

Bodyguards: The Name of the Game



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Boston in February.

Cold, wet, and wind like ice.

The man shivered briefly in spite of the bulk of his heavy woollen overcoat and quickly pulled on his gloves. With a glance at the leaden sky he suspected that there would be snow before the day was out, and again wondered what had possessed a Southern warm-blood like himself to venture this far north. Employment, he reminded himself. Indeed, employment-or rather lack of it-he had decided, was a great motivator for change. Boston would not have been his first choice but then, his choices were becoming increasingly limited and, as the saying went, needs must when the devil drives. Well, the devil was certainly at the wheel now and he had no other choice but to go along for the ride.

His breath frosted on the chill air as soon as it gusted from between his lips and he was relieved when the car, courtesy of the hotel management, pulled up at the kerb and the driver quickly got out to open the rear passenger door for him. He settled back against the aromatic leather of the Mercedes' upholstery, and drawing a business card bearing a Cambridge address from the inner breast pocket of his suit passed it to the driver. With a nod the chauffeur put the car into drive and pulled smoothly away into the traffic. All part of the service, he mused, and one of the reasons he was spending money he could ill-afford on luxury accommodation on Beacon Street rather than taking a tourist class room at Howard Johnson. First impressions. As his mother was so fond of saying: Appearances are everything, Darlin'.

He was not sure what he had expected but the address at which the driver dropped him was an unprepossessing multi-storey affair that seemed to house all manner of enterprises from accountants to a Zen meditation centre and just about everything in between-not to mention his prospective employer: Suite 21, seventh floor, InterSept. Peeling off his gloves he thumbed the elevator button. Intriguing name if nothing else. As he waited for the elevator car to rise the seven levels on whisper quiet cables, he unbuttoned his overcoat and tucked the doeskin gloves into his pocket with a sigh, feeling more like a freshman summoned to the dean's office than a thirty-six year old former FBI agent. He steeled himself as he waited for the doors to slide open once the inane musical ding had signalled his floor. No matter how many times he said it, either in public or in private, it still hurt. Former.

Quickly exiting before the door closed on him again, he stood for a moment in the foyer, initially surprised that the set-up he had mentally written off as a try-hard security agency occupied the entire floor. Someone, it appeared, had invested serious capital in this venture but whether he should accept it as a mark of success or whether it was merely a façade as carefully constructed as his own he had yet to discover. He was very good at what he did, he wondered if these people

were equally facile. Moving forward at last he stepped up to the automatic doors with a confidence he did not feel and the quiet desperation of a man going under for the third time.

An athletic-looking blond man, perhaps ten years his senior, raised his head as the doors slid noiselessly apart and moved quickly forward with an almost catlike grace to meet him, interceding before the young woman stationed at the front desk could utter a word.

“You must be Special Agent Standish. Been expecting you.”

“Alas, former special agent, Ezra Standish,” corrected Standish smoothly, “And you must be...”

“Larabee. Chris Larabee,” the man introduced himself, “We spoke on the phone last week.”

The two men exchanged a brief handshake.

“Of course.” He glanced at his watch. “I’m not late am I?” Knowing perfectly well he was five minutes early for his appointment with this quietly intense man.

Blue-green eyes as hard as flint looked the younger man up and down with a coolly appraising glance that warned Standish to tread warily. This was no desk jockey he was dealing with; in fact he was prepared to wager that Larabee had, at some time in his not too distant past, seen active combat.

“No. Not late.” He tapped Standish’s elbow, a signal to follow. “Come through. Let’s talk.”

Obviously a man of few words.

Larabee’s office was as utilitarian as his speech, all sharp edges and angles, with leather and chrome featuring strongly and no single concession to colour. Even the venetian blinds were black and it came as no surprise that there were no personal touches in evidence anywhere in the room. Taking off his overcoat, Standish searched in vain for somewhere to hang it and for want of any alternative finally deposited it on a chair and, before sitting down, unfastened the centre button of his charcoal grey suit jacket. Larabee sat down on the opposite side of the desk but seemed to feel no immediate need to speak. Unfazed, Standish waited patiently; after all Larabee had been the one to seek him out. It was his call.

As the seconds ticked away, the Southerner picked up a paperweight from Larabee’s desk turning it over in his hand as he studied the logo of the company. InterSept.

“Interesting play on words, Mr. Larabee.”

The blond man shrugged dismissively.

“Seven’s my lucky number.”

Standish carefully replaced the paperweight and leaned back with a half-smile on his lips.

“Well then, let’s hope it’s mine too.”

Larabee swung his chair a fraction to squarely face the desk.

“You look fit.”

Standish tilted his head at the apparent non sequitur. A reference he knew to the fact that he had

been discharged from hospital only a scant month before. While it was no secret, he was curious as to why-and how-this man was quite so au fait with his recent past.

“Fit enough,” he replied guardedly. Larabee had no need to know that he still routinely carried a supply of oxycodone for the pain or that he still woke in the middle of the night in a cold sweat of fear. They were his own, personal, demons and not for public scrutiny. The rest of his life may have been hung out like dirty laundry for all to see, but some things he had salvaged; and some things he had buried so deep that no one would ever find them again.

“Bad business,” commented Larabee brusquely, then abruptly leaned forward to rest his elbows on the blotter, looking evenly at the well-dressed ex-FBI agent. “Now, I have just one question for you. Do you want a job?”

Standish managed to keep the surprise from showing on his face but only just, and he paused to pick a microscopic speck of lint from his immaculately pressed trousers to cover up his lack of preparedness for that particular question.

“That’s it? Do you want a job? Mr. Larabee, I’m not sure that I even understand the scope of your operation, let alone whether I would want to work for you.”

Larabee lowered his head for a minute, a feral smile appearing on his lean face.

“Hell, what am I thinking? My mistake, and my apologies for wasting your time. I’ll bet you’re beating off the offers with a stick.”

Sarcastic bastard! Standish knew then that Larabee was perfectly aware that he was a pariah. Not one government agency was prepared to touch him now; he was too big a risk. The mud slinging might be over but the dirt had stuck. Now Larabee was offering him a lifeline - probably the only one likely to be thrown in his direction - and here he was dicking around debating whether it was of the quality he was prepared to accept. Stung, the Southerner started to rise. Broke or not, he had his pride, and he was not about to be treated like a ten dollar whore.

“I don’t think we have anything to discuss after all, Mr. Larabee.”

The blond man stood up, uncoiling like a cobra ready to strike.

“Sit down!” he snapped, the voice of command used to being obeyed, “Swallow that god-damn pride before it chokes you and listen up for a minute.”

Standish hesitated for a split second before slowly lowering himself back into the chair, pragmatic enough to realise that he could well be biting the hand that may provide his next meal.

“I’m listening.”

Larabee walked from behind the desk, pacing to and fro in front of the window like a caged tiger.

“I’m going out on a limb here, Ezra.”

The younger man refrained from making any comment, merely fixing steady green eyes on the blond man, noting the almost familiar use of his first name and patiently waiting for him to

continue.

“You’re considered somewhat of a...”

“Maverick?”

“...risk. What I’m trying to tell you is that I’m willing to take that risk.”

“Based on exactly what, Mr. Larabee?”

“Your reputation.”

The Southerner lowered his head, a self-mocking smile on his face, his tongue momentarily darting out to cover his bottom lip in a gesture that Larabee would come to know well.

“My reputation?” He laughed bitterly. “You mean that degree of notoriety I seem to have effortlessly achieved as a fed who doesn’t know which team he’s playing on any more, the Feebie on the take, the nark who let the whole fucking team down? That reputation, Mr. Larabee.”

“Your reputation as an exceptional field agent,” repeated Larabee with dogged persistence, “My gut feeling. The alignment of the goddamn stars if you want...hell, Standish-are you interested in this job or not?”

“Of course. I’d be lying if I said otherwise. You know it, and I know it.” He met the other man’s eyes, his gaze unwavering. “I need the work.”

Larabee sat on the edge of the desk. “I guess a condo in New Orleans and those designer clothes you’re so fond of, don’t come cheap.”

The subtlest flicker of irritation crossed the Southerner’s handsome faced. Larabee had touched a nerve.

“My business.” It was a warning that even the blond man decided to heed.

He sighed and changed tack, effortlessly switching to running with the wind instead of into it.

“You’re the kind of man I need in this operation, “ he confessed, openly, “And that’s not a snow job, Ezra. I can get ex-military or ex-cop at a dime a dozen but I’m looking for guys with close quarter and undercover experience. I need someone fast with a gun but who knows when not to use it, someone who can mix it with the low lifes then turn around and just as easily mix with the diplomatic corps. You have those skills, I already know that.”

Standish looked away, carefully inspecting his manicured fingernails.

“Ah, the skills are not in question. This is more a matter of trust, wouldn’t you agree?”

Larabee thrust himself a way from the desk with such violence that Standish was hard-pressed not to flinch.

“Fuck me, Standish! What do you want me to do? Get down on my knees and beg, for Christ’s sake?” He ran a hand through his short hair not bothering to conceal his agitation. “I’m going to say this just once then I’m going to ask you again to give me an answer but I’ll give you fair warning that this is the last time I’ll be asking.” He stopped for a moment and levelled a glare at the

Southerner from which he dare not look away. "I don't give a damn what happened in New Orleans, as far as I'm concerned you were shafted and left with your ass hanging in the breeze. That's over and done with. Now you need a job, and I'm offering you one. What do you say?"

Standish, ever the opportunist, knew better than to ignore the lifeline this time, if it didn't already fit then he would make it.

"Where do I sign?"

The moustached man looked out of the window at the figure on the sidewalk, snorting derisively as the Mercedes sedan drew up to the kerb and the man he had been so carefully studying climbed in.

"So that's him?"

"Yup." Larabee was not prepared to buy into his partner's line of crap this time, knowing exactly what axe Wilmington was going to start grinding. They had been friends for a long time but that did not always guarantee harmony.

"Did some checking of my own into him, Chris."

Larabee's eyes went hard, his expression flat; then he wheeled away. "You know, you'll cross the line once too often, Buck."

Wilmington followed his friend.

"Word has it that he was playing both sides against the middle; the Feebies gave him up. His own kind, Chris, sold him down the river."

"Nothing was proved against him. I'd say that counts for something wouldn't you? In the end Internal Affairs had nothing they could pin on him."

"Hey, pard, from all accounts Standish is as slippery as a greased pig. Where there's smoke and all that. Jesus, the guy wears a three thousand dollar suit and gets picked up in a goddamn Mercedes!"

Larabee's eyes narrowed. "So what're you saying to me, Buck? That you think they're right. That he was dirty? That I should let him swing?"

Wilmington's shoulders slumped.

"Hell, I don't know, Chris." He dug his hands into his pockets, his voice quieter. "Is it right he got taken down? Worked over, I mean? You know, did they....?"

"They broke both his fucking legs with a tyre iron," snarled the blond man, recalling too easily the details of the story that had, for a short time, made front-page news, "then beat the crap out of him. Nearly killed him. As it is the guy's lucky he can still walk. Spent three months in hospital and came out to an IA witch-hunt and no job. You just don't do that to a man. Bastards."

"Dismissed?"

Larabee shook his head. "Had nothing on him. Not one shred of proof. But a lot of crap hit the fan

and most of it came back on Standish. He was 'strongly encouraged' to resign."

Wilmington watched his friend closely, sensing the outrage in him. "You believe him."

Slate-blue eyes speared him like twin lasers. "I wouldn't have offered him a job if I didn't."

The moustached man paused for a beat, hesitated, and then forged ahead regardless.

"Do you trust him?"

Larabee gave a sigh and walked back to the window, looking down onto an empty street.

"I have to."

The Southerner moved with stiff-gaited care from the bar to the armchair and guardedly sat down, quickly swallowing a couple of painkillers, which he washed down with a generous quantity of Ketel One. No need for pretence now. He was hurting like hell. He grimaced then, not at the raw bite of the spirit but at the bitter taste the drug left in the back of his throat. The combination, he knew, was frowned upon in medical circles but personally he found it a perfectly good way of easing into a good night's sleep; only today he was just starting a little earlier than usual. What the hell, he even had something to celebrate. He had a job didn't he?

