay. In fact, better than okay. Reckon at least Vin can see that now but I'm not so sure that you can. Cut her some slack."

Larabee sighed.

"Damn it, Buck. She was right! I tried to control something that should've been left alone. Now instead of an ally I have an enemy."

"Don't know about an enemy, Chris, but you sure grabbed the tiger by the tail."

"And you know the worst part of all this? Zoé thinks I doubted her, but it was never about her, it was about Vin."

Buck didn't allow the surprise at Larabee's unexpected revelation to register on his face maintaining a neutral expression of which even Ezra would have been proud, but with those few words the final piece of the puzzle slipped effortlessly into place. *It was about Vin.*

"Tell me if I've got this right. You set Vin up. Zoé thinks you set her up. Now they're good buddies and you're...you're fucked, man."

"You got it, Buck."

Chris sat on the examination couch, his gaze wandering from the poster on the opposite wall recommending regular breast examination to the metal trolley stacked, it seemed, with enough medical supplies to cater for a small war -- or he mused, a weekend visit from an ATF team. He rested his hand, palm up on his thigh and tried not to think how the Denver controller was going to react when he found out that several of his agents were not going to be reporting for duty on Monday morning. Still, he'd always wondered what a posting would be like in Alaska.

"You want the good news or the bad news first?"

Nathan, looking suitably business-like and carrying an envelope of x-rays, strode into the cubicle and proceeded to attach two films to the light box.

"You mean there *is* good news?" responded Larabee sarcastically.

Jackson frowned.

"Only that the damage isn't worse, " he countered, obviously unimpressed that Chris has managed to injure himself, then pointed to a spot on the x-ray, "See this?"

Chris peered at the negative image, seeing certainly what looked like five fingers and a hand but the subtle nuances of light and shadow were lost on him.

"It's what used to be the central metacarpal."

Larabee switched his gaze back to Nathan focusing on the phrase 'used to be' and waited for the rest of

what he knew was still to come.

"This here is now a comminuted fracture of the metacarpal head; right below that is also a fracture of the central carpal bone. These are typical of what we call a closed-fist injury." He turned a disapproving look on his boss. "So do you mind telling me just what you punched?"

Chris fidgeted again wondering how both Josiah and Nathan could at times make him feel like an unruly child.

"The Ram."

Jackson sighed and rolled his eyes.

"Well, it's a darn sight easier to replace a panel than it is to fix this, so I guess you lost the fight."

"And this is the good news?"

"No and it gets worse. You need surgery."

Chris started to get down from the couch. This was not happening to him.

"Forget it, Nate. It doesn't feel so bad. Just strap it up."

Jackson's hand descended firmly on Larabee's shoulder and physically prevented him from moving.

"Listen to me, Chris. You walk out of here now and your career with the Bureau will be as good as over. That's your gun hand, and I can guarantee unless it's wired back together real soon you won't be doing any more shooting -- ever! As it is there's a chance you'll lose some flexibility."

"Since you put it that way, what choice do I have?"

Nathan finally grinned wolfishly.

"None. You're lucky they have a great orthoped here who's on his way right now. Okay, when did you last eat?"

Ezra shook his head slowly in disbelief as he slowly turned to face Buck.

"Mr. Wilmington, are you telling me that we are to endure another night in this loathsome backwater because Mr. Larabee unwisely chose to argue with a rather large immovable object?"

"That's right. Unless you want to go back up to the cabin."

Standish cast a glance around the waiting room and brushed a microscopic piece of lint from his slacks.

"In case you have forgotten Mr. Wilmington there is only one vehicle. I, for one, do not plan on commuting the twenty miles between this sorry excuse for a town and the little house on the prairie."

"Then I guess you'll be staying right here with the rest of us."

Ezra laughed softly.

"On the contrary, Mr. Wilmington. I intend to arrange alternative accommodation post-haste in the nearest hostelry where I can at least take a bath, indulge in the fine cuisine this rustic hamlet has to offer and sleep in a real bed."

"From what I hear, Ezra, you had no trouble finding yourself a bed last night."

Zoé looked away, her cheeks flaming while the others turned in mute surprise at the insult, recognising that it was a low blow even for Buck.

The Southerner's expression remained impassive but his emerald eyes glittered dangerously.

"I shall treat that remark with the contempt it deserves, Mr. Wilmington. I shall also ignore the

embarrassment you have caused Zoé with your insulting innuendo. If I believed for even one moment that your intent was in any way malicious, or for that matter directed against Zoé rather than myself, I would take great pleasure in having the opportunity to reduce you to a bloody pulp." He deliberately turned his back on the bigger man and offered his arm to Zoé. "If anyone else would care to join us? Mr. Dunne? Mr. Sanchez?"

J.D. rose and cast a disappointed and disgusted look at Buck.

"Actually that sounds great, Ezra. I'm beat. Come on, Zoé."

Buck took a step forward as the trio turned towards the exit but Josiah, moving with surprising agility quickly interceded.

"I think you've done more than enough damage already, Buck. Now I'm going to ask you to sit down and I'd appreciate it if at the same time you'd shut up."

Wilmington strained for a moment against the larger man but ultimately decided on the more prudent course of non-violence and twisting out of Josiah's grasp threw himself into the nearest chair.

The three agents moved as one unit through the hospital, J.D. falling into step on the Southerner's left while Zoé strode determinedly on his right. To all intents and purposes Ezra appeared as cool and collected as ever but Dunne now knew the man well enough to understand that it was merely a façade, and beneath the perfectly composed exterior lay a dangerous predator. As if by mutual consent none of them spoke until they were free of the building and standing together in the emergency drop zone.

Standish glanced around at the numerous parked cars and moved to pull out his cell phone.

"A cab I believe may be in order unless of course you prefer to indulge in a midday stroll through this fine municipality."

"That's not what you said a few minutes ago," pointed out Dunne ingenuously, "Something about a sorry excuse for a town."

Ezra cocked a critical eyebrow in the younger man's direction as he dialled.

"Humour me, Mr. Dunne. Have you never before encountered artistic license?"

Standish slipped the gold card back into its slot and tucked his wallet into the inner pocket of his leather jacket, wondering if he could finagle this as a legitimately deductible expense, and accepted the key from the receptionist.

"Suite 205, Mr. Standish. Enjoy your stay."

Ezra nodded his thanks and returned to where he had left Zoé and J.D. in the foyer.

"I declare that woman believed me to be procuring accommodation for the purpose of engaging in some kind of perverted menage a trois. So if you two could try to look a little less like escapees from juvie hall and start walking I would certainly appreciate it."

Dunne grinned broadly and draped a friendly arm around the Southerner's shoulders.

"Just be thankful we're not in Utah."

Nimble evading the younger man's embrace Standish moved in front of the single elevator and pressed the call button.

"Utah?"

"It's illegal in that state to co-habit with a person of the opposite gender unless you're married."

The doors swished open with a hiss of pneumatics and the three of them stepped into the car.

"Mr. Dunne, your capacity for retaining vast quantities of trivia never ceases to amaze me."

Josiah collected two cups of coffee from the machine and wordlessly offered one to Buck. The mustached agent hesitated then, recognising the conciliatory gesture for what it was, took the cup and drank. Sanchez stood for a moment and stared pensively out of the window at the mountains.

"Beautiful day isn't it?"

Buck's eyes stared into the same distance but saw only the parking lot and the stationery cars.

"Ain't been what I'd call beautiful so far."

Josiah kept his gaze straight ahead.

"Well, Buck. Seems to me that's just because you're in the mood to see the glass as being half empty."

Wilmington sculled his coffee. As much as he liked Josiah he had the feeling that he was about to be on the receiving end of one of his famous morality tales of which he seemed to possess an endless supply.

"Is this going to be one of those conversation where you tell me what a hard-headed, loud-mouthed, ill-mannered jackass I can be?"