Taking another swallow of the vodka, he slowly stretched out his left leg, gently massaging his knee for some minutes before glancing around the sumptuously appointed room. Thank God for American Express. Sinking deeper into the chair he closed his eyes and made a mental note to offload some more shares first thing in the morning and transfer some funds to his checking account before his Amex card-and his credit rating-became history too. Jesus, his overdraft was already at its limit and he had just two hundred dollars left in his billfold. He downed the last of his drink and reached to pour another. Hell, that would barely see him through the rest of the day. He looked thoughtfully at the glass in his hand and gently swirled the colourless liquor around with a subtle movement of his wrist. The term liquid assets was beginning to take on a whole new meaning.

He was still coming to terms with the fact that he had actually accepted Larabee's proposition. The money would not be nearly enough to maintain his lifestyle, that was obvious from the outset, but Larabee was offering him something more than the opportunity to earn a living, he was giving him the chance to recoup his severely diminished self-esteem-the chance to re-establish his life. He set aside the glass and stared thoughtfully at the half bottle on the table beside it, acknowledging that over the last four months he had spent more time thinking about death than life. Initially because he had one foot in either camp then, as his body had slowly mended, because he had been in so much pain that he would have gladly accepted dying just to be free of it. He thought he knew all there was to know about pain then, but that was before they asked for his badge. The Southerner abruptly reached for the vodka and filled his glass again. Bastards.

His cell phone shrilled, demanding a response, and he sighed wondering if he should answer it. The oxycodone had already taken hold and in combination with the alcohol was easing him into a pleasantly buzzed, twilight state of consciousness. He closed his eyes. Fuck the phone. Five minutes later the annoying trill started again and he swore softly under his breath realising that, as he would have to get up to turn the damned thing off, he might as well answer it.

“Standish.” Not the best of surnames to have when ever so slightly bombed, he decided.

“Larabee. Are you free tonight, Ezra? There are a couple of guys I’d like you to meet.”

“I’d be delighted, Mr. Larabee.” He was aware that his tone intimated exactly the opposite but he was having difficulty controlling his speech, let alone his inflection.

There was a moment’s hesitation. “I was thinking maybe we could meet at your hotel. Save you coming out again.”

“Sure.” Ezra decided that short and sweet would be safer but it came out sounding sullen.

Another pause. “Are you all right, Ezra?”

The Southerner rubbed his eyes and began to wish that he had gone with his earlier decision to not to answer the damned phone at all.

“Yes,” it was a weary sigh, that only served to transmit the fact that he was not, “What time?”

The pregnant silence on the other end of the line extended until Ezra was beginning to think Larabee had hung up.

“Say eight-thirty?”

“Fine. Have the desk buzz me when you get here.”

“Fifteen Beacon, right?”

Standish managed to finish the rest of the call without tripping over his tongue and finally thumbed the off button with a sense of relief.

“Well,” he murmured, with a heavy sense of irony as he returned to his drink, “That went well.”

Vin Tanner glanced quickly down at the embossed card in his hand and back to the index of occupants on the wall. Seventh floor. Suite 21. This was it all right. He hesitated a moment, almost tempted to turn around and leave, barely able to believe that he had actually come here. He stared again at the card. What did he know about this Chris Larabee anyway? The two of them had met under unusual circumstances during a brawl several months before. The odds had been spectacularly against them but the two strangers, with nothing in common but a desire to see justice done had, and on no more than a glance exchanged across a room, gone head to head with a bunch of bikers and after the dust had settled, the blond guy with the glare that would cut diamonds had given him his card. If you’re ever looking for a job, give me a call. So here he was. Looking for a job. He wondered if the guy would even remember him.

He did.

“Tanner. Vin Tanner. Amarillo, Texas.”

The Texan thrust out his hand with an almost shy smile, pleased that he had been so readily placed by the blond man.

“Didn’t think you’d remember me.”

Larabee didn’t bother to suppress the grin that momentarily transformed the stern features into something more boyish, that hinted of a mischievous soul.

“Not something I’m likely to forget in a hurry,” he confessed; then laughed, “We sure kicked some ass that day!”

Tanner’s grin broadened.

“You wound up with a dozen stitches in your head.”

“And you busted your wrist.”

The pair fell silent for a moment, each taking the other’s measure, more like old friends than two men who had met by chance and shared a single experience that somehow had made a deep impression on both of them.

“So how’re you doing?” Larabee ushered the younger man through the scattering of unoccupied desks to his office. “And what brings you to Boston?”

“I’m looking for a job.”

“I thought you were with the Rangers?”

“I was. Past tense.”

Larabee leaned back in his chair and Tanner felt the intensity of his stare as the older man studied him. He resisted the urge to look away but was almost relieved when he was finally released from the spell.

“Your choice or theirs?”

The Texan ducked his head,

“Can’t lie to you. Got the bullet.”

“Mind telling me why?”

“Killed a man.”

Larabee said nothing but it was obvious he wanted more.

“Said I used unnecessary force. Bastard was as high as a kite; had a classroom full of kids hostage. We had a siege situation going down the tubes fast. There was a window of opportunity to put the guy down and I took it.”

“You shot him.”

“Blew his fucking head off.”

A flicker of what might have been amusement momentarily relaxed the lean features of the man

across the desk.

“I can see where that might get you offside with the authorities.”

Tanner shook his head at the memory.

“Crucified me. I came out of it as the bad guy. Got a black mark against my name now, don’t know that I can ever clear it.”

The older man rose sinuously from his chair and started to walk slowly around the desk, digging his hands into his pockets.

“You know we have a code of conduct here as well? Even a private company is regulated by law and the legislation governing us is pretty tough. We don’t exactly advocate blowing people’s heads off either,” he smiled, adding: “unless it’s absolutely necessary.”

The former Texas Ranger looked evenly at Larabee, his eyes as blue and as guileless as the Texas skies.

“I’d do it again,” he said quietly, then added with a hint of sadness in his voice. “Just so’s you know.”

“I bet you would,” Larabee answered smoothly, and with not a little respect for the young Texan.

“Do you have a CV?”

Tanner’s head swung up, a little surprised as the sudden change in tack.

“Not with me. I can fax one to you though.”

“Fine. Do that. Are you in town for long?”

“Coupla days. Thought I might go up to Canada if nothin’ pans out here.”

Chris chewed thoughtfully on his bottom lip then sighed.

“Okay, here’s the plan. Get your CV to me by tonight and if I think I can help, I’ll give you a call by tomorrow afternoon latest. Then we’ll talk some more. Where can I contact you?”

The younger man rose quickly.

“Thanks. I’ll do that.” He gave Larabee his cell phone number.

Larabee quickly jotted down the number and with a brief smile and a firm handshake he signalled that the session was at an end. Tanner gave a quick nod before moving off with an easy loose-limbed stride. The blond man stared for a long time after the ex-Ranger, his face expressionless. Another black sheep. Standish was going to be enough of a handful without taking on another errant, yet his gut instinct told him that he’d be making a huge mistake if he let Tanner slip through his fingers. All he had to do was convince the others.

The four men left the Cherokee on the street and walked the remaining distance to the hotel, the only one on Beacon Street. Buck had already made the offhanded comment that anyone who stayed in a seven hundred dollar a night hotel did not need to work for InterSept and Chris had told

him in no uncertain terms to shut up or go back to the office. The other two members of the party bringing up the rear, both recent additions to the team, Josiah Sanchez and Nathan Jackson, exchanged a hasty glance and wisely chose to remain silent. Wilmington merely changed the subject steering towards safer waters.

“So, what about that kid we interviewed yesterday?”

“John Dunne? He’s twenty-five, not exactly a kid.” Pointed out Larabee reasonably.

“Reckon he’s lying about his age,” joked the moustached man, “He’s just a young ‘un.”

“These days anyone’s a young ‘un compared to you, Buck.”

Wilmington punched Larabee in the shoulder and grinned taking no offence.

“Except maybe you, you old war dog!”

“He’s keen,” admitted the blond man, ignoring the other man’s riposte, “but not got much experience. A few years under his belt in the PD don’t count for too much.”

“He’s a tech wiz,” countered Buck, “Fast tracked through MIT. Besides I thought he had something.”

Larabee laughed.

“Yeah? Just like you thought that red head had “something”, but I don’t think we were looking for those particular attributes.”

Buck’s grin widened.

“She did have great...assets.”

“Right!”

Chris shook his head at his incorrigible partner and realising that they had reached the hotel, lead the way into the impressive front entrance.

Larabee had, over the course of the evening, come to the unhappy conclusion that Standish was either drunk-or worse, stoned, goddamn it! The signs were subtle but what he had initially been inclined to put down to a combination of tiredness and stress now appeared to be something more sinister. Buck, picking up on the same signs, was already giving him his ‘I told you so’ look and he was seriously beginning to doubt in his own judgement, wondering if he was making a mistake after all in sticking his neck out for Standish. As if reading his mind, the former FBI agent turned and levelled his steady gaze in his direction, green irises impossibly huge around an almost invisible pupil as his lips curved in a maddening half-smile that suggested he was in on a joke that no one else had quite figured out yet. Larabee held his eyes for a long moment, then the Southerner was turning away to answer a question from Sanchez and the moment was passed.

With a sigh Larabee drank the rest of his beer, the only one he was allowing himself given that he was driving, and watched the interaction between Standish and the other men. He had to admit

that, even bombed, Ezra had all the skills of a born diplomat, managing to deftly field Buck's less than tactful questioning about his FBI background without giving too much away, and deftly picking his way through the veritable minefield of loaded questions with all the grace and dexterity of a dancer. Jackson and Sanchez were less intrusive but there was no doubt that Standish was the man in the spotlight and in spite of his earlier misgivings Larabee found himself both impressed and intrigued by the Southerner. Hell, if the man wanted to sink a few in the privacy of his own room, who was he to complain. He'd wrestled a few demons of his own -- enough to have a little sympathy for what Standish had been through-and right now the guy looked like he'd had enough of trying to jump a twelve-foot wall with a five-foot pole. The blond man looked at his watch and stood up, signalling an end to the gathering.

"Been a long day. Reckon it's time we broke up the party, guys." He set down his empty beer can. "Ezra, thanks for the drinks."

Standish inclined his head, his expression giving nothing away. If he was relieved that the impromptu inquisition was finally over he did not show it. "Don't mention it, Mr. Larabee. All part of the service."

Larabee hung back, allowing the others to move past him to the door, slipping his car keys into Buck's hand as he went by. "I'll catch up with you."

Wilmington ducked his head, his voice quiet. "Somethin' wrong, pard?"

"Nope. Just need a word with Ezra alone."

Buck raised a dark eyebrow as if to intimate that he could guess just what that word might be. He slapped his friend on the arm in a brotherly gesture of affection. "Take care, Chris, Reckon you've snared yourself a shark there. Just watch out he don't turn and bite."

Larabee jerked his chin in the direction of the door, silently dismissing Wilmington before turning back to an at ease and expectant Standish. He waited until he heard the door close before speaking.

"Sorry about the third degree, Ezra. Buck gets a bit contentious at times but he's cool."

The Southerner shrugged.

"It comes with the territory," he paused, a flicker of some indistinguishable emotion subtly altering his expression for a split-second, "people are naturally...curious."

Standish dropped into the chair he had occupied for the last few hours and squeezed his eyes shut, rubbing at his temples as if he had a headache. After a moment's hesitation, Larabee moved away from the door and back towards the younger man.

"You all right, Ezra?"

"Thank you for your concern, Mr. Larabee, but I already have a mother and I assure you that one is more than enough for me to cope with."

The barriers were up.

“Whatever you say, but you look as if you could use a good night’s sleep. A few of them in fact.” Chris picked up the almost empty half-bottle of Ketel One and looked thoughtfully at the inch of vodka remaining, before placing it precisely back down on the table at the Southerner’s elbow. “Do yourself a favour, Ezra, cut back on the booze.”

Standish opened his eyes and squinted up at the blond man, then in reply slowly reached out with one hand, and without any change in expression or even seeming to look at what he was doing, wordlessly screwed the cap back on the bottle. Message received and understood.

Chris kept his own expression flat.

“I’ll call you tomorrow.”

Ezra raised two fingers to his forehead and sketched a salute, again with that mocking smile on his face, before once again closing his eyes as if sleep was about to overtake him. Chris might not have been there.

Larabee let himself out.

Buck had already fired up the Jeep and had the heater blasting out hot air and the CD cranking out Pearl Jam when Chris finally jerked open the passenger door and climbed in, his lean face tense.

“Dare I ask?” ventured Buck, as the blond man wordlessly snapped his seatbelt into place.

“Drive.”

“That good, huh?”

“Stow it, Buck.”

Wilmington eased the SUV away from the kerb and chuckled softly.

“Just don’t want to admit that I’m right do you? What the hell, Chris, the guy was juiced!”

“Buck, shut up.” The tone was weary rather than angry. “Let me deal with this. My own way.”

Wilmington glanced shrewdly to his right and for once, did as he was told.

The Texan stretched and cursed as he lifted his hips to move the safety belt buckle that had painfully embedded itself in his butt, managing to bang his knee on the dashboard and get one foot tangled in the webbing of the passenger seat belt in the process. Hell, that had to be the most uncomfortable night he’d spent in a long time. It was freezing and although the windows were misted he was genuinely amazed that he had succeeded in generating enough heat for any condensation to form, after spending most of the night lying in uncomfortable misery wondering if he was in danger of succumbing to hypothermia. Briskly rubbing his hands together to restore the circulation, he finger combed his hair into some sort of order and glanced at his reflection in the rear-view mirror. Satisfied that he did not look quite as bad, or as unwashed, as he felt he turned the ignition key, quietly hoping that the battery had enough juice to get him started. On the third

try the engine fired and he leaned forward to scrub at the windshield with his sleeve, clearing a space as the demister struggled to disperse the heavy accumulation of condensation. Finally able to see where he was going, Tanner let out the clutch and hit the gas. He badly needed to find a rest room.

Thank God for McDonald's. Immediate physical needs satisfied, the former Texas Ranger sat for a while reading the newspaper and drinking endless cups of scalding coffee, wondering if he would ever feel warm again. He had already decided that if he did not hear from Larabee by mid-afternoon then he would be on his way. Spending another night in the city sleeping rough held no appeal and he had no intention of spending any of his meagre cash reserves on a hotel. Everything he owned was in the back of his truck. Not a great deal to show for a man his age but, then again, he had never set much store in material possessions or being tied to one place. He carefully folded the paper and finished his sixth cup of coffee, which in turn necessitated a second visit to the rest room, before venturing back out into the chill February morning. For the first time in three years he was as free as a bird, and he was surprised to find that at that moment the notion held little appeal for him.

Less than two blocks away, Chris Larabee poured himself a coffee and decided, after grimacing at the strong, dark brew that had been stewing on the hotplate for longer than his imagination was currently capable of contemplating, that he should make some fresh. He had not slept and his eyes felt gritty but he had a full workload scheduled and with no way of putting any of it off he would be foregoing sleep for another ten hours at least. After the meeting with Standish the night before he had come back to the office, unable to sleep, and had immersed himself in the minutiae involved in operating a fledgling enterprise. Sometimes in moments of reflective introspection he wished for nothing more than the uncomplicated life of a foot soldier, instead he was now in the position where the buck stopped and, as he had quickly found, it was a lonely place to be.

Walking around behind his desk he idly flipped a manilla folder open and looked again at the five pages that represented Vin Tanner's life. The Texan had a chequered past and for someone only just into his thirties had managed to cram a whole lot of experience into a few short years. Police background, five years in Dallas, three years in Los Angeles then another two years in the Texas Rangers. Marksman, equally adept with handgun or rifle, he had carried off an impressive array of titles over the past ten years. Ironic that his best attribute had effectively ended his career. Pausing to take another swallow of bitter coffee, his hand strayed to an identical folder and slowly opened the cover. Dunne. The other side of the coin. College graduate-with honours. Buck was right about one thing; he was a technological savant. Four years as one of New York's finest. Hardly the experience he was looking for in a bodyguard. He scanned down the personal profile and shook his head - not to mention him being a little on the short side.

With a sigh Larabee walked to the window and opened the blinds, letting in the weak morning sun. Time was ticking away and he needed to get a full team up and operational before too much longer. Buck was a known quantity and was already working with Sanchez and Jackson on small, routine, close protection work. Small potatoes for someone with Wilmington's experience in the ATF but valuable in training up the others. Sanchez was a veteran by anyone's standards but protection was a new direction for the former Marine, and he had finally chosen Jackson as much for his paramedical skills as his solid Army background.

Standish. Now here was a horse of a different colour. He was a maverick and, from all accounts, no team player. Larabee had nonetheless been prepared to go out on a limb to draw the Southerner into the fold for the simple reason that he was good at what he did and InterSept was in need of someone with his level of skill. That, and the fact that the man had been royally shafted then hung out by his own agency. Larabee was a firm believer in justice. He was also a believer in second chances. Now he just had to find a way of reining the wayward Southerner in and utilising his particular talents, which did not include the man's seemingly natural and effortless ability to piss people-including himself-off.

Moving back to the desk, he put down his cup and looked again at the two files. Tanner. Dunne. One with too much past, one with not enough. Finally he gathered both folders together and threw them with a sigh into the 'in' tray. What the hell. He'd take the chance.

Larabee frowned as he terminated yet another unsuccessful call. The wireless customer you are attempting to reach is either not responding or out of range. Please try your call again. He had already tried the hotel landline and had a similar lack of success. Not answering. No, he did not want to leave a message; he wanted to talk to Standish, goddamn it. Tapping his fingers on the desk, he picked up the phone again, not sure himself if the building irritation was a result of frustration or concern but as he punched in the number of XV Beacon once again he wondered spitefully if he might have better luck if he tried the bar. Mr. Standish was not answering his phone, would he like to leave a message? He resisted the urge to vent his annoyance at the receptionist and instead left his number for Standish to call then put down the phone with deliberate slowness. If that was how Standish wanted to play it then that was his problem; except that the Southerner did not strike him as a man who would deliberately ignore a call. Especially not when his future was literally hanging on the end of the line.

With a hasty glance at his watch he abruptly pushed himself away from the desk and swiped his jacket from where it hung over the back of the chair. Cursing Standish under his breath-he had a meeting with Tanner in less than an hour-he snatched up his car keys. The Southerner's inconsistent behaviour the night before had already created more than enough uncertainty for

Larabee's peace of mind and now this. Before he went any further he intended to get some answers or the deal was off. As much as he wanted Ezra on board he could not help but think back to Buck's observation that Standish was a shark, and he was not about to buy into anything that was later going to turn around and bite him in the ass.

His thoughts momentarily flicked to the brief phone call with the Texan and he smiled as he shrugged into his jacket. Now there was a man of few words. Tanner had answered his cell phone on the second ring and the dialogue had lasted all of two minutes. Larabee was aware of his own, justifiable, reputation for reticence but he came out looking positively garrulous at the side of the former Ranger. The man obviously wasted neither time nor energy on the minutiae of everyday existence such as conversation. Larabee had already formed the distinct impression that Tanner was one of those rare specimens of humanity that would only ever speak when he had something worth saying. Standish might be at the other end of the scale as far as verbosity went but the blond man found himself hoping that once he caught up with him that the Southerner would be able to give him some simple answers to some simple questions-straight down the line and no bullshit. Considering the man had until recently been a Fed, he wondered if that was even possible or if, as he suspected, the FBI and honesty were two mutually exclusive entities.

It was late. Ezra knew it before he even coerced reluctant eyelids open and peered myopically at his watch. Very late. He groaned aloud as he shoved aside the covers and waited a beat before he tentatively moved again, trying-and failing-to ignore the stabbing pain that speared through his gut but pushing himself to get up anyway. On the night stand, the red light on the house phone winked insistently silently informing that he had messages waiting. Great. He had not even heard it ring. Squeezing his eyes shut, he pinched the bridge of his nose and tried to force his sluggish brain into action. Gradually his thoughts coalesced and he remembered waking in the small hours of the morning, the pain that speared through his abdomen excruciating, and reaching for the painkillers. Had he taken one or two? Sometimes he did that when it got so bad that he could no longer stand it. A double dose. That would account for the unnatural depth of his sleep. He rubbed his eyes, feeling the heaviness behind them that warned him of an impending headache, and finally swung his legs out of bed. Still not quite awake, he stumbled to the bathroom and resolved yet again to try and cut back on the medications.

Shit. He looked at the readout of his Nokia cell phone: six missed calls. He retrieved the numbers, not really needing to check to confirm that each and every one was Chris Larabee. It hardly took a towering intellect to go one step further and figure exactly who was messaging him on the house phone. Even he could manage to put two and two together and come up with four. Good one, Standish. The guy now thinks you're an asshole as well as a drunk. He tossed the phone onto the

bed and closing his eyes as he rode a fresh wave of pain, wondered if he should pre-empt the inevitable and make a reservation for the flight back to New Orleans now or whether he could possibly convince Larabee that he was not the biggest jerk who ever lived.

The abrupt knock on the door a few minutes later came as no great surprise. After all Larabee did not strike him as a man of infinite patience.

“Thought maybe you were dead.” Larabee stepped through the open door without invitation, closing it softly behind him as he fastened a hard-eyed glare on Standish. Larabee’s tone suggested he was marginally disappointed that he had been proved wrong.

“I...um...overslept, Mr. Larabee.” The excuse sounded lame even to him although it was in fact the truth.

“You look like shit.”

Ezra did not think it would help his case for him to admit that he felt like it, so he let the comment ride.

“You have something against answering your phone?”

The Southerner rubbed his forehead. Larabee’s irritation was understandable but he didn’t need the sarcasm. Not now. Not when he wanted to curl up on the bed until the cramps had eased and he could at least think straight. Larabee, he knew had come armed with a truckload of questions and he was not sure he was going to like the answers.

“No. My apologies.” He moved to his open suitcase and started sifting through the carefully folded shirts and underwear, aware that he sounded truculent but beyond caring.

“So, what’s the problem?” A demand. This man was not about to tiptoe around anyone’s feelings. No, sir. Right to the point, in your face, straight-for-the-jugular stuff.

“Jet lag?” offered the Southerner, knowing the flippant answer would be sure to irritate the intense Larabee. He was right.

“Want to try that one again? And the truth might be a good start. You into something, Ezra? Booze? Drugs? What?”

Standish sighed, his shoulder’s slumping and turned to pick up the foil bubble pack from the night stand, casually flipping it in Larabee’s direction, thinking he had just blown any chance at all he had of working for the blond man.

“Meet the monkey on my back, Mr. Larabee, or,” he added ruefully, “at least, one of them.”

Chris slowly turned the blister of medications over in his hand, a slight frown creasing his face.

“OxyContin? Pain killers?” He sounded both surprised and puzzled.

Standish attempted a smile but it never reached his eyes.

“Can’t get through the day without them, Mr. Larabee. A most generous parting gift courtesy of my erstwhile FBI colleagues made certain of that.”

“Jesus!” The sea green eyes reflected a righteous anger then went as flat and expressionless as snake eyes. “Is this...” he hesitated, “...a problem?”

“Only when I’m stupid enough to allow it to be.” He raised an eyebrow at Larabee’s doubtful expression. “The narcotic effects of oxycodone are somewhat enhanced by the consumption of alcohol. I should know better.”

Larabee leaned forward and handed the foil strip back to the Southerner.

“So you’re telling me you weren’t really drunk last night, just stoned, right?”

Standish lowered his head. Touché, Mr. Larabee. New Orleans here I come. He picked up a fresh set of underwear from his suitcase and started to turn away.

“I apologise for wasting your time, Mr. Larabee. Now if you’ll excuse me, I think I have a plane to catch.”

Larabee laughed softly, an unexpected sound that halted the Southerner in his tracks. If he had been a dog, thought the blond man, his fur would have been bristling.

“Ezra, that stiff necked pride of yours is going to be a bigger problem than any dependency you might have on prescription pain-killers. You’re under medical supervision, right?”

“Of course.”

“Then don’t think you can weasel out on a deal and run out on me that easily.”

“Deal, Mr. Larabee?”

“Yesterday, you agreed to come work for me. Something make you change your mind?”

“No, I mean...I thought...” Standish was having some trouble stringing a coherent sentence together. He took a deep breath. “I thought that under the circumstances you might wish to retract your offer.”

Chris raked a hand through his short blond hair with a gusting sigh.

“Fuck, Ezra, but you had me scared for a while there, I don’t mind telling you.” His eyes narrowed.

“You still do, but not for the same reasons. Seems to me you’ve already been stabbed in the back, I’m sure as hell not going to be the one to twist the knife. The offer still stands.”