Josiah laughter rumbled deep in his chest.

"You don't need me to tell you something you already know, Buck."

Wilmington was silent for a moment. Although he had no intention of making Sanchez his confessor he had been feeling an uncomfortable combination of outrage, betrayal and guilt since J.D., Ezra and Zoé had left. Betrayal because J.D. had turned his back on him, guilt because while he had started out with the intention to wound he knew he had missed his target and stuck it to Zoé instead, and outrage because Ezra had as usual so easily turned the situation to his own advantage with his smooth talking. Sometimes he'd like to ram that attitude of his right down his superior Southern gullet.

"You know I didn't mean to hurt Zoé."

Sanchez settled a bear-like paw on Buck's shoulder.

"You think I don't know that, son? I reckon she knows it too. But you're lucky Ezra isn't running on a short fuse."

"Fuck Ezra!" The words were almost whispered but stated with such quiet intensity that Josiah turned sharply to look at the often volatile but normally even tempered Wilmington.

"Ezra? From where I was standing Ezra was just attempting to make the most of a bad situation."

Buck snorted derisively.

"And what's new about that?"

Josiah moved away slightly.

"You get any sleep last night, Buck?"

Wilmington glanced quickly at Sanchez, puzzled by the sudden change in subject.

"Some. Chris, Nate and me snatched a few hours in here."

"And while you were catching a few zees do you know what Ezra was doing?" Before Buck could reply Josiah pressed on. "Contrary to what you seem to think, Ezra stayed with Zoé just to help her get through

the night. As far as anyone knows he never closed his eyes while Zoé slept."

"Is that supposed to impress me, Josiah? It was an all-round crappy night for everyone."

"Agreed, but don't blame Ezra for doing what any sensible person would do under the circumstances. In case you've forgotten this isn't Denver and there's no chance for anyone to catch a few hours respite by going home. I can guarantee that Ezra cares as much about Chris and Vin as you do but if I'm reading things right he was almost ready to crash and burn; so he chose the most reasonable option. If you recall, the invitation was open to everyone and I, for one will be taking advantage of it as soon as Nathan gets back -- just the same as J.D did."

Wilmington sighed and allowed some of the tension to seep from his muscles.

"You sure know how to hit a man below the belt, don't you?"

"Don't know about hitting below the belt, Buck. I just try to tell the truth as I see it." Josiah threw a muscular arm around Wilmington and shook his head slowly. "Now maybe you should consider why J.D. chose to side with Ezra on this one."

Buck nodded taking Josiah's point.

"Because I was a loud-mouthed, ill-mannered, insensitive horse's ass. That boy's definitely gettin' more sense."

Sanchez dug in his pocket and casually tossed the keys to the Chevy in his direction.

"Reckon you might be needing these. Best Western on Main, suite 205."

Buck snatched the keys out of the air and slowly weighed them in his palm, before nodding and abruptly striding away.

Zoé curled comfortably in the corner of one of the two sofas wrapped in a hotel bathrobe and sipping a cup of tea while JD sprawled full length on the adjacent sofa having fallen asleep while surfing through the cable channels on the TV. With impressive efficiency Ezra had arranged for Zoé's clothes to be laundered, ordered room service, called both Josiah at the hospital and then, at his suggestion, followed up with a call to the Denver ATF offices. Zoé smiled in recollection of his conversation with the Section Supervisor. Apparently Ezra had been the preferred choice for the task as he was deemed the only one with the creative skills necessary to concoct for their immediate superiors a suitably believable story that would cover their combined asses and explain why the eight Bureau agents would be missing in action the next day. After listening to the Southerner at work she could appreciate why. That done he had finally stretched out on the King size bed and promptly gone to sleep. That had been three hours ago and Standish had shown no sign of movement since.

She launched herself from the sofa as a sharp knock reverberated through the room anxious to answer the door before either man disturbed. She need not have worried; neither Ezra or J.D. showed any signs of having heard a sound. Keeping the security chain in place she cracked the door open a few inches.

"Your laundry, ma'am."

"Buck!" She slipped the chain and opened the door fully. "What on earth are you doing here?"

He stepped over the threshold and handed her a plastic-wrapped package.

"Delivering your laundry."

She accepted the bundle, relieved that at last she had her clothes back but unsure that Buck was the kind of visitor she needed, and closed the door behind him.

"I can see that but you're certainly the last person I expected to see right now."

Buck moved past her and into the dimly lit room. The curtains blocked out the late afternoon sunlight and apart from the flickering illumination from the TV there were only two bedside lamps burning. She was sure she detected an audible release of breath when he saw Ezra sleeping and realised what it had probably taken for Wilmington to present himself like this.

"Zoé..."

She rested a gentle hand on his arm.

"Just give me a minute to get dressed. Help yourself to a drink."

She disappeared into the bathroom and Buck spent a moment looking around the impressive suite. Typically Ezra! Nothing but the best. Buck stopped, mentally berating himself and headed for the wet bar where he poured a generous measure of whiskey over ice. Sitting down he looked at Dunne sleeping peacefully on the opposite sofa. *Kid looks dead beat.* He looked across at the bed. *Ezra looks just plain dead.* He couldn't believe it was Sunday already. Most of Saturday had dissolved into a nightmarish blur and the last time he had felt remotely like himself had been Friday on the trip up to the mountains. Now he just felt drained.

When Zoé returned she was dressed in jeans, which retained only slight evidence of their rough treatment the day before, and a white shirt over a navy t-shirt. She had also pulled her hair into a braid and looked more like 21 than the 31 he knew her to be. Sitting down next to him she pulled on her boots and started pulling the laces tight.

"Zoé," he began again, "I'm sorry. I didn't mean..."

She paused in tying her laces and her head snapped up.

"Yes you did! You meant to be hurtful." Her expression softened slightly. "But I know your intention wasn't to hurt me. You were striking out at Ezra and I just happened to be in the way. Right?"

Buck suddenly found she had kicked his feet out from under him and left him with nothing to say.

"Right. I *am* trying to apologise."

She stamped her foot and adjusted the lacings.

"Yes, well it seems this trip has brought out the bastard in everyone. I'm surprised you've managed to stay together as a team this long."

Buck took a drink to hide his smile. *Sparky little thing ain't she?*

"It's a guy thing."

"Then God preserve me if I have another five months of this to endure."

Sighing suddenly she leaned forward and planted a kiss on his cheek.

"Give me the car keys, I'm going back to the hospital. I suggest you stay here and hit the sack."

He reached into his pocket for the keys, knowing there was no value in arguing with this woman.

"Zoé," he tried again, "I really am sorry."

She patted his knee and stood up.

"I know you are, Buck. Just be sure you tell that to Ezra too." She crossed the room with an energetic

stride that made him tired just to watch and swiped Ezra's jacket from the chair. "And tell him I borrowed his jacket."

Zoé eased the big SUV into a parking space and killed the engine feeling as if she had just manoeuvred an eighteen wheel tractor-trailer into position. Why Americans were obsessed with such enormous vehicles she couldn't imagine, while silently giving thanks for the benefits of power steering. Making no immediate move to get out of the Suburban, she instead relaxed against the seat enjoying for a moment the sensation of absolute solitude. She glanced at the clock on the ruined dashboard. 18.23. They should all have been on their way back to Denver by now but they would be spending at least one more night on the mountain and she doubted that even Ezra could persuade the Section Supervisor to extend their leave any further than that. Come Tuesday the able-bodied members of the unit would be expected back at their respective desks and functioning as normal, although she seriously doubted if anything about Team 7 could be described as normal.

How complicated everything had become. In the space of a few days her perceptions had subtly shifted and she was now finding it hard to get a handle on her feelings. It was no longer possible for her to try and just be one of the guys; both Vin and Ezra had seen to that but the last thing she wanted was to lose the definition between her personal and professional conduct, and right now she felt the line was becoming a little indistinct. Whether she could avoid it was going to be a problem, whether she wanted to was an even bigger one.