John Dunne-JD-shifted uncomfortably in the chair, aware that he was under scrutiny from the three men sitting in the bullpen. Damn! He could not remember being this nervous since his first day at the Academy and now, just to make him look like a complete jerk, he needed to go to the bathroom yet again. The first interview had been bad enough; now, having made the short list, he was compelled to go through the same motions again. Tugging at the tie that seemed to be strangling him, he glanced apprehensively towards Chris Larabee’s office and was overcome by a moment of panic as the handle turned and the door swung wide to disgorge Larabee and another man of similar height but darker in colouring. His competition? Both had about them that aura of

intensity that made Dunne think of predatory animals, yet there was an easy familiarity between them that made Dunne think that they might be old friends. Finally the two exchanged a few parting words, a handclasp, and the darker of the two made his exit. Larabee turned the double-barrelled glare, hard-eyed and uncompromising, that JD remembered from the first meeting, towards him.

“John. Come on in.”

JD hastily got to his feet and eagerly stuck out his hand.

“Folks generally call me JD, Mr. Larabee.”

The man returned the handshake, with a look that hinted of tolerant amusement.

“Well, JD, folks generally call me Chris.”

He indicated that Dunne should go ahead of him and the young New Yorker, wishing now that he had taken the opportunity to revisit the men’s room, took a deep breath and moved forward like a man walking to the gallows rather than his next job.

Wilmington watched Larabee usher the younger man into his office and shook his head.

“Like a lamb to the slaughter,” he grinned, addressing his two colleagues, “Reckon Chris’ll chew him up and spit out the bones.”

Josiah laughed richly.

“I thought you were the one who thought he had “something”, Buck”?

“Yeah, I did. I do. I’m not sure I’ve managed to convince Chris yet though.”

“Well, then, you’ll just have to hope that he can.”

Buck leaned back in his chair with a sigh and rested his boots on the desk.

“Goddamn kid doesn’t look old enough to shave.”

Sitting at the neighbouring desk, Nathan raised his head from his terminal and looked thoughtfully at the closed door.

“Do you think he’ll take him on?”

“Don’t see why not. He took that guy Standish on didn’t he?”

Josiah turned his chair to face Wilmington, a slight frown on his face.

“Meaning?”

“At least the kid’s got a clean record.”

Nathan nodded.

“Buck’s right, you know. Not sure what Chris was thinking of bringing someone like him on board. Don’t know that we need what he’s got to offer.”

“I’m sure he has his reasons,” replied Sanchez, quietly, “And if I were you I’d think twice about saying anything like that in front of Chris.”

Buck laughed and threw a pencil at the ceiling, apparently satisfied when it stuck point first into the foam battens overhead.

“Hah! Make no mistake, Josiah, I’ve already had my ass chewed over that one. This mama’s little boy is keeping schtum from now on. Let Larabee make his own mistakes, I say.”

Josiah picked up a paperclip and began to absently unbend the thin wire into a straight length.

“What makes you so sure it’s a mistake? From all accounts Standish is very good at what he does.”

Buck kicked back from the desk and stood up, walking around as he spoke.

“That’s just it, Josiah. What does he do? And more to the point, who does he do it for?”

“Where there’s smoke there’s fire,” added Nathan, as he continued to enter data into the computer in front of him.

“Exactly!” yelled Buck triumphantly, “That’s just what I tried to tell Chris. Trouble with a capital tee.”

“Ever heard of the benefit of the doubt, Buck?” urged Josiah, softly.

Wilmington stared evenly at the older man.

“We’ll see about that, Josiah. Ever heard of biting the hand that feeds you? Hell, I’ll be the first to say I’m wrong if Standish can prove he’s straight up and down.”

“I always thought a man was innocent until proven guilty. Seems I must have gotten that twisted around somewhere.” Sarcasm oozed from the older man’s words as he stood up. “Just remember,” he threw back over his shoulder as he walked away, “all men reap what they sow.”

Buck stared after the departing Sanchez, then quickly turned to Jackson.

“Now what the hell is that supposed to mean?” Wilmington face creased into a frown. “Is he talking about me or the Feebie?”

Nathan shrugged without looking up from his computer.

“Beats me.”

Wilmington sat down again, distractedly pushing a pen around his desk.

“Anyway, the only kind of sowin’ I’m interested in is a few wild oats.”

Nathan laughed, a low rumble of genuine amusement.

“Trouble is with that, Buck, that one day someone’s gonna bring the harvest home!”

The moustached man turned quickly to stare at the paramedic, his expression almost comical as he struggled for a fitting response. In the end he gave up and instead picked up a bundle of papers from his in tray masking his ruffled feathers under the pretext of working, a ruse that was a dismal failure and which only encouraged Jackson to laugh harder.

“Yeah, right,” Wilmington muttered, as he sifted through a wad of paper, “Everyone’s a goddamn comedian.”

Chris crossed his arms on the desk in front of him and rested his forehead on the makeshift pillow. Christ it had been a long day. He knew he should think about heading for home and getting some sleep but the idea of fighting through the commuter traffic held no appeal for him. Still, sacking out in the office did nothing for him either, so it was a question of the lesser of two evils. He was aware of the door to his office opening softly but he was just too tired to react.

“Hey, Chris. You might want to think about going home tonight.”

Larabee sighed at the sound of Buck’s voice.

“I am thinking about it.” Chris’ voice was muffled, his face still buried in his arms. “Just too goddamn tired to do anything about it.”

“Come on. I’ll drive you.”

He felt Wilmington’s hand on his shoulder and with it the strength of a friendship that went back twelve years or more. Hell, Buck had been there for him more times than he could count. Through the dark days after his wife and son had been killed; days when he had wanted to curl up and die and when he had looked for answers in the bottom of a bottle of whiskey-only to find there were no answers, only grief and pain of a different kind. Buck had hauled him kicking and screaming, back from the pit of despair, kicked his ass and refused to let him give in. That had been four years ago. Good old Buck. Still looking after him.

“Thanks, Buck.” For everything.

“Don’t mention it, pard.”

Wilmington thrust the blond man’s jacket at him and unceremoniously hauled him up from the chair, with Chris responding to his prompts like an automaton as he steered him from the office and finally, after locking up, to the parking garage.

Sliding into the passenger seat of the gleaming red Camaro, Chris promptly folded his jacket into a pillow and crashed, not even bothering to put on his seatbelt. With a shake of his head, Buck leaned across and pulled the safety belt across the exhausted man, shoving the tongue into the buckle until he heard the snick of it locking into place.

“Buckle up.”

Larabee cracked open one eye.

“How about shut up?”

Buck laughed and turned the key in the ignition, filling the underground garage with the roar of the Chevrolet’s engine.

“You know, I think I like you better when you’re drunk.”

Chris moved his head, trying to find a comfortable compromise that would not leave him needing a chiropractor’s attention.

“That can be arranged,” he murmured, already only half-awake, “Just get me home first.”

Lulled by the hum of the engine and the quiet murmur of the radio, Chris slid easily into a twilight doze that quickly became the deep, solid sleep that his overtired body craved.

“Honey, we’re home!”

Jesus! The loud and deliberately cheerful voice penetrated the dark fog of sleep, an unwelcome intrusion that brought him back to reality with a jolt and a pounding heart. He struggled up, looked groggily around, and recognising his apartment block fell back against the seat with a sigh. “Very funny, Buck.”

Wilmington grinned as the blond man stretched and yawned but made no immediate move to leave the vehicle.

“Want that I come up with you?”

Larabee slowly gathered his wits and his jacket, giving Wilmington a peculiar look as his hand found the door lever and released the catch.

“No thanks, pard. I ain’t that tired.” He gave a wicked half-smile. “Besides, folks might talk.”

“Yeah, right,” laughed Buck, “As if anyone could mistake which side my bread’s buttered on!”

Chris shook his head slowly, his grin widening as he slammed the door and ducked to look through the open window.

“Buck, anyone tell you you’re full of crap?”

“Only you.” Wilmington hit the control to close the window, then put the car into drive. “Make it a late start tomorrow, okay?”

Larabee straightened and watched the car until its tail lights swung left and out of sight before wearily turning to cross the sidewalk. It had been a very long day.

Vin Tanner prepared for his second night on the streets of Boston and began to wonder if he would ever feel warm again. He had not counted on the weather being quite so bitterly cold and had already spent hours driving around with the heater blasting just to keep his thin Texas blood from freezing in his veins. Bean Town, he had quickly discovered, was an expensive place to be when you were financially challenged. He laughed a little at the delicate euphemism his mind had latched onto. It sounded better than broke but the outcome was just the same. He had driven down to the beach but it cost ten bucks to park and it was too well patrolled by the cops for him to bed down there; the last thing he needed was to wind up in the hoosegow for vagrancy. Especially not with the hardware he was carrying behind his seat. Might be difficult explaining to the local PD just why he was cruising around Boston with a SIG SSG 3000 sniper rifle. Suddenly tired of driving he finally drew into the kerb and killed the engine.

He leaned his head back against the headrest and closed his eyes. At least he had a job. For a while he had thought that striking out for Canada and starting over again would be his only option. In

fact if he was honest with himself he knew that he would be lucky to ever work in any government agency again. The ranks had closed. Not everyone was as understanding as Larabee. A bodyguard, he mused, still not quite believing what he had let himself in for. He knew Chris had been interested in both his marksmanship and his martial arts experience but he had also homed in on his advanced driving skills. Thinking of the hours he had spent in the last two days getting lost in the rabbit warren of streets around the city, he doubted Larabee would be impressed with his navigational ability and he sure as hell did not want to get stuck as a glorified chauffeur. If he had wanted that, he could have taken a job as a cab driver.

Sighing, he gently struck the steering wheel with the heel of his hand. Twenty-four hours ago he had been without a job and no real prospects, now he was getting picky about the very job that was going to haul his ass out of the fire. Talk about looking a gift horse in the mouth, here he was giving it a dental inspection. He stretched to ease the kinks out of his back and shoulders then leaned forward to turn the ignition key. Time to be moving again. No sense in drawing unwelcome attention to himself. It had been one hell of a long day and worse, it was not over yet.

He did not see the red light. Between looking at the goddamn map and trying to stay awake he cruised clean through the intersection. He was lucky in that it was late enough for there to have been no cross-traffic, he was unlucky in that the only car travelling behind him happened to be a black and white. As he pulled over at the first wail of the siren he felt a heavy sense of dread settle over him. Vin Tanner - you are fucked.

The Southerner leaned back in the armchair contemplating the Perrier water in his hand and considered himself a very lucky man. Firstly because he realised how close he had come to self-destructing with a continuing combination of painkillers and alcohol and secondly because a man by the name of Chris Larabee had shown more faith in him than he even had in himself. Even now he wondered whether he might not have been playing some bizarre subconscious game of Russian roulette, seeking to shorten the odds with each potentially lethal cocktail, looking not only for temporary freedom from pain but a permanent erasure of his past-and by default his future.

Tomorrow he would board US Airways flight 1215 and fly back to New Orleans; the city of his downfall. The prospect did not fill him with any great joy but loose ends and all that. He took a slow drink of the Perrier and tried not to think about when his next medication was due. Stabbed in the back, Larabee had said. Eviscerated would be closer to the truth. Suddenly, hand not quite steady, he sharply returned the glass to the side table, his fingers tightening momentarily around the tumbler as a vague but disturbing recollection of hearing the priest softly intoning the viaticum brought him out in a cold sweat. The memory of it still freaked him out. Jesus! He had been given the last rites.

He remembered then. Just like it was yesterday. Losing blood internally from ruptured organs faster than they could pump it back in. Losing the fight. He had been dying and he had been afraid. And he had been utterly and completely alone. The stark memory of lying bruised and broken on a gurney, crying out in pain, stripped not only of his clothing but of his dignity, was one that had not faded. Would never fade. Too close. Too goddamn close. But he had not died. Instead he had spent three months in hospital. Three long months of reconstructive surgery at Johns Hopkins-the only time he could ever remember being truly grateful for his mother's intervention on his behalf-on a leg that at first they had considered amputating below the knee. Three months of trauma counselling, of psychological assessment and therapy, of physical therapy and rehabilitation and through it all the certain knowledge that he had been set up by his own people.

No, the reality of returning to Louisiana, even for a few days, did not thrill him but he had to go back if only to finally achieve a sense of completion. It was time to close the door on that part of his life. Awkwardly pushing himself up out of the chair, feeling every bone-deep ache in his pinned and wired legs, he moved across to the window to stare thoughtfully down into the grey wetness of Beacon Street thinking how different it looked to the view from his Bienville Street apartment. After a moment he let the curtain fall and leaned his head against the window frame. Time to close the door and throw away the fucking key.

Chris surfaced, the urgent ring of the phone finally penetrating his consciousness. He had the impression that the ring had been going for some time and, still disorientated, he snatched up the phone although for a moment he was at a loss as to what he should say. Finally he managed an inarticulate: "Lo," thick with sleep and barely comprehensible. The next moment he was sitting bolt upright in bed, all sleep driven from his brain, running his hand through his unruly hair as the caller and the words suddenly came together. Vin Tanner. Police. Red light.

"You what?"

"I ran a red a light."

Chris sighed and closed his eyes.

"That's a moving violation, Vin. Even in Boston they don't arrest you for that, unless you're DUI?"

The question hung in the air for a moment but the Texan was quick to deny it.

"No. No. Look it's along story, I need someone to stand up for me and bail me out..."

"Which district?" Questions could wait.

There was a moment's silence and Larabee could hear muted conversation on the other end of the phone.

"A1 - New Sudbury Street."

"Be right there."

Larabee slammed the phone down and threw back the covers, then stopped half-way out of bed. Goddamn it, his car was still parked in Cambridge. Grabbing a pair of jeans and his cell phone he speed dialled Buck's number. Hell, so much for sleep.

"Sorry for gettin' you out of bed at this time, Buck."

"Hey, don't apologise to me; apologise to Janice."

"Janice?"

"Cute little filly moved into the apartment down the hall just last week."

"Sounds like she already moved up the hall."

Wilmington laughed.

"She's got a good sense of direction, especially in the dark."

Chris shook his head.

"Don't know where you find the energy, Buck."

Hitting the gas Wilmington pulled sharply away from the kerb.

"So what's the lowdown again? Tanner got himself arrested for running a red light, right? Must've really pissed 'em off to make 'em take him in." He frowned as he manoeuvred the Camaro easily through the almost deserted city streets. "What the fuck is he doing cruising round the city at two in the morning anyway? Doesn't strike me as party animal."

Larabee rubbed his eyes feeling as if he had a bucket load of sand under each eyelid.

"Damned if I know. Guess we'll find out soon enough. Just said it was a long story."

"Reckon it'd better be a good one," joked Wilmington, with a good natured grin, "or he might just wish he'd let sleeping dogs lie. No offence, Chris."

Larabee stared out of the window, in no mood for Buck's jokes, and in truth concerned about the Texan and what trouble he'd managed to land himself in after only forty-eight hours in Boston.

"Just drive."

It was almost four in the morning and the two men sat in the Texan's truck, with the rain running in rivulets down the windscreen, Tanner in the driver's seat looking uncomfortable, Larabee in the passenger seat looking pissed. Tanner kept his head averted, not willing to meet the older man's eyes and instead stared out of the misted side window, seeing nothing but his own reflection.

"You wanna tell me why?"

"Why I ran a red light?"

"No, fuck it! Why you spent two nights sleeping on the street in your goddamn truck?"

"Seemed like a good idea at the time?"

"Cute son-of-a-bitch." Larabee was not so much angry as exasperated with the Texan. "You

could've talked to me. Asked for an advance for Christ's sake!"

"Right," snorted Vin, a short laugh devoid of humour, "Perfect start to a new job. Touch up the boss for a loan."

"Better than waiting two days and getting yourself arrested," countered the older man, his voice losing some of its hard edge, understanding the shackles of pride that had constrained Tanner.

Vin hit the steering wheel with his closed fist but his anger was obviously directed at himself.

"Stupid! So stupid!"

"No argument from me, cowboy. Pretty dumb to drive around with a sniper rifle in your truck!"

Larabee looked steadily at the man in the driver's seat then finally sighed. "You can stay at my place tonight, okay? We'll sort something out tomorrow."

Tanner turned quickly, ready to argue, then stopped abruptly and after a moment's hesitation, nodded his agreement.

"Thanks."

"Don't mention it." The blond man settled down in the passenger seat, the hint of a smile on his face. "You really think I'm gonna let you outta my sight 'till I get my bail money back?"

Vin leaned forward to fit the key into the ignition.

"Don't worry, I ain't plannin' on leaving." He gave a tired smile. "I ain't got nowhere to go."

"Well I do," answered the older man drily, "and I'd really appreciate getting there before daylight."

The weak winter sun finally made its appearance some two hours later, a fact that ultimately neither man witnessed or even cared about.

The Texan smelled coffee. He drew in a deep breath and sighed without opening his eyes, the tantalising aroma almost tempting enough to make him to leave the soft and warm embrace of the feather comforter, but not quite. He was just too tired to move. For the first time in days he had not woken up freezing and although he had never been one for material possessions he suddenly understood the need for people to have a home base and the security of a roof over their heads. Right now he needed that feeling of security himself. Some sense of belonging somewhere. Turning further onto his side he pulled the quilt higher over his shoulder and tried to remember when he had last felt quite so at peace with himself; quite so centred.

Reluctantly he freed his left arm from the cocoon he had made for himself and held his wrist in front of his face before finally opening his eyes, although he knew from past experience that once he did that, he would forfeit any further claim on sleep. Ten a.m. He let his arm drop back onto the bed with the loose-jointed flaccidity of a rag doll and stared at the ceiling. Five hours since he had literally fallen into Larabee's spare bed, kicking off his boots and shedding his clothing in an

untidy heap at the bedside before crawling between the covers and dropping, almost instantly, into a deep and dreamless sleep; the sleep of utter exhaustion.

Yawning and stretching, he finally swung his legs over the edge of the bed and let the quilt fall away, shivering as his skin quickly lost warmth in the chilly air. Damn, even indoors there was no escaping the cold. He leaned over to haul his rucksack within reach and quickly dragged out and pulled on a clean pair of sweats and a t-shirt. Now to find some of that coffee, then maybe after a gallon or so he could think about joining the land of the living again.

Chris was in no better shape than himself by the look of him. Unshaven, dressed in just pyjama bottoms, he stood at the breakfast bar with his hand curled around a mug of coffee, his expression far away as he stared with apparent absorption at the calendar on the wall. Vin helped himself to a clean mug from the drainer and poured himself a generous measure of the dark coffee, sighing with contentment as he gulped the hot, strong brew.

“Better than sex,” he muttered, as he took another mouthful.

Larabee turned from his intense scrutiny of the calendar as if noticing the Texan for the first time.

“Then I’ve got to tell you, man, you’re doin’ somethin’ wrong.” He leaned easily against the bench. “Either that or it’s been a long time.”

Tanner cocked an eyebrow that suggested he was admitting nothing before a slow smile spread across his face.

“No comment.”

Chris finished off his own coffee and put his cup aside, arriving at his own conclusion.

“It’s been a long time,” judged the blond man his voice flat, and both men laughed. Still grinning he opened the refrigerator. “Want some breakfast?”

The Texan hesitated then shook his head.

“Coffee’s fine.”

“I make a mean Spanish omelette...besides how long since you had anything that didn’t come in a paper sack?”

“Um, I think that might have been that roadkill back in South Carolina,” confessed Tanner, straight-faced as he refilled his cup from the carafe.

Larabee leaned one arm on the fridge door and cast a quick glance at the Texan that said: smart ass. Slowly shaking his head and unsuccessfully trying to conceal his amusement, he grabbed what he needed before kneeing the door closed.

“I deserved that one,” he admitted, then as he broke a half-dozen eggs into a bowl: “How long you been travelling?”

“Long enough.” He leaned back against the bench with a sigh. “Long enough to run out of places to go. And,” he added, “to run out of money.”

Larabee looked up again, a flicker of sympathy passing over his lean features.

“Yeah.”

Tanner ducked his head, embarrassed, although there was no hint of criticism in that single word, just a wealth of understanding.

“Lit out of Texas soon as the axe fell,” he admitted, “Been on the road ever since. Picked up a day’s work here and there, just drifted mostly.”

“So what brought you up to Boston?” Larabee shot a sidelong glance at Tanner as he spoke. “Except the offer of the best job you’re ever likely to see.”

Vin shrugged, the ghost of a smile crossing his lips.

“Just one of those things, I guess. When you’re down to your last hundred anything’s worth a shot.”

“Rocks and hard places, huh?”

“Hell, Chris, I’ve been squeezed between the two plenty of times before, only thing is, this time I got pulped.”

Larabee finished pouring in the eggs into the pan and stood back.

“Hey, you made it through the other side. That’s all that matters. Amarillo’s loss is Boston’s gain, right?”

Tanner raised a doubtful eyebrow.

“If you say so. Can’t promise I’ll turn out to be what you’re expecting though.”

Larabee slowly moved the pan over the heat without looking back at the young Texan.

“Oh, you will,” he murmured softly, with a sly grin, “I guarantee it.”

JD Dunne was beginning to think he had made a mistake. He was sure Larabee had told him 8.30 but now he was starting to doubt himself. The automatic doors to the InterSept offices had opened as he approached but both reception and the bull pen were deserted and he was left with the uncomfortable sensation that he had walked into a bad science-fiction movie where suddenly everyone had been vapourised or kidnapped by aliens and any minute something was going to happen to scare the bejesus out of him.

“Hey, kid!”

It did.

Although the unexpected appearance of-he struggled for the name, knowing the guy had interviewed him, Warrington no Wilmington, Buck Wilmington-from a back office hardly qualified as a paranormal event, it certainly succeeded in startling him. He wheeled at the sound of the voice, giving a fair imitation of a frightened deer and wondered if it was his destiny to always feel awkwardly foolish in front of this man.

“I’m...I’m looking for Chris Larabee,” he stammered finally.

Wilmington grinned and took a swig of the coffee he was carrying.

“Yeah? Well, you won’t find him here, ‘cause he ain’t turned up yet.” He perched on the edge of a desk and waved one arm expansively to encompass the empty room. “Neither has anyone else in case you hadn’t already noticed, so it’s just you and me, kid.”

He laughed at his own joke and noisily slurped more of the obviously hot coffee from the oversized mug in his hand.

“The name’s JD.” Dunne was conscious of his youthful looks and Wilmington’s habit of referring to him as “kid” was already getting under his skin.

“Well, fine, JD,” he stressed the initials as if he found the idea of him having a name mildly amusing, “What time did Chris say for you to be here?”

“Eight-thirty.”

The older man finally set his coffee down and

“Grab a chair, in fact best lay claim to a desk too; only Josiah, Nathan and me are set up yet so take your pick. First in, best dressed is my rule. Chris had a real late night so I don’t expect to see him before noon. Course I had a late night too,” he continued, as much to himself as to Dunne, “but I can manage to drag my ass into work. Still, he’s the boss, reckon he can do just about whatever he wants.”

Dunne hesitantly moved to a neighbouring desk. He wasn’t sure if he wanted to be too close to Wilmington, but neither did he want to look as if he was trying to get away from him. In the end he just chose the next one along and sat down, feeling as if he should be somewhere else-anywhere else. He looked quickly around the office and wondered again if he had made the right decision.

So Larabee was going to be late. He had been as impressed by the setup as he had been overwhelmed by the force of Larabee’s personality, but now he felt a sense of disappointment that Larabee had not even bothered to cancel the meeting, instead he had just not turned up. He leaned across and automatically turned on the monitor, trying to decide if he was supposed to interpret that as an indicator of his overall importance in the greater scheme of things. Subdued by the thought, he occupied himself by checking out the network, gradually immersing himself in the minutiae of the system to the exclusion of all else.

“Hell, JD, there ain’t nothing that interesting on a computer monitor unless it’s got a triple x rating.”

Damn! Dunne glanced up, successfully concealing the fact that he had almost jumped a foot out of his chair, to find Wilmington, with one buttock hitched on the edge of his desk, watching him with great interest.

“Just checking out the system,” he confessed guiltily, adding: “Pretty cool setup.”

The older man shrugged.

“Hey, kid, I write reports, I send email and I surf the net. All the rest is just a load of hooley!”

In spite of his initial misgivings, Dunne found himself responding to Wilmington’s affable nature and with a grin, he slowly shook his head as if unable to believe what he was hearing.

“Hooley?”

“That’s right. Hooley! I’ll leave all that IT techno bullshit side of it up to you, kid. I’m just an old fashioned guy who does things the old fashioned way.”

JD flicked to another screen.

“And I’ll bet you still light a fire by rubbing two sticks together, right?”

Buck laughed.

“Done that too.”

JD did not turn from the screen.

“Geez, didn’t think you were that old.”