Then there was Chris. She had not spoken to him since her outburst at the cabin, and while she remembered that he had come after her the rest was a vague memory. She had told Ezra that she would have to face her demons alone but in truth Larabee scared her. This man was dark, deep and mysterious with something dangerous lurking below the surface -- a bit like Loch Ness she thought, smiling at the mental imagery. Unlike any man she had ever known he exuded raw power. Quietly intense she knew he was a person who could make either the greatest ally or the worst enemy and his view of the world seemed to swing between intense black or stark white with no room for any subtler shadings of grey in between.

Zoé sighed and removed the keys from the ignition. A confrontation with Larabee was to be avoided at all cost; now all she had to do was figure out how to justify her inexcusable behaviour towards him and come out of the encounter still in one piece. Although they had locked horns several times already she doubted that even he would be able to forgive being called a sanctimonious bastard and told to shove his job without some degree of acrimony. She thought back over the past three weeks:

I ought to bust your ass, Elliott!

The last thing I need right now is a pint sized rebel...

You really know how to yank his chain...

We're not in the circus...

Maybe she should just pack up and leave now.

With a sigh of resignation she reached for the door handle and jumped as she realised someone was leaning against the front fender. Josiah! She had been so self-absorbed that she hadn't even noticed him approach. How long had he been standing there? Her eye flickered to the dashboard clock. 18:45. She had been sitting in the parking lot for over twenty minutes. Self-consciously, she climbed down from the

Suburban and slammed the door shut.

"Sorry, Josiah. I didn't see you there. Have you been waiting long?"

Sanchez straightened.

"No problem. Everyone needs a little time alone to reflect, Zoé."

She handed him the car keys.

"I guess you should have these back."

Josiah laughed and started to walk away from the vehicle.

"Just in case you decide to make a break for it, huh?"

She smiled wanly and fell into step beside him.

"That's closer to the truth than you know, Josiah. The road out of town was looking very tempting."

He slowed and draped a comforting arm around her shoulders.

"Just remember it's a very lonely road."

She dug her hands deep into the pockets of Ezra's jacket and they walked in silence for several minutes.

"How's Chris?"

"Miserable." He laughed as if he found that concept amusing. "Meaner than a wounded polecat and as mad as hell."

Zoé's shoulders slumped. *Great!* Josiah halted abruptly and looked down at her curiously.

"Something you want to talk about?" When she didn't answer he continued. "I'm a very good listener."

She hesitated only briefly before nodding and Sanchez slowed his pace so they could both walk and talk.

"You know," she mused thoughtfully, "My Dad always used to call me his little Firecracker, because he said I was always exploding! Said I should come with a hazard warning. I've worked hard at controlling my temper but occasionally someone comes along who manages to light the fuse and off I go again."

"Chris?"

"But I always end up regretting what I've said in anger so I don't know why I can't just learn to keep my mouth shut!" she continued as if Josiah had not spoken. "This time I really excelled myself though. Normally I have enough sense not to alienate my superiors -- it generally avoids the inconvenience of having to find a new job -- but I actually called my boss a manipulating bastard!

"Among other things. Don't forget Machiavellian, son of a bitch and, I believe, sanctimonious came in there somewhere."

She hung her head smiling tightly.

"You're laughing at me now," she accused but without rancour.

"Believe me Zoé, you have my deepest respect. You are possibly the only person in recorded history to call out Chris Larabee and escape unscathed."

"You call this unscathed? I'm a wreck! And I'm afraid to even face Chris now. He must think I'm the worst kind of bitch and I'll be lucky if I don't find myself transferred to another unit as soon as my feet touch Denver again."

"Do you really believe that?"

"I don't know, Josiah. Why would he want me on his team when I've openly challenged his authority and then put the boot in for good measure."

Josiah finally stopped and turned to stand in front of her.

"If it makes you feel any better Chris blames himself for what happened yesterday."

"What?"

"For good or bad, Zoé, you've done what I didn't believe was possible. You've made Chris doubt himself."

She stared away into the distance, her eye roving to encompass the mountains on the horizon and moving progressively back towards the harsh reality of the brick building of the hospital.

"God, what have I done," she sighed, "And what am I going to do?"

Sanchez placed both his hands on her shoulders and gave a reassuring squeeze.

"I think you two need to talk."

Zoé chewed thoughtfully on her lip, indecision etched clearly on her face then after a moment she squared her shoulders and raised her incredibly blue eyes, fixing the older man with her determined gaze.

"You're right. I think we do."

Chris reclined against the pillows, his right arm supported upright in a suspension sling, still nauseous from the after-effects of the anaesthetic but no longer drowsy. He had to admit that he had felt better, although on the upside he had to concede he had also felt a damn sight worse. Such as his last period of enforced rest when, six months before, he had been shot during a bust. He winced at the memory: caught in cross-fire one bullet had flukishly entered his left armpit, collapsed a lung and torn his subclavian artery while a second had angled under his body armour tearing into his right groin, travelling a destructive path through his lower abdomen and exiting finally through his left hip. Compared to that little incident, which had earned him several days in intensive care, the damage he had done to his hand was small potatoes. This time though he had no one to blame but himself and that one basic, indisputable fact was causing him more torment than any physical pain he might be enduring. *Damn it, he had lost control!*

He turned his head as the door opened cautiously then gradually widened as if the person was afraid of disturbing him. Recognising the expensive leather jacket that Ezra, in typical fashion, had chosen in his concession to casual attire, Chris was about to speak but the words died on his lips as he realised his mistake. Elliott's slight figure slowly materialised from the shadows to stand uneasily beside his bed, arms folded across her chest in an unconsciously defensive posture.

"I didn't wake you did I?"

Chris, not wanting to make it any more obvious how much she had thrown him off balance just by being there, finally cleared his throat and found his voice.

"No. Just been lying here thinking."

A ghost of a smile played across her lips.

"Seems there's a lot of that going on. I just spent twenty minutes sitting in the car park doing the same thing."

For a moment they both fell silent, neither completely comfortable with each other to be sure of what the next step should be.

"I tried to see you last night," began Chris eventually after an awkward pause, "but you were asleep and...I couldn't make it past your bodyguard."

Zoé nodded slowly. Ezra. In a way she was glad he had been able to keep to wolf from the door till she was better able to deal with it. Him.

"I heard how you broke your hand."

Chris nodded slowly in turn, having no great desire to discuss his folly further.

"Dumb thing to do," he growled, self-conscious in the admission.

Zoé plunged her hands into the pockets of her jeans and took a step forward.

"Chris..." she stopped and nervously ran her fingers through her hair, "Christ, how hard can this be?" She started again. "Chris, I owe you an apology."

Larabee looked at her for a moment, expression unreadable then he frowned slightly.

"For what?"

Zoé's shoulders slumped. He was going to make it hard for her.

"For behaving like an undisciplined, unprofessional, hysterical bitch."

Larabee's frosty countenance relaxed into a barely suppressed smile.

"Oh, that. Quite a performance. I've been called a lot of things in my time but never sanctimonious."

She narrowed her eyes and searched his face having difficulty gauging his reaction.

"You don't have the monopoly on doing something dumb, you know."

At that he actually did smile.

"Come and sit here, Zoé. That's if you can put your hackles down for a minute. You're making me feel like a rabbit in a trap."

After a slight hesitation she moved forward and did as he asked, not entirely at ease in such close proximity to the man of whom she stood in professional awe yet had publicly vilified.

"You? A rabbit! Fat chance. Maybe a weasel!"

"Okay, a weasel," he conceded, "Probably a more fitting description considering your opinion of me."

She hung her head again, knowing that he was deliberately pushing her buttons and wondering what he expected her to say.