Wilmington stood up, and still laughing walked back to his own desk, leaving Dunne with a curious sense of having undergone some kind of initiation. Maybe Wilmington was not going to be such a bad guy after all. If only he’d stop calling him kid!

oooOOOooo

Larabee looked at each man sitting around the conference table, conscious of the fact that the differences between them were far more apparent than any similarities there might be. A few of them had already met but this was the first time that all of them had come together as a group. At this stage, he rejected the notion of regarding them as a team, already knowing there would be a few rough edges to smooth before he could even hope to mould them into a single working entity. Already he had noticed the wary glances, the traditional posturing of males in front of other males, and the subtle verbal power plays that would ultimately establish places within the pack. Yet these were the men he had chosen to be at the core of this organisation. For better or worse it was now his job to pull them together into an effective unit. Considering them individually he decided that it was not going to be an easy path-for any of them.

“Okay,” he started, “Some of you have already met but just to kick things off, I’ll introduce everybody.” He gestured to the man on his right. “Vin Tanner. Lately of the Texas Rangers. Vin is a...marksman...with a whole swag of medals and the Porter Cup to prove it. So my advice is, don’t piss him off.”

Watching the rest of the group in that quiet way he had as he slouched in the chair, it was easy for Larabee to see the predator in him and could readily imagine the intense blue eyes focused on a

distant target to the exclusion of all else as he lined up for a shot. A better friend than an enemy. “Buck Wilmington. My partner, before that with the ATF and before that US Army Special Forces. Buck is our resident evasive driving specialist.”

“Yeah,” Wilmington grinned, “Learned everything I know driving in downtown Boston.”

Friend and companion, the two of them had lived, laughed, loved and even cried together, through a turbulent twelve years with Buck always there riding shotgun for him. He owed Buck his sanity and probably his life.

Beside Wilmington sat the youngest of the group, John Dunne.

“JD Dunne. NYPD until just a few days ago. IT and electronic surveillance are JD’s areas of expertise.”

A calculated risk as far as InterSept was concerned. A greenhorn. Yet Buck had seen something in him, and he valued his friend’s judgement. Time would tell.

“Nathan Jackson. Last two years working close protection. Nathan’s also a trained paramedic. Try not to keep him too busy, guys.”

This one had a rock solid background first as an army medic and then as a civilian paramedic, a man of quiet dignity who took his work seriously. A foil to the noisy exuberance of Buck and the keen enthusiasm of Dunne.

“Josiah Sanchez. Former USMC, specialising in explosives. Now our designated Hazmat expert.”

Oldest of the group, he exuded an air of calm that was pleasantly contagious. If Nathan was the rock then he was the water flowing around it. Josiah had spent most of his adult life in the Marine Corps and Chris knew that in his time he had been a hellraiser but now he was searching for some measure of balance in his life.

Larabee moved his gaze to the last man at the table. The green eyes were already on him, that knowing smile, just barely there, and Larabee felt the uncomfortable sensation that the Southerner knew exactly what was in his thoughts. This man was of a different breed and no mistake. Hell, his suit cost more than the collective wardrobes of the remaining six at the table. A square peg in a round hole? Again, only time would tell.

“Ezra Standish. Recently parted company with the Bureau, Ezra’s specialty was in deep cover situations. He’s also a pilot with a commercial ticket and part of his responsibilities will be flying the company jet. So that’s the...”

“And you, Mr. Larabee?” Standish’s soft Georgia drawl interrupted smoothly. “What about you?”

Chris looked evenly at his questioner, wondering how the Southerner always managed to infuse his words with a hint of sarcasm without ever being openly challenging. He shrugged, never completely comfortable talking about himself.

“Nothing spectacular. Regular Army then Special Forces. Moved into this business about three years

ago. Started out as a bodyguard and the rest, as they say, is history.” Quickly moving on, he glanced around the table. “Any questions?”

Wilmington leaned back in his chair and stretched expansively.

“Yeah. Where’s the donuts?”

Vin Tanner. Lately of the Texas Rangers. Well at least Larabee had not gone into any detail and he wondered if anyone but Chris knew that his leaving the Rangers had been on less than friendly terms. Hell, Tanner, admit it; you had your ass kicked. He was surprised that the sense of injustice over his dismissal still stung. Damn. After so many months he had thought that he was over that but in truth the wound was barely healed. Now, compared to the present company in which he found himself, he was starting to feel like the black sheep of the family. Recently parted company with the Bureau. Tanner’s head snapped up and he found himself looking across the table with interest at the urbane Southerner. Larabee’s inflection was subtle but the implication was that the parting had not been an amicable one. Maybe he was not the only black sheep. Although after studying Standish for several more moments the Texan came to the conclusion that possibly he was not so much a black sheep as a wolf in sheep’s clothing. As he sat, relaxed and giving nothing away in his expression save a hint of mild amusement, the man continually rolled a dime across the backs of his knuckles, seeming not to pay any attention to the exercise but never once misplacing or dropping the coin. An impressive exhibition of dexterity which left Vin wondering how fast Standish might be with a gun. Chalk and cheese. Standish, with his expensive three-piece suit, almost militarily precise haircut, a heavy gold watch on his wrist that Vin would bet his boots was a Rolex and carefully manicured fingernails, screamed wealth and privilege to the Texan. Looking down at his own worn and scuffed cowboy boots, jeans and leather jacket, his hair untrimmed and grown out to rat-tails over the last few months, he felt like a penniless hobo, which admittedly was not too far from the truth. Yet there was a hard edge to the man that suggested that what he was seeing was not necessarily the real Ezra Standish but ornate window dressing, and for some inexplicable reason he felt a curious affinity for the Southerner although if anyone had asked he would have been hard pressed to explain why. His affinity for Larabee was not so hard to explain. Two sides of the same coin. They had established a rapport that had begun back in Amarillo; two men who had shared a handshake and a beer after a hard won fight. Now it was as if they had known each other for a lifetime. It had been almost a week since Larabee had bailed him out of jail and he had not moved out of the apartment. Neither had he moved in. In an unspoken agreement it was understood that as soon as Tanner was on his feet again he would find a place of his own, but for the moment it seemed Chris was glad of the company and he was glad of a place he could call home, however temporary that home might be. He owed Larabee for that at least.

Emerging from his introspection he glanced quickly around the room and realised that this group of men, although strangers, were his only future. There was nowhere else he could go now, his bridges were in smoking ruins and there was just one road ahead for him but at least this time he felt it was a freeway and not a cul de sac.

It had been a hard afternoon's work. Chris still loved the hard physical slog of training and was as fit, if not fitter, than the youngest in the group but he found that a few hours of close quarter drill and unarmed combat really got the adrenaline pumping. Taking a quick break, Larabee wiped the sweat from his forehead with his sleeve and sculled a cup of water as he paused to watch the others. A mixed bunch indeed. What JD lacked in finesse he made up for with a boundless enthusiasm and Chris suspected that the young cop would be nursing a few bruises by the end of the session. Vin was economical and fast, no surprises there considering his martial arts background; Josiah was an old hand, not working any harder than he needed to but a powerful and capable adversary; Nathan approached hand to hand combat with efficient practicality but was obviously never going to be anything more than adequate; Buck was a known quantity and Chris had no real interest in watching his performance except to measure his interaction with the group as a whole; Ezra had not exerted himself beyond that which was absolutely necessary, but when he was on the mat he had proved to be surprisingly adept and Chris wondered if he might not just be pacing himself in avoiding the rough stuff.

He moved forward, throwing away the paper cup as the instructor, an ex-SAS sergeant by the name of Ian Kendry, put Vin and Ezra up to spar. Joining the others at the edge of the mat, he casually rested his arm on Buck's shoulder.

"This should be interesting," he muttered, if anything sounding dubious about the match.

Buck grinned in response.

"Your two protégés, Chris! Mano y mano. Fifty bucks on Tanner."

Chris frowned and shot a hard-eyed glare at his friend.

"Forget it!"

Wilmington laughed, elbowing him in the ribs.

"Hah! You just know you'll lose your money."

The two men, almost evenly matched in height and weight, stood relaxed but aware, neither making a move as they sized each other up.

"Whenever you're ready," prompted Kendry drily, provoking a ripple of laughter from the remaining five.

It was unclear to any of the observers who made the first move but the pair were suddenly a blur of movement, attacking, blocking, feinting in a barrage of kicks and blows, that resembled a cat

fight more than any of the traditional moves they had been engaged in for the previous few hours. Chris became aware of a low murmur of excitement buzzing through the group as they strained forward for a clearer view of the two men and he felt his own pulse jump in response to the sheer intensity of the match. Neither man seemed to be gaining an advantage, with each blocking in lightning fast response to the others' moves as they moved within a tight circle on the mat. He exchanged a quick glance with Buck, seeing his own thoughts mirrored in the other man's eyes: This was as up close and personal as it got. The action was fluid, and not quite like anything that Chris had seen before but whatever it was both Vin and Ezra had all the moves. Then as abruptly as it had started it was over. The pair stood gripping each other's arms, breathing hard and grinning. Ezra stepped back and gave a quick bow to his opponent.

"Bigay-galang."

"What the fuck was that?" Buck's voice carried clearly through the gym as he stood and watched Standish and Tanner shake hands then start up an animated conversation, as they moved off the mat.

"That," said Ian, smiling broadly, "was a more than adequate display of Eskrima."

JD leaned forward to look at the instructor, obviously none the wiser for having been given a name on which to hang the moves he had just witnessed.

"So what the hell is it? All that was missing was the brass knuckles and the switchblades!"

Ian laughed. "That's not too far from the truth, son. It's a Filipino martial art; uses both open hand and weapons - traditionally rattan sticks and knives. As you can see, it's very effective at close quarters, and has a very flexible and adaptable style. Each fighter will adapt the moves to suit his own way, so you won't see any rigidly traditional forms being used."

Kendry moved forward and clapped one meaty hand on each man's shoulder as they joined the group. "Well, lads, I'm impressed. Been hiding your lights under a bushel, eh? Now just for being bloody cute you can each hit the deck and gimme fifty push ups - one handed; twenty-five left, twenty-five right. Now!"

The burly Englishman turned his attention to Larabee, ignoring the pair as they dropped without question to the floor, surrounded by the remains of the group shouting encouragement, making jokes and enjoying the fact that it was someone else under the hammer. He jerked his thumb over his shoulder at the two men.

"I don't think there's a lot I'm going to be able to teach those boys, Chris," he grinned, "Except maybe how to fight a little dirtier than they no doubt already do."

"Looked pretty business-like to me."

Kendry looked thoughtful and started to walk away with Chris following.

"They're both bloody good. Ezra's got more style but he's not quite as fast, in fact he slowed up a

lot towards the end and I'm pretty sure Vin stopped right when he could have finished it." He nodded in approval and flicked a parting glance at Tanner and Standish. "Good man. Confident enough that he's not going to put the screws on the other guy just to show he's got balls but who'll kick ass when he needs to."

Larabee nodded slowly, knowing what Kendry meant.

"Poor bastard got it in the neck from the Texas Rangers."

Ian looked keenly at the blond man beside him. "Good for you, bad for him though. What'd he do?"

"Killed a guy."

Kendry laughed out loud. "Fucking A! And they gave him the chop for that?"

"Unnecessary force. You know the kind of bullshit."

Kendry nodded slowly.

"As long as you're cool with it. Reckon you've got yourself a winner, Chris. In fact this looks a good bunch you've rustled up this time."

Larabee turned to study the six men who had formed a huddle on the mat, laughing and joking as the Southerner and the Texan sweated their way through the sets to good-humoured ribbing and well-intentioned advice.

"Tell me that again at the end of this four weeks and I might just believe it."

White-knuckled Ezra gripped the edge of the washbasin and considered the indignity of passing out in the men's room of a public bar. In a cold sweat, he was momentarily undecided as to whether he was going to throw up or whether he would just keel over and smash his head open on the filthy tiled floor. Neither option greatly appealed to him. Turning on the cold faucet he sluiced his face, then fumbled in his breast pocket for the blister pack of tablets that might just be his salvation, at least enough to get him through the evening.

It had been a mistake. He should have accepted that he was finished; that nothing could ever be the same again. Whatever had possessed him to believe that he could just take up his life as if nothing had happened? He swallowed a tablet, resisted the urge to take a second, and scooped a handful of water to his mouth to wash it down before once again gripping the porcelain basin, truly afraid that he was going to lose it and end up unconscious on the stinking floor of a public toilet. Loosening his tie, he wrestled with the top button of his shirt, cursing and finally ripping it open, not caring that the pearl button flew off to land somewhere on the tiles with a soft chink.