"I did mean what I said about you manipulating people," she confessed finally, "Every word."

"I know you did."

"But I'm sorry about the way I said it."

Larabee shook his head; if he lived another hundred years he would never understand women. Only a woman would draw a distinction like that. She had no qualms about cursing him out but she worried about the way she had said it? *Sarah was like that.* He pushed the thought aside and concentrated on how he was going to deal with this firebrand.

"You think I tried to set you up to fail, don't you? That the purpose behind the whole exercise was to prove you couldn't make the cut and that the reason you were paired with Vin was to make the distinction even more obvious?"

Zoé didn't answer, confusion and suspicion evident in her eyes. For some reason when Chris put it into words it sounded not only petty and egocentric but more than a little paranoid. She considered the possibility that she had been fighting her way through the ranks of a masculine dominated and essentially chauvinistic industry for so long that her perceptions had narrowed to a point where she could see only subterfuge and

deceit. Indeed the very scenario Larabee was describing was one she had encountered and had to overcome many times in the past. Only now she was beginning to get the uncomfortable feeling that those past experiences had prejudiced her view and that she had created a hidden agenda in her own mind when none had truly existed. An anticipatory feeling of dread for what Larabee was going to say next sent a chill through her and she realised that if she allowed herself the luxury of misery, that she would start to cry. Bracing herself she finally met Chris' eyes, surprised that the steely hardness she had come to expect was not there. Instead it was like looking at the same man but with some of the edges blurred --not soft, she could not yet imagine that -- still and all there was a subtle difference about him.

"The bet I made with Vin just proved to you that the guys were playing games again at your expense. Right?"

This time Zoé nodded, not trusting her voice and wishing Larabee would get to the point. So far he had managed to put all her fears and suspicions into words and in throwing them back at her, reduce them to something without substance.

Chris shifted slightly, a shadow of something -- pain? disappointment? sorrow? -- flickering in his eyes as he adjusted his arm in the sling. She realised then that she had never heard Chris talk at length before. Larabee, like most of his gender, was a man of action rather than words and she guessed that extended periods of dialogue were not his forté. The fact that he was also injured and out of his traditional environment would not be making the present situation any easier. At that moment Zoé saw a different Chris Larabee to the ATF Team 7 leader she had been working alongside for several weeks; she hoped he might be able to see a different Zoé Elliott before they were through.

"Before I go any further I want you to understand one thing, Zoé. I have always had every faith in your abilities as far as this job goes. Make no mistake about this, if I hadn't you wouldn't still be on this team but it's been a rough few weeks for everyone."

Zoé finally felt she could speak.

"You know something, Chris? I feel like I spend my life going through a continuous initiation ceremony; jumping through hoops just so that my peers can make sure I measure up to their expectations. My career path consists of working twice as hard, for twice as long to gain half the advantage. If I try to be "one of the boys" I'm a threat; if on the other hand I try the feminine approach I'm accused of trying to gain an advantage by using my sex as a lever. It's a no win situation. At best I'm tolerated, at worst I'm transferred. I'm used to it now but forgive me if in this instance I jumped to the wrong conclusion!"

Chris considered her words, carefully appraising this very much unknown quantity sitting on his bed. True, women field agents were still few and he couldn't begin to imagine how difficult it would be for someone like Zoé to compete in a predominantly male world. He knew something of Zoé's history from her file and she had qualifications and experience that surpassed some of the best in his own team. She had accomplished something of a minor miracle in being selected to represent Her Majesty's Customs and Excise on a twelve month tour of duty in the US yet here she was, a bundle of insecurity, a victim of her own success.

"You could try being yourself."

She smiled at him then. A genuine smile that brightened her face and added depth to her eyes.

“God, no!” she exclaimed in mock horror, “We all need a defence to hide behind. Even you.”

She had him there. No comeback. Time to change the subject.

“Tell me. How do you feel about Vin?”

“Now?”

Chris nodded and Zoé noticed the shadow of pain cross his eyes again.

“I think he’s changed the way he feels about me,” she ventured hesitantly, “I’m still wondering what I did, or he did, to really make that happen. The hike was the catalyst,” she shot an accusatory glance in Larabee’s direction, “but then you knew it would be. Somewhere along the way we arrived at a ‘mutual understanding’ let’s say. I thought he hated me but...”

“But what...?”

She shrugged.

“I don’t know. To be honest, he confuses me.” She chuckled softly. “All I can say is that when we came back down the mountain we were a bloody sight friendlier than when we went up. Then.....after, when he was hurt I just fell apart.” Her voice dropped to a whisper. “I thought those bikers were going to kill him, Chris.”

They both fell silent for a few moments, knowing how close that thought had come to reality. For Chris the contemplation of that particular outcome merely increased his own guilt.

“You know it was Vin who I was testing, not you.”

“Vin?” She couldn’t hide the surprise. Tanner was Chris’ closest friend and confidante.

“I can’t operate with a dysfunctional team and Vin’s attitude towards you was starting to get in the way of his work.” He paused, and Zoé realised he was starting to get tired. “You accused me of being manipulative and you were right. I wanted to force Vin’s hand so I went ahead and started playing God. This weekend is the result: a very big fuck up!”

The bitterness was evident in his voice and Zoé found herself sympathising with the injured blond man; her boss and, she hoped, her friend. Slowly she reached out a small hand and placed it over his.

“I told you already, you don’t have the monopoly on doing something dumb. And you know, if it hadn’t been for the bikers it really would have worked out okay.”

He sighed.

“Zoé, I’ve have three agents -- including myself -- hospitalised this weekend. Vin won’t be fit for active duty for a couple of weeks, Nathan says I could be out of action for a month and you...”

She fingered her jaw.

“Don’t worry about me. I’m fine now.”

“I’m going to have a lot of explaining to do back in Denver.”

Zoé squeezed his fingers reassuringly.

“I wouldn’t worry about that, Chris. Ezra has worked a little of his magic and I don’t think there’ll be too many questions from above.”

Larabee rolled his eyes, wondering what in hell Ezra had managed to pull off but acknowledging at the same time that if someone was going to successfully con the agency it would be the smooth-talking Southerner. He just hoped they wouldn’t live to regret it.

"Great. Now I'm lying to the Bureau as well."

She smiled innocently.

"Not lying, Chris. Just not telling everything."

He looked at her warily, sitting in her too-big borrowed jacket with her hair in braids looking as if butter wouldn't melt in her mouth.

"I think you've been too long around Ezra."

Zoé walked back down the familiar corridor from Larabee's room and smiled, recognising one of the RNs.

"Don't you ever go home?"

"Don't you? We discharge you and you still keep coming back!"

She pushed open the door to Vin's room and quietly moved towards his bed. The IV she noticed had already been removed but the drainage bag from his catheter still hung on the bedframe and it was evident from it that the bleeding from his kidneys had not yet resolved. Her eyes travelled across the smooth expanse of his chest, her stomach rippling uneasily at the sight of the bruises, and then onto his face. Some of the swelling had gone down and his eye was no longer half-closed but the sutures in his cheek looked red and angry and she found herself wondering if it would scar. Finally she bent to smooth back the hair at his temple.

"Vin," she whispered, "It's me, Zoé."

He stirred but did not open his eyes.

"I was just thinking about you. I've been having some really weird dreams..."

Zoé sat carefully on the edge of the bed and leaned over to place a feather-soft kiss on his mouth trying to avoid the sutures for fear of causing him any pain.

"And," he continued, "I think that's how one of them started."

He opened his eyes then and she winced when she saw the sclera of his damaged eye was filled with blood.

"I don't think I want to know how it ended," she joked, forcing a smile.

"It didn't. You woke me up." He shifted his hips so that he was on his back and reached for the control unit to raise the head of the bed. The manoeuvre obviously caused him some discomfort but he seemed to be moving more freely than when she had last seen him. "What time is it?"