"Ezra?"

The Southerner almost groaned. Goddamn it, if someone had to come looking for him why the hell did it have to be Wilmington? He closed his eyes and gave a short, bitter laugh. At least he had bothered, although knowing Buck he probably thought he was shooting up, or doing a few lines of

cocaine. Larabee's partner had made it quite clear that he thought Chris' faith in his abilities severely over-rated-and at this moment Ezra would have been quite prepared to agree with him on that score.

"Christ! If you feel as bad as you look, pard, then you're in serious trouble." Surprisingly, the bigger man did not hesitate, hurrying forward to shove a hand under his elbow and a thigh against the backs of his legs to hold him up as he swayed dangerously. "You've been looking like a sick dog all night. If I didn't know you hadn't been drinking, I'd think you were blitzed." He paused and looked intently at the Southerner. "You wanna go home?"

Standish hung his head and swallowed the bile that rose in his throat, gulping air and trying desperately not to retch. Awkwardly reaching around him Wilmington grabbed a wad of paper towels from the wall dispenser and wetting them under the tap, thrust the cold compress against the back of Ezra's neck, momentarily reviving him.

"Not home," he managed, wearily, "In fact, if you don't mind, Mr. Wilmington, I believe at this moment a hospital may be more appropriate."

"Jesus, Ezra. You're not kidding are you?" The alarm in the other man's voice was genuine.

"Trust me. I kid you not."

"Shit!" He felt the increase in pressure on his elbow as Buck supported him. "Just hang in there, you hear me? Don't you pass out on me, you son-of-a-bitch!"

"Certainly not," he protested weakly, as if he found the very idea offensive, "The floor in this establishment is disgusting and this is an Armani suit."

It was all too familiar. The sights, the sounds, even the smell of the ER brought back unwelcome and intrusive memories and once again he was gripped by an irrational fear of what was yet to come. Only the analgesia he had taken in the men's room kicking in half way to the hospital had stopped him succumbing to the panic that was starting to take hold; that, and the fact that he was not alone. He was still trying to come to terms with the fact that these six men, who were really little more than strangers, had immediately and without question closed ranks around him and like a well-oiled machine, had quickly gotten him away from the bar with a minimum of fuss and into the company SUV. As Buck had taken the wheel, Jackson had expertly relieved him of his jacket, tie and belt, and loosened the rest of his clothing while he had lain on the back seat vaguely wondering what the hell he had done to deserve such attention, except make a complete fool of himself by finally throwing up on the sidewalk outside the bar.

The pain had been worse than he had ever known it; breaking through the medication and tearing through his vitals until he wanted to scream out loud, instead he had writhed in silent agony and prayed for a fast trip and a skilled doctor at the other end. He need not have worried on either

count. Wilmington had wasted no time carving his way through the city traffic with all the skill of a Formula One driver and once at their destination Larabee showed he was a man who believed in cutting through the bullshit and getting straight to the point; the fact that he was backed by another five equally hard-looking men made a formidable argument and had guaranteed that he was heard. Ezra, reduced to the role of observer, found himself fast-tracked through triage, and before he knew it he was back in the system, and hating every undignified, humiliating and pain-wracked minute of it.

Chris had stayed with him and Ezra found it amusing, in spite of his own misery, that not once had anyone on staff asked the lean blond to leave, although in some ways he could not blame them; the man exuded an air of menace that tended to keep people at a distance. The others at least had been persuaded to wait outside, something for which he was secretly grateful, not knowing if he could tolerate quite such a show of solidarity. Besides which, he reasoned, if he was going to embarrass himself in any way, he preferred to do it in private and God only knew what these medical vultures might yet have in store for him.

At last, after far too many questions and a prolonged physical workup, during the course of which he endured the unpleasant experience of having a tube passed down his nose and into his stomach and the lesser discomfort of the intravenous line in his left arm, someone-at least from his point of view-did something right and stuck a hypodermic loaded with morphine into his hip. The drug seeped rapidly into his bloodstream, pushing the pain back to a distant place where it lurked, a dark shadow robbed of its former savage intensity, and he was finally able to relax with a soft sigh and close his eyes.

“Reckon that did the trick, huh?”

Ezra had almost forgotten that Larabee was still there. The concept of the whole buddy system was alien to him and having someone in his corner was a decidedly unique experience. Whether or not it was the morphine affecting his judgement, he decided it was not such a bad feeling.

“Indeed, Mr. Larabee, “ he breathed, almost dreamily, “but from past experience, I should warn you that it makes me heave.”

“Don’t worry, I move fast,” came the dry response, “But that reminds me, you owe Buck for dry cleaning.”

“Aw, hell,” Ezra groaned, remembering disgracing himself out on the street. “Tell me you’re joking.”

“Would I lie to you?” The humour in his voice was evident and it was clear that Chris found any opportunity to score off his friend a source of amusement.

The Southerner opened his eyes and focused with some difficulty on the blond man beside the gurney. Chris was actually grinning.

“Please convey my apologies to Mr. Wilmington.” His eyes, almost against his will, slid shut again. “No sweat.” Larabee fell silent for a moment, the smile fading into a an expression of profound sadness, then so quietly that even if Standish had not already slipped into a narcotic-induced doze he would barely have heard it: “You could’ve told me, Ezra. Could’ve trusted me at least.” Chris stared for a long time at the peacefully relaxed features of the younger man, and wondered how long it was going to take to build that kind of trust in someone who had been so well fucked over by his former peers. His first and best guess was a very long time.

Chris Larabee stared evenly at the young doctor and sighed, a signal for anyone that knew him that he was trying hard to hold onto his temper.

“So what are you telling me? That you can’t tell me anything?”

The resident shuffled from foot to foot, unable to maintain eye contact, and desperately looking around in the hope that some emergency would arise to rescue him from this intense man.

“You’re not next of kin. It’s hospital policy...” He uttered a small squeak, his words coming to an abrupt end, as Chris’ fist lashed out and grabbed his coat by the lapels.

“Right now, I’m all he’s fucking-well got so consider me next-of-kin by default, okay? Now either start talkin’ or get me someone who can!”

A muscular arm quickly insinuated itself between the two men, another hand hauling back on a belligerent Larabee’s shoulder as Wilmington stepped into the arena.

“Take my advice, doc and listen up. My friend, Chris here, doesn’t have a whole lot of patience, so try not to piss him off too much. He’s on an understandably short fuse.”

The Resident, released, moved back and straightened his jacket, obviously not any the less intimidated by the man that had ostensibly come to his rescue.

“I’ll get Doctor Travis.” He wheeled away and cut back into the ER, leaving the two men looking fiercely at his departing figure.

“You do that, son,” muttered Buck, then quickly turned on Larabee. ”Hell Chris, you can’t go beating up on the doctors like that. Gotta do this right; catch more flies with honey than with vinegar you know.”

Larabee shrugged himself free of Wilmington’s grip and looked ready to spit six inch nails.

“Yeah, well I’m not looking to catch goddamn flies!”

A low whistle alerted the blond man to a new development at the same time Wilmington nudged him with his elbow.

“Well, just look what’s comin’ our way, Chris.” Buck’s voice had dropped to the suggestive tone that Chris associated with Wilmington’s pursuit of an attractive female. “You might want to think about watchin’ your language, pard.”

“Is there something I can help you with?” Chris’ expression did not change as he looked the owner of the voice up and down but his entire body was speaking volumes, the main thrust of which seemed to be: who the hell are you? “I’m Doctor Mary Travis.” The answer.

Travis was a tall blond woman in her early thirties, her manner coolly appraising as she studied the two men through startlingly green eyes. Although she appeared open and responsive, she gave the impression that she was not about to stand any nonsense from anyone; even Chris Larabee. For a moment the blond man said nothing, merely assessing her with the same degree of intensity that she had used on him. After a long silence, he grudgingly responded.

“Chris Larabee.”

Travis frowned and inclined her head to one side.

“The Chris Larabee?” The rising inflection of her voice intimated personal knowledge of him.

He cast a quick, puzzled glance at his partner then shifted his gaze back to the doctor. “Do I know you?”

She smiled briefly. “No, but I know of you.”

Buck grinned.

“Goddamn, Chris, and I thought I was the legend!”

The blonde woman, smiling indulgently at Wilmington, took a step forward and held out her hand.

“I’m Orrin Travis’ daughter-in-law. He’s told me a lot about you.”

Orrin Travis, former Supreme Court Judge and the prime mover behind InterSept. Its founder and its present Chief Executive. Chris knew Travis’ son, a high profile executive, had been killed in a terrorist attack some years before; one of the reasons the Judge had moved into the personal protection field and quickly drawn Larabee and other men like him to his cause. This then was Stephen’s widow. He nodded once, acknowledging his awareness of her identity but ignored the extended hand she offered in greeting.

“You’re in ER?”

If she was intimidated by the snub, she did not show it. Instead her voice assumed a professional quality as she answered Larabee’s question.

“I’m the senior MD on duty,” she admitted, “I understand you have some concerns about someone you brought in.”

“A friend.” Larabee snapped. “I want to know what the fu...” He caught himself in time, remembering Buck’s warning. “...what’s happening with him and nobody’s talking.” He ran a hand through his short hair, an indicator of his concern. “I tried to tell that jerk that there is no fucking next-of-kin but no one’s listening!”

Travis smoothly took his arm, recognising the anger in him and underneath it the genuine worry.

“Mr. Larabee, we’re not here to be obstructive but there are issues of confidentiality...”

“Doctor Travis, this is one of my men.” Plain and simple. No argument. “And there is no-one else.”

The anger had given way to an appeal for help.

Travis nodded, understanding.

‘Give me a minute. He’s not one of my cases but I’ll have a look and get back to you.’ She looked up at Wilmington. “I suggest you get Mr. Larabee a coffee and,” she smiled archly, as she started to walk away, “keep hold of the leash.”

He needed the coffee. He would have preferred something stronger, something amber and in a tumbler full of ice, but that could wait until he got home; if he ever got home. Sculling the hot, strong brew from the flimsy styrofoam cup he resisted the sudden urge to laugh as he recalled Travis’ parting comment. Orrin’s daughter-in-law was one tough cookie. And of course he had made a great first impression. Keep hold of the leash. Buck was still laughing. He would get good mileage out of that one.

“Hell, Buck,’ he protested finally, but without any heat, “It wasn’t that funny.”

“Oh, man, you gotta be kidding! That was a classic. She sure set you back on your ass.”

“Buck?”

“Yeah?”

“Get over it.”

Wilmington’s response was to dissolve into yet another burst of uncontrollable laughter and throwing an arm around Larabee’s shoulders, steer him back towards the other four men who, after the long wait, had finally resorted to playing a desultory game of cards in the waiting area.

Sanchez glanced up as they approached.

“So what’s happening?”

“Don’t ask,” sighed Chris, sitting down and drinking his coffee. Josiah had known him long enough to understand he meant it.

“Buck?”

A shake of the head. “Medical red tape.”

Vin lifted his head and stared for a long moment at Larabee.

“How was he when you last saw him, Chris?”

“Flyin’ high.” He gave a crooked smile. “And feelin’ no pain.”

The Texan threw down his cards, no longer interested in the game. “’Bout time.”

“Yeah,” agreed Josiah softly, flexing his fingers, bruised from the strength of Ezra’s grip, as he remembered the Southerner’s stoically quiet distress in the back of the Jeep. Such agonising torment he would not wish on his worst enemy.

The six of them fell into an awkward silence. None of them knowing either each other or Ezra well enough to be completely at ease with the situation, yet feeling a need to maintain the

cohesiveness of the group. For any one of them to leave was unthinkable. So they waited.

“Mr. Larabee. Would you like to come this way, please?”

Chris had been on his feet the moment Travis has reappeared and was moving before she had even finished speaking, dropping his empty coffee container in Buck’s lap as he passed, pausing only to slap Wilmington up the side of the head as he yelled: “Watch out, doc. He bites and I’m not sure he’s house trained!”

Larabee flushed as he fell into step beside the attractive blonde, annoyed at how easily Buck had managed to embarrass him. “Don’t mind him, he’s certifiable.”

She gave him an amused glance and led him through the swing doors into the ER.

“Interesting friends you have, Mr. Larabee.” She halted then and turned to him with her arms folded. “I’ve spoken with Mr. Standish and...” She paused and a smile crossed her lips. “...he insists that you are...his brother.”