"It's a little after six. Sunday evening."

"I think I lost a few hours somewhere.," he complained, moving his head slightly to compensate for his impaired vision and running an appraising eye over her. "Isn't that Ezra's jacket?"

"Mmmm. D'you think it suits me?" She stood up and postured for him accentuating the generous size on her small frame.

"Looks better on him."

She stopped and laughed.

"You're supposed to say it looks better on *me* than it does on *him*."

"I was thinking that you'd look even better out of it."

"Like this you mean?" Slowly and deliberately she let the supple leather slide from her shoulders and fall

to the floor before sitting back on the edge of the bed, her smile suddenly fading.

"I don't know if I really want to ask this, but why the change of heart, Vin?" She turned to look at him earnestly, looking for answers. "I mean, until Friday I got the impression - and correct me if I'm wrong about this - that I didn't rate too highly in your estimation. In fact on a scale of 1 to 10 I think a minus five might be just a touch on the conservative side. And to be honest I thought you were an arrogant and condescending prick, although at least I had the decency not to show it!"

Vin turned his head away suddenly afraid that in her honesty Zoé would sever the slender thread that now tenuously held them together.

"Well, at least one of us got it right."

"No. I don't believe that. Not now. We've been out of step since day one that's all."

Vin sighed and took a deep breath, obviously wanting to say something but struggling with the words.

"Remember the first day you walked into the office?"

She nodded, smiling at the recollection.

"Five guys standing round a coffee machine. Buck almost tripped over his tongue!"

"You made a big impression, Zoé but that was before we all knew you were joining the team. Then it was as if someone had suddenly changed the rules, moved the goal posts. I don't know." He stopped then for a moment as if collecting his thoughts. "Out of seven guys only one was willing to defend you. The rest of us - well you know ..."

"Let me guess." She sighed wistfully. "Ezra. My knight in shining armour even before I knew it."

Tanner fell silent again, then finally summoned the courage to continue.

"You love Ezra, don't you?"

"Of course I do. I love him dearly." She slid closer, turning her back on him to use his shoulder as a headrest. "But I'm not *in* love with him and there lies a subtle and significant distinction. Now, you were saying...?"

"Hey, how 'bout cutting me a little slack here?"

"All right. Let me try. To cut a long story short somewhere along the way you changed your mind and decided I wasn't the bitch queen from hell after all. At about the same time I realised you weren't an obnoxious creep. On the other hand you *were* an absolute bastard but I trusted you to get me safely home; and once we started pulling together it just got easier than forever trying to freeze each other out."

"Close enough."

"So where do we go from here?" She shifted slightly as he slid his arm around her waist. "I mean, you started something on the mountain...but I..." she hesitated, searching for the words.

"Wasn't ready?"

She smiled, then in the way of women switched to a seemingly unrelated topic.

"Do you know that within three seconds of kissing a man a woman's brain can chemically analyse his genetic compatibility and immune system through an exchange of saliva?"

Vin shook his head, slightly bewildered at the rapid change of conversational direction.

"And," she continued, "that if she finds his immune system is weaker than hers, he will be less attractive than a man with a stronger immune system?"

"Sounds romantic, " he commented drily, having caught up with her, "Did I pass?"

"I think I can safely say you have a magnificent immune system," she turned to look at him, raising a hand to touch an unmarked area on his cheek, "however I can't say much about the rest of you right now. This is the face to give little children nightmares."

She sighed and dropped her hand.

"I talked to Chris before I came in here."

Chris? She'd done it again and changed the subject almost without pausing for breath. Vin made the mental adjustment and decided if nothing else, any relationship with Zoé was going to be exhausting -- in more ways than one.

"Should I be relieved or worried?"

Zoé turned quickly, not sure if Vin was even aware that Larabee had been in surgery. She hadn't seen Nathan and Josiah hadn't mentioned talking to Tanner.

"You do know he's in the room down the hall don't you?"

Vin nodded and she relaxed.

"Nathan told me. Chris broke his hand -- and how."

"As you can imagine he's feeling a bit below par right now. Maybe that's how I got away with body and soul still intact."

"You both had me scared, you know. Chris doesn't often blow a gasket but I reckon he came mighty close Saturday and I was sure you were gonna take a swing at him."

"An unfortunate misunderstanding. Now that we've both stopped indulging in either flagellating ourselves or each other we've been able to reach a consensus."

Tanner looked momentarily mystified then finally made sense of the words filtering them as he was through her English accent.

"Zoé, I think you've been around Ezra way too much."

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For some the waking process is a rapid transition from one state of consciousness to another; for others the ability to achieve wakefulness only comes after passing through numerous layers of awareness to reluctantly arrive at a point which could be considered awake. Ezra Standish was definitely one of the latter, who tended to crawl rather than leap out of bed and only then after a carefully considered appraisal of the absolute necessity of rising at all.

Although it was late evening, a time certainly preferable to the obscenity of early morning, Ezra's internal clock was so far askew that it made little difference. While he was accustomed to pulling all-nighters either as part of his undercover work or at the gaming table, the past forty-eight hours had taxed even his remarkable resilience. Now he felt as though he was suffering the worst degree of jet lag imaginable. Had he not discovered an urgent need to use the bathroom, the temptation to turn over and sleep for at least another twelve hours would surely have prevailed. As it was he could ignore the call of nature no longer and finally was forced to make his body do his bidding as reluctant as it was to co-operate. He groaned as he

stretched cramped muscles and finally sat up on the edge of the bed.

"We have lift off!!"

"Hellfire, Ezra. We were about to send you to the mortuary."

It took him a moment to understand why Buck and J.D. were in his bedroom. As if it wasn't bad enough just waking up, the idea of waking up to such boisterous enthusiasm from that particular pair was enough to send him straight back into the arms of Morpheus. Of course, he recalled, this wasn't his bedroom; it was a Best Western motel in a nondescript town in the Colorado Rockies far, far away from his comfortable bed in Denver.

Memory kicking in he looked miserably down at his crumpled clothes. Nino Cerruti no less -- or rather looking at the sad state of his designer jeans and shirt -- no more. Still, his own fault entirely for not being prudent enough to undress. Standing up he crossed to the bathroom wondering if he could navigate the distance without keeping his eyes open.

"Could you two please keep it down to a dull roar. Have some respect for the walking dead."

The bathroom door shut firmly behind the Southerner leaving Buck and J.D. still laughing.

Dunne immediately hit the remote control button for the TV and turned the sound up for while they had both been sure that Ezra was not likely to be disturbed by any noise short of an atomic blast in the room J.D. had nonetheless kept the television muted in deference to the sleeping agent.

"Hey, Buck," remarked J.D. after a moment's thought, his joking quickly giving way to concern, "Even for Ezra straight out of bed he looks pretty wasted!"

"You're not wrong, kid," agreed Wilmington, "You sure he hasn't been drinking?"

"Nothing. He just crashed once everything was under control."

Fifteen minutes later the pair were beginning to exchange worried glances when Ezra showed no immediate signs of emerging from the bathroom. J.D. shrugged at the unspoken question.

"Maybe he's fallen asleep on the can."

Neither man felt completely comfortable with the idea of checking on the Southerner. Some things at least should be private. Finally, unable to contain himself any longer as the minutes continued to tick by, Buck made a move and rapped on the bathroom door.

"Ezra! You okay?"

Silence.

He tried again, straining to hear any sound from within only to be greeted with more silence. No sarcastic response telling him in no uncertain terms where to go, not even the sound of running water to indicate Ezra may be in the shower stall and unable to hear. He tried the handle and it gave under his fingers; at least Ezra hadn't bothered to engage the lock. Buck slowly pushed open the door hoping his actions were not about to result in embarrassment for either himself or Ezra but his instincts were telling him that there was something definitely amiss.

Wilmington scanned the tiled expanse of the en suite. Ezra, dressed only in his underwear, sat on the floor in the angle made by the bath tub and the wall, forearms resting on knees, head resting on forearms. The folded clothing and range of toiletries set out on the vanity suggested Standish had been about to take a shower.

Buck squatted beside the still form and reached out to grasp a well-muscled shoulder.

“Ezra? Talk to me, pard.”

To his relief the tousled head slowly came up but, as if it was too difficult a posture to maintain, the Southerner allowed his head fell back against the wall with a slight thud. The bathroom was cold and Buck could already see the gooseflesh standing out on Ezra’s arms and chest, so it surprised him to see the flush of fever and a fine sheen of perspiration on the man’s face. He definitely looked unwell.

“Okay, buddy. Got to get you up of this floor before you freeze. Can you stand?”

Ezra nodded but once Wilmington had urged the smaller agent to his feet he was forced to support most of his weight. J.D. appearing from nowhere slid into place on the opposite side and between them they guided Ezra back to the bed. Dunne quickly stripped back the covers and Standish sank gratefully into the pillows.

“Thank you, gentlemen,” he breathed, his accent suddenly thick, “I’m much obliged.”

“Jeez, man. What did you do to your leg?”

Both men looked in alarm at the ragged tear in Standish’s mid-thigh and the heated swelling of the surrounding tissue. Buck no longer wondered over his fever or collapse; he might not have Nathan’s medical expertise but he knew with absolute certainty that the Southerner was fighting a raging infection.

Ezra sighed. No one should be expected to talk when they felt as bad as he did.

“A little souvenir of our foray into the wilderness, Mr. Dunne. Merely a scratch I am assured by our esteemed Mr. Jackson.”

Buck lightly touched the periphery of the wound eliciting a grunt from Standish and a vain attempt to move his leg away from Wilmington’s reach.

“Well, it might have been a scratch then but it sure as hell needs attention now.” He rounded on Dunne. “J.D. Want to see if you can raise Nathan and get him over here?”

Ezra reached for the covers and pulled them slowly over his chest.

“Gentlemen,” he slurred, “By all means summon whomever you wish but I prevail upon you to conduct your conversation elsewhere and allow me the courtesy of dying in peace.”

Nathan accompanied by both Josiah and Zoé arrived at the suite some twenty minutes later.

“What took you so long?”

Jackson barely glanced at the agitated Wilmington as he put down the bag he was carrying and started taking items out.

“Had to get a few supplies,” he answered reasonably, not at all fazed by Buck’s agitation, “Needed to get some amoxicillin first up. Had to talk up a storm to get some out of the hospital pharmacy.”

Ezra barely stirred as Jackson pulled aside the bed covers to expose the wound he had so casually dismissed the previous day. Damn! He should have paid more attention and probably would have followed up under normal circumstances but nothing had gone quite according to plan. Ezra’s ‘scratch’ had become insignificant, lost in the greater scheme of things but Nathan nevertheless felt a pang of guilt.

The green eyes of the Southerner flew open as Jackson began his first tentative probing and a hand fastened itself around his wrist with surprising speed and strength, successfully preventing him from continuing. He waited until the grip relaxed as he knew it would.

"Some prior warning may be in order next time, Mr. Jackson," Ezra chided gently, releasing Nathan's wrist and tacitly permitting him to continue.

"Sorry, Ezra. Gotta clean this up and it's gonna hurt some. Just bear with me."

Standish nodded, accepting, composing himself. His expression revealed nothing during the entire procedure; only the occasional tensing of his muscles as Nathan continued his work betrayed the fact that he experienced anything more than mild discomfort. Jackson knew it was hurting but he also knew that it was important for Ezra to maintain control. A few minutes later after debriding and cleaning the tear, then spraying the wound with a topical antibiotic and covering it with an adhesive dressing he glanced up.

"It's okay, Ezra. You can breathe now. A shot of antibiotics and you'll be as good as new." He paused to administer the injection of amoxicillin in Standish's upper thigh. "Well, in a couple of days anyway. Right now the best thing you can do is sleep."

Ezra smiled at the irony. He had been rudely awakened just to be told he should go back to sleep. Given the way he felt he didn't see that it was going to be a difficult obstacle to overcome.

"If you don't mind me saying so, Mr. Jackson, I do believe that you should think about taking your own advice."

Josiah's familiar baritone interceded at that moment.

"Ezra's right, Nate. Why don't you sack down here? Buck, J.D. and me are going back up to the cabin to pack up and square things away. We'll catch some shut-eye up there and be back down here tomorrow ready for the trip back."

Jackson nodded seeing the sense in the arrangement.

Josiah turned to the others standing slightly apart. "You okay with that Zoé?"

"Fine. As long as I get a change of clothes I don't care who does the packing."

Buck's wolfish grin was not lost on her.

"On second thoughts, will you pack up my stuff J.D.? I don't think I like the thought of Buck going through my underwear!"

She laughed musically, not which she found sure more amusing -- Buck's open-mouthed astonishment or J.D.'s embarrassed blush.

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"Okay, how are we going to do this?"

The group that stood in the forecourt of the motel bore little resemblance to the rag-tag individuals who had progressively trooped through the motel over the previous twenty-four hours. The opportunity to bathe and change, coupled with the anticipation of returning to Denver, had wrought a minor transformation on the six ATF agents who, while still dressed casually, managed to exude an aura of collective self-confidence that until this moment had to some extent been missing in all of them.

Ezra, leaning nonchalantly against the Ram's fender, glanced critically around the group.

"Might I suggest we return in the same vehicle that we rode up in. Zoé and I can pick up Vin and Chris from the hospital."

Nathan shrugged. The Southerner seemed to be the only one to have a definite preference and the arrangement was obviously important to him. No one else seemed disinclined to agree on the proposition although Nathan himself had doubts about the four injured parties travelling together.

"That's cool. You think you're up to driving, Ezra?"

Zoé stepped forward.

"No problem. I'll drive."

The four remaining men shared a less-than-subtle glance but no-one thought of contradicting her claim.

Buck tossed the keys for the Dodge to Zoé.

"That's it then. Let's get this show on the road." The four agents boarded the big Chevy with Nathan at the wheel. "See you at the hospital."

Zoé watched the SUV pull out of the parking area and turned to Ezra.

"Shall we go?"

He inclined his head slightly and smiled.

"I believe that's an offer I can't refuse."

As she moved in front of him to reach the cab she paused and rested a hand on his arm, concern etching fine lines in her face.

"Are you sure you're alright? You still don't look the best."

He took off his sunglasses and rubbed his eyes prepared to let his carefully maintained facade slip once they were alone.

"Other than feeling as if a herd of elephants have taken up residence inside my skull and that some malicious person has seen fit to impale my right leg on a meat-hook, I'm perfectly fine. Nathan gave me another shot of antibiotics this morning and informs me that he intends to keep doing so every four hours for the next twenty four."

"Poor baby," she cooed sympathetically, then instantly business-like: "Come on. Let's go. Just close your eyes and think of home."

The two of them moved to their separate doors to access the vehicle.

"Shouldn't that be "Close your eyes and think of England"?"

The doors slammed shut and Zoé kicked the engine into life.

"Only when you're facing inevitable rape..."

J.D. was getting bored. Nathan and Zoé had been gone for over half an hour leaving the rest of them to cool their heels in the hospital car park. None of them had wanted to wait inside. Ezra had persuaded Buck to invest the time in losing a few hands of poker -- and a few dollars -- in an impromptu game in the front of the Dodge while Josiah had settled down to read. J.D. uninterested in either pursuit and too full of energy to remain still for long, jumped down from the hood where he had been sitting and walked restlessly around the two vehicles. Stopping beside the front fender of the Ram he traced the impression left by Chris' fist in the bodywork with his fingers. Curious, he fitted his own clenched hand into the depression and considered the force it would have taken to achieve that degree of damage. Whatever the mathematical computations he made a mental note to never be on the receiving end of one of Chris Larabee's punches.

He heard Buck snort in disgust as he lost yet another hand to the Southerner.

"I don't know why I bother playing against you, Ezra. Haven't you ever considered lettin' me win just once in a while?"

"But Mr. Wilmington," drawled Standish, smiling wickedly, "In order for you to win, I would have to lose and to lose, I would have to cheat. Surely you wouldn't ask me to compromise my integrity."

"Integrity, my ass. Deal again!"

J.D. shook his head. Buck always believed that the next hand would be a winner but when Ezra was at the table Lady Luck seemed only to have eyes for him. He had seen Ezra lose occasionally but J.D. always believed it was a deliberate act of sympathy for his colleagues. He leaned into the Ram and watched Standish smoothly deal the cards.

"Don't you get tired of winning?"

Ezra flicked a glance in J.D.'s direction before turning his attention back to the game.

"Lord, no! I believe that to win is the object of the exercise, is it not?"

"Have you never heard 'It's not whether you win or lose, but how you play the game'?"

Josiah's large frame appeared at Buck's side of the vehicle as he stooped to look in on the two players.

"Josiah, my friend, the gentleman who said that obviously never indulged in games of chance."

Dunne effectively halted the debate as his ear-piercing whistle heralded the arrival of the remaining members of the team. The four of them walked line abreast, albeit a little slower than usual in deference to Tanner's injuries, engaged in animated conversation. In the centre the Texan and the Englishwoman leaned possessively into one another flanked almost protectively by Nathan and Chris. If there was any animosity remaining between Zoé and Chris it was well disguised as the two of them bandied words, evidently in high spirits as they approached the waiting remnants of the team. Buck and Ezra exchanged an enigmatic glance unnoticed by the others; a silent communication that nonetheless screamed conspiracy. As Larabee slipped an arm around Zoé's shoulders and leaned down to whisper in her ear Buck groaned aloud and mentally waved good-bye to the last reserves of his cash which any minute Ezra would be triumphantly claiming from him. Once again he had backed a loser. Instead of Chris eating her alive, she had him eating out of the palm of her hand! A moment later Zoé turned her 1000 watt smile, absent for so long, on their leader and Buck frantically back-pedalled, re-evaluating the situation. Maybe it was Larabee that had her eating out of the palm of his hand.

Ezra's voice, pitched deliberately low finally registered in his brain.

"Don't even try to figure it out."

Buck sighed and turned to the Southerner who continued to shuffle the cards in an almost hypnotic rhythm.

"Guess we both lose, huh?"

Ezra flipped over the Queen of Hearts, followed by the Jack and the King.

"On the contrary, Mr. Wilmington, I believe in this case we both win." The Ace of Spades appeared in his hand and he tossed it on top of the other cards with a sigh.

Josiah mellow voice unexpectedly joined the conversation.

"It's just a question of whether the glass is half-full or half empty, isn't it?"

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Zoé slowly turned a full circle, taking in the rugged natural beauty of the place; the timbered ranch-house, the split rail fences enclosing a handful of horses, the traditional barn and the stables all complementing rather than encroaching on the environment. This, then, was The Ranch; Chris's home and his retreat from the world. And here they all were - together. Here they would rest and heal - together.

It had been five days since the sorry remnants of Chris and his team had arrived back in the city. Following a round of medical reviews Vin, not unexpectedly, had been pronounced unfit for duty and would be cooling his heels for at least a week before he would be allowed even behind a desk; Chris, much to his chagrin, not even permitted desk duty had been side-lined for a similar period; and Ezra would be desk-bound until the following week. The rest of them had closed ranks, endured the inevitable questioning from both peers and superiors and gone about their work, albeit with a distinct lack of enthusiasm. If anyone had been asked to describe the team's behaviour over those interminable few days the reply would have undoubtedly been 'distracted'. As it was Tanner and Larabee had been temporarily sharing the townhouse with Ezra and Zoé but it had been a given thing that come the weekend they would all retire to The Ranch.

She had wondered at the wisdom of spending a second weekend in the company of all seven men but as usual Chris would not be gainsaid. This was different. This was strictly rest and relaxation. No challenges, no expectations. A chance to unwind.

He had convinced her.

Now she was here. She strolled over to the corral and standing on the bottom rail leaned over the fence. Two of the horses ambled across to her seeking food, snuffled at her out of curiosity then, finding nothing of interest about her, sauntered away again.

"They're pretty mercenary."

Zoé turned as Chris took up position beside her on the fence, hooking his elbows over the top rail.

"Like most animals," she replied, "They're only interested in food and procreation."

"Funny, I thought that was Buck."

She laughed and climbed further up the fence, swinging her denim-clad leg over to sit astride the top rail.

"You've got a great place here, Chris. It's so..." she searched for a word to describe it, then settled for "...You."

Chris whistled through his teeth and one of the horses, a big grey, flicked its ears forward and trotted towards the fence.

"Zoé meet Dolittle."

She reached out and stroked the velvety muzzle.

"Dolittle?"

"Buck's idea of a joke. He's a gelding."

Zoé threw him a glance that spoke volumes about Wilmington's dubious sense of humour.

"Why does that not surprise me?"

Chris patted the horse's neck affectionately then stepped down from the rail offering his left hand to assist

the Englishwoman down.

"Come on, let's go eat. Josiah's barbecue has to be tasted to be believed."

Contentment. That was the only way Zoé could describe the atmosphere that permeated the room. Eight of them ranged in various attitudes around the log fire, curiously in tune with each other and entirely at ease in one another's company. They had all consumed more alcohol than was good for them and the mood was light, the banter barbed but friendly. Chris had claimed a spot on one side of the fire, his long legs stretching out in front of him while on the other side -- a mirror image almost -- Buck propped up his share of the hearth. The massive leather sofa to her right housed Ezra, Nathan and Josiah all in various stages of inebriation as they shared a bottle of the Southerner's best bourbon which they kept passing from hand to hand, no longer even bothering with glasses. Behind her Vin relaxed in the chair, beer in hand, while she sat on the floor nestled into the "V" of his legs. The subtly intimate touch of his fingers stroking the back of her neck sent delicious shivers down her spine and she involuntarily arched against his thighs. Silently cursing his activity restrictions she wondered how long it would be before Vin would be capable of...She flushed, suddenly feeling hot and guiltily turned aside from that particular avenue of thought. *God, she really must have had too much to drink.* Mortified, she realised that Buck had been watching her and now gave her a knowing wink and a slow, mischievous grin. *Damn that man!* She deliberately turned her attention to JD, the youngest member of the team and the only one still sober as he wisely continued to steer clear of every offering except cola. He sat cross-legged on the floor with a twelve-string guitar across his knees, strumming a few disparate chords and occasionally completing a short riff.

Zoé suddenly leaned forward, both as an excuse to escape the disturbing sensations coursing through her that close bodily contact with Vin had created and to avoid Buck's mocking smile.

"That's a Gibson isn't it?" She held out her hand. "Can I try it?"

Dunne passed the guitar over as Buck snorted teasingly.

"Gotta be better than you kid. Ya still can't tell your "E" string from a G-string!"

J.D. ignored the jibe and moved closer to the woman, who was examining the instrument with practiced ease.

"I didn't know you played."

Zoé grinned as she played a rapid series of individual notes followed by several echoing chords.

"Oh, J.D. There's a lot about me you don't know."

At the prospect of possible entertainment Buck hunched forward.

"Ya gonna give us a tune, Zoé or just talk us to death?"

She kicked out at Wilmington with a bare foot.

"Shut up, Buck. Or you'll be playing this guitar with your teeth."

Whistles, catcalls and verbal encouragement from the others accompanied by assorted missiles launched in Wilmington's direction succeeded in silencing him. Zoé glanced around the group as she prepared to play.

"No heckling, okay?"

As the first slow and sonorous notes filled the room an absolute hush descended on the seven men. This was no mere tune she was parading for their entertainment but a rich, complex tapestry of classical Spanish guitar. Totally absorbed, Zoé barely noticed the awe-struck expression on Buck's face or the reverent

admiration shining from JD's warm brown eyes as she swayed almost sensuously to an internal rhythm while her fingers danced across the strings. Caught up in the intricate beauty of the piece no-one uttered a sound and even after the last notes had died away there was complete silence for the space of several heartbeats then Ezra found his voice.

"Memories of the Alhambra I believe."

Zoé flicked her hair over her shoulder and grinned at the Southerner.

"Trust you to know it. I suppose you picked up where I fluffed it too? Bloody tremelo's a bitch to play."

"You made a mistake?" JD asked disbelievingly.

"Or three," she confessed happily, "I haven't played it for a while."

She turned to Wilmington, eyes full of mischief.

"I'm not quite sure if that qualifies as a 'tune', Buck. What do you think?"

"Shoot, woman!" he protested, "Do you go out of your way to keep me looking foolish? I never know which way is up with you!"

Zoé laughed and reached out to clasp his arm.

"Promise me something, Buck."

He cocked his head on one side, eyes suspicious as he wondered what form her particular pound of flesh would take.

"What?"

"Don't ever change."

She quieted the now distinctly rowdy group with a resounding chord.

"Right. A song!" She picked out a few notes and looked up at the blond man beside the hearth. "This one's just for you Chris. From me."

*"Well I don't have as many friends because
I'm not as pretty as I was
I've kicked myself at times because I've lied
So I will have to learn to stand my ground
I'll tell 'em I won't be around
I'll move on over to your town and hide*

*And you'll be the Captain
And I'll be no-one
And you can carry me away if you want to
And you can lay low
Just like your father and if
I tread upon your feet you just say so
'Cos you're the Captain, I am no-one
I tend to feel as though I owe one to you*

*Well I have handed all my efforts in
I searched here for my second wind
Is there someone here to let me in I asked?
So I slammed the doors they slammed at me
I found the place I'm meant to be
I figured out my destiny at last*

*You'll be the Captain
And I'll be no-one
And you can carry me away if you want to
And you can lay low
Just like your father and if
I tread upon your feet you just say so
'Cos you're the Captain, I am no-one
I tend to feel as though I owe one to you.*

*Did I forget to thank you for the ride
I hadn't tried I tend to run away and hide.*

*"Cos you're the Captain and I am no-one
And I owe one to you."*

Almost shyly Zoé raised her head and meeting Chris's eyes, read the understanding there, then smiled. She had made her peace offering - and it had been accepted.

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Adjusting the sit of the backpack across her shoulders Zoé paused to allow Vin to catch up wondering at the irony of it. Barely a month before she had been scrambling in Tanner's wake to climb this self same mountain, now the roles were reversed. She smiled indulgently as he drew level with her slightly out of breath but at least now almost fully recovered from his injuries. They had settled on a less ambitious method of ascent this time, using the established trails taking into consideration Vin's mending ribs but nevertheless he was still finding it physically demanding.

"Let's take five," she suggested, "there's no hurry."

"I'm okay," he protested, but she noticed that he was massaging his ribs while trying not to breathe too deeply.

Zoé shrugged out of the backpack harness and lowered it to the ground, then rolled her shoulders to ease the tension across her back, making a soft sound in her throat as she felt Vin's slim fingers start to knead the rigid muscles. *Magic!* She closed her eyes, revelling in his touch, and felt the slight but reassuring

pressure of his body behind hers as he stepped even closer.

"Oh, that feels so good."

He dropped one hand to snare her waist, drawing her back against him and nuzzled the curve of her shoulder where it joined her neck. She shuddered at the sensation of his warm breath on her skin and relaxed with a contented sigh of pleasure against his lean frame.

Since returning to Denver and throughout Tanner's convalescence the pair had been in close company. Vin, at Ezra's insistence, had taken up temporary residence at the townhouse after the entire cadre of Team 7 had unanimously decreed that he could not return to the Purgatorio apartment until he was 100% fit. For once, he had agreed with them. The rest had taken care of itself.

Vin's recuperation had been a slow and, for him, frustrating few weeks. For the restless Texan the enforced inactivity was akin to prolonged torture. His one attempt to hasten the process had resulted in a further haemorrhage from his damaged kidney and a ureter blocked by a blood clot; an excruciatingly painful experience that he quickly decided was not something he wanted to repeat. Finally given clearance for restricted duties he had embraced previously detested deskwork with a vengeance, simply glad to be back as part of the team and in a familiar environment. Buck had put forward his own theory that Vin's sudden burst of enthusiasm had more to do with the fact that the Texan was able to be around Zoé twenty-four hours a day.

This weekend away, instigated by Zoé who recognised that Tanner was slowly starting to go stir crazy, was the first time they had truly been alone; the first time their steadily escalating relationship was not being conducted under public scrutiny.

"How 'bout this?" he murmured teasingly, as his mouth crept towards her ear and she felt his teeth and tongue on her earlobe.

She squirmed in his grasp, laughing, then turned to face him, and looped her arms around his waist leaning back to look into his face. The newly healed laceration under his eye, still a livid red line, stood out in angry contrast to his tanned skin and she could still see a slight irregularity in the curve of his cheek over the fracture site. A wave of sadness washed over her as unbidden her memory conjured up images that she would rather forget but knew she never would. Loosening her hold on him she raised a hand and traced the scar with the barest touch of her forefinger. Vin remained motionless as her fingers continued to follow the strong contours of his face, brush lightly through his hair then slide sensuously down his neck, over his shoulder and finally onto his chest where her hand settled over his healing ribs.

"I'm okay, Zoé," he responded quietly to the unspoken question, "Really."

Closing the last few centimetres of space between them she pressed the length of her body against him and rested her head on his shoulder.

"I didn't say anything."

Sighing he put both his arms around her, smiling faintly.

"You didn't have to. I know what you're thinking."

"So tell me what I'm thinking right now," she demanded playfully slipping her hand inside his shirt.

"Now?" He was unable to keep the tremor out of his voice as her fingers continued to rove across his body, eliciting a physical reaction he was powerless to control. "Can't...uh...too much static..."

She met his eyes, recognising again the feral hunger there that she previously denied, and slowly drew him into a long, deep kiss knowing that this time she was not about to back away. Vin's reaction, powerful and demanding, left her breathless and for a moment her emotions wavered between panic at the rampant sexuality she had unleashed and excitement at her own response.

Zoé didn't recall clearly how they came to be on the ground but she could smell the aromatic tang of pine needles -- crushed now under the weight of their bodies -- on which they were lying, both of them more out of their clothes than in them. Above, a vivid blue sky overlaid with a tracery of green branches and punctuated by the occasional cotton-wool cloud went unappreciated. All extraneous thoughts were driven from her mind as the feel of Vin's lips on her skin transported her into the realm of the senses. Her own questing hands searched the contours of his lean and muscular body, roving urgently along his flank, his thigh, his abdomen unable to get enough of the feel of his skin against hers.

She made a soft sound in her throat as his lips brushed tantalisingly against her breast only to draw away again. Slowly her vision came back into focus and she realised that Vin was looking down at her, uncertainty written clearly in his startlingly blue eyes.

"Zoé?" He hesitated a moment before continuing, "Are you sure this is what you want?"

Not knowing whether she should laugh or cry, she felt a surge of intense love for this man that transcended anything she had ever felt before and reaching up she cupped his cheek.

"Vin Tanner, I've never been more sure of anything in my life."

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