Chris ducked his head hiding his own smile but secretly admiring the Southerner for his ever-ready line of bullshit. She went on. “When I questioned him about the difference in names do you know what he said? I never liked the name Larabee.”

“He’s probably telling the truth there,” he admitted readily, silently adding it was possibly the only element of truth in anything the Southerner had told her. After all the man had made a career out of pretending to be something he was not.

Travis raised an eyebrow.

“Yes, well, the more I hear, the less I want to know but as Mr. Standish has named you his advocate then I see no reason to keep you out of the picture.”

Chris eased out the breath he had been holding, knowing that doctors were about as ready to divulge information about their patients as a priest was likely to reveal the secrets of the confessional.

“Thanks.”

She drew him aside, clearing the way as a loaded gurney came through the doors.

“Now, some information.”

He experienced a moment of panic knowing he was in deep trouble if Travis wanted anything too personal. Everything he knew about the man came from his personnel file, what he had gleaned from the newspapers and a few superficial conversations over the past week. His biggest fear was that that she would need to know something that he could not tell her, and that he would not be of any use at all to Ezra.

“Like?”

“Some history. I can see for myself that he’s had fairly recent abdominal surgery but I can’t get any real answers out of him and it’s not just the morphine.”

“Ezra doesn’t like to talk about it.” That at least was the absolute truth. Larabee sighed and dug his hands into his pockets, wondering how much he should tell. How much she really needed to know. “He was an FBI agent working long term deep cover and someone blew the whistle on him. I can’t tell you all the details, I think only Ezra knows what really happened but they really did a number on him.” He paused again, aware that this was another man’s life he was talking about so casually in a hospital corridor. “Held him down and broke both his legs, again and again, with a tyre iron, then beat him up. And I mean really beat the crap out of him. Internal injuries, a ruptured spleen I think, lost a couple of feet of intestine...I don’t know what else. Then they tossed him in the swamp and left him for alligator bait.”

Her eyes darkened, a hint of anger behind her calm, professional mask.

“Yes. That would explain a lot. He’s very...” She paused searching for the word. “...wary.”

Chris guessed stubbornly unco-operative would have been a more accurate assessment but he could imagine how Ezra would feel about hospitals.

“So what’s wrong with him?”

“I’ve scheduled a laparoscopy for first thing tomorrow morning, just to have a look and see what’s going on inside but my first instinct given his history think we’re looking at abdominal adhesions here.”

“What?”

“It’s fairly common after surgery,” she continued, “You see, during the healing process the raw surfaces stick together and form fibrous bands of scar tissue. The more extensive the surgery the more adhesions there are likely to be. The bowel may attach itself to the abdominal wall, another section of bowel, the bladder. The pain, as you’ve already seen, can be excruciating.”

“That’s it?” Chris stared at the woman, disbelief in his eyes. “That’s what’s caused all this? That’s why this guy has spent the last few months swallowing painkillers like candy and going nearly out of his mind?”

Travis frowned.

“In all probability, yes.”

“Can you fix it?”

She looked away from the hard-eyed glare that almost demanded an answer in the affirmative.

“The prognosis is...fair. We’ll do the diagnostic scope and adhesiolysis tomorrow. Then in another two to four weeks he’ll need a second laparoscopy to free any new adhesions that are starting to form but there’s no guarantee that it won’t happen again. It’s the nature of the problem. The more surgery to free the adhesions, the more adhesions form.”

Chris shook his head. Not liking what he was hearing.

“Ezra knows?”

“He knows about the adhesions and the surgery.” She started to walk, waiting for Larabee to follow before she spoke again. “Look, Mr. Larabee,” she explained patiently, “I could do a microlaparoscopy here in ER under local anaesthetic right now but given his history, I think it’s best to wait. He’s already suspicious of hospitals and doctors, that’s perfectly obvious. I think it would be too traumatic for him for me to attempt a procedure like that under these conditions. I’d rather get his pain, and his anxiety, under control and do it in OR. That way, if there’s anything,” she hesitated, “...more complicated, then we can go straight in.”

“To tell you the truth,” Larabee sighed, “I don’t think Ezra can handle any more complications in his life right now, Doctor Travis.”

The woman nodded, a gesture that indicated that in some measure she understood.

“Don’t worry, Mr. Larabee,” She gave a knowing smile. “Your ‘brother’s’ in good hands.”

Chris sighed, not completely convinced, although he responded with guilty grin.

“I’ll take your word for that.”

Travis stopped at Ezra’s cubicle, lowering her voice.

“You should stay with him. You or someone else he trusts,” she advised, quietly, “And while I know men don’t like to either admit or hear this, he’s scared and he could use a friend.” She smiled. “Or better still, a brother.”

“Thanks. I will.”

She turned her back then, moving quickly away from him down the long corridor.

“Hey, doc,” he called, surprising himself that he had done so and even more surprised when she looked back, “I am house trained, you know.”

The smile flashed briefly then she was gone and as Chris pushed aside the curtain screening the Southerner’s cubicle he decided that, given time, he could maybe even get to like Doctor Travis.

He stirred, the uncomfortable feeling that he was not alone nagging insistently at his dulled senses; a vague warning from the once finely honed survival instincts that he had nurtured over the years but which had suddenly deserted him, leaving him feeling vulnerable and exposed. Damn sedation. A chemical double edged sword. He started to move his arm, felt the tug of the IV line secured in a vein in the back of his left hand and stopped with a frustrated sigh. It took a full minute for his brain to offer the alternative of moving his right arm, by which time the initial reason for wanting to move at all had long since fled his mind.

Now if he could just get his head together. Right now he had the attention span of a goldfish. Pain relief certainly had its downside. He was going to OR. Or had already been. He could not quite remember which. Someone at some stage had explained the whole thing to him but that could have been five minutes ago or five hours. He shifted a hip, feeling the sensation of fullness centred on

his pelvis and decided he must be post-surgery as he felt as if someone had carelessly rearranged parts of his internal anatomy below the waist, and quite possibly a few above. With his increased level of awareness came the realisation that his body was insisting on his undivided attention as various signals simultaneously reached his brain through the clearing fog of anaesthesia. His mouth was as dry as dust and his throat raw, he desperately needed to empty his bladder, and his stomach was threatening to empty itself on a rising tide of nausea. He swallowed hard, overcoming the urge to throw up and pushing aside the more immediate demands of his body, as he finally persuaded his eyes to open.

His instincts had not failed him after all. Not alone. One man, his own fatigue clearly written across his lean features, keeping vigil; sea green eyes keenly watching, subtly softening as they met his own. Ezra found he was not at all surprised that it was Chris Larabee who should be at his bedside. What did surprise him was how natural it seemed and his own ready acceptance of the man's presence.

"Don't you have anything better to do, Mr. Larabee?" It was hard work getting mind and mouth to co-ordinate but the words came out in the right order and only slightly slurred which, he decided, was all that he could ask, considering he was so thoroughly bombed.

"Plenty," Chris confessed readily, the hint of a smile playing at the corners of his mouth, "But blood's thicker than water, right? Thought as your only kin I really should stick around."

Ezra found the heavy sarcasm amusing and laughed softly, his right arm carefully guarding his still-tender abdomen from the unavoidable movement.

"Creative manipulation of facts. Knew the bastards wouldn't tell you anything otherwise," he murmured, fighting the sleep that was trying to reclaim him, "My apologies for any inconvenience."

Chris waved a hand.

"It's cool, Ezra. You did good. Never had a brother before. New experience for me." His tone became more serious as he quickly abandoned the banter. "So, how're you feeling?"

"Wasted." His gaze slid away from Larabee's unable to maintain focus and his right hand moved from protecting his belly to slowly to massage his eyelids. "Feel crappy seven different ways."

"Yeah? Well that's understandable I guess." Larabee suddenly looked away and began a determined attack on an already ragged cuticle. When he spoke again, his voice was pitched low, startling in its intensity. "You really gave us a scare, you son-of-a-bitch!"

Although Ezra's recollection of the run to the hospital was at best hazy after he had been bundled by willing hands into the Jeep, he remembered with absolute clarity the genuine worry he had read on each and every face and his own stunned disbelief that someone actually cared. That alone was enough for him to know that Larabee was telling the truth.

“Scared myself,” he admitted, and immediately wondered what had possessed him to make such a confession. What the hell was he thinking of? He blamed the medication. “Almost as bad...” He stopped abruptly, almost snapping his teeth together to keep the words from slipping out. Christ, what had they given him Sodium Pentothal? No, he would not go there. Not for anything in the world. He had not screamed; not once through any of it. Would not give the bastards the satisfaction. Bad enough that he had finally lost control and pissed himself like a frightened kid as the steel bar, having already risen and fallen a dozen times, had moved on to snap first his left femur then his right. But he had not screamed. Not once. Struggled-yes-like a man possessed against too many hands, fighting for air through the blood and mucus that filled his mouth and bubbled from his nose, grunting as each fist, each boot connected; ribs, groin, belly, kidneys... *Ahhhh, Sweet Jesus! No! Nooo!* He gripped the sheet under his hand and quickly slammed the door on his memory shut.

“Ezra?”

Startled, he snapped his eyes open to find Chris leaning over him-the man must have moved like a ghost-and he wondered what he had done to make Larabee so anxious. He blinked owlishly, disorientated, not quite sure what had just happened. Something told him that he had lost a slice of time and he tried to remember what he had been saying before Larabee had uttered his name.

“Must’ve drifted off,” he mumbled, apologetically, “Sorry.”

Larabee gave him a long look, then nodded and gave his shoulder a reassuringly solid squeeze.

“Just keep it frosty, okay?”

Ezra sighed. This was getting to be too hard. Having someone else worrying about him was more than he could cope with right now.

“I’m fine,” he answered quietly, hoping his ability to shoot a convincing line had not completely deserted him. “Just fine.”

It had been an exhausting twenty-four hours and Chris was running on little more than the promise of sleep yet to come and caffeine. He had sent the others home. No point in all six of them hanging around the hospital once the crisis was over. Vin had come back. The Texan had gone just long enough to shower and change clothes before he was back, grinning as he presented the older man with a steaming container of double espresso in one hand and paper sack in the other, which Chris soon discovered contained a fresh pastrami on rye and a cherry danish. But he knew why Vin had come back and it was not to make sure he had something other than hospital cafeteria food to eat. It was because he felt in some way responsible for Ezra.

Tanner, ignoring his half-hearted protests, resolutely steered him out of the building and into the

fresh air before he finally allowed him to stop and eat. He had not realised just how hungry he was until he attacked the sandwich, which he then wolfed down with barely a breath between bites, washing it down with frequent gulps of the hot, strong coffee. At last he sighed, crumpled the discarded wrappings and empty coffee container together and ditched them in the nearest trashcan.

“Thanks. Now go home.”

Tanner stuck his hands deep in the pockets of his jeans and relaxed one hip as he narrowed his eyes, his stare unwavering.

“Reckon I’ll just stick around if it’s all the same to you, Chris.”

Larabee shrugged recognising the futility of arguing with the Texan, and started to move back into the building.

“I know what you’re thinking, Vin and you can forget it.”

Tanner fell into step beside him.

“So. What am I thinking?”

“That you’re responsible for Ezra being here.”

Silence.

“Go on. Tell me I’m wrong,” urged Chris, challenging.

More silence.

“I thought so.” He stopped abruptly in his tracks forcing the younger man to turn and face him as he overshot the mark. “I’m telling you this once, Vin and I expect you to listen. None of this is your fault. The sparring at the gym had absolutely nothing to do with what happened.”

Vin lifted his head, belligerently thrusting out his chin.

“Sure as hell can’t have helped! Goddamn, I knew there was something wrong...”

“So you’re a fucking mind-reader now? Come on! Ezra didn’t say anything, even after the push ups and he must’ve really been hurtin’ by then.” He reached out and gripped Vin by the upper arm.

“You eased off in the fight didn’t you?”

“What?”

“I said you pulled back at the end. Didn’t close it out.”

Tanner’s shoulders slumped.

“That’s what I’m saying, Chris. I knew there was something wrong. Knew I’d gotten under his guard. Gussed he was hurtin’ when he slowed up. Ended it then.” He looked morosely at the ground. “Asked him if he was okay. Said he was fine, joked about it, but I could see he wasn’t lookin’ too good.”

“Then I reckon you did as much as you could.”

“I...”

“Vin, I’m telling you! Not your fault.” He started walking again, slower this time and his voice lost some of its hard edge. “This was a time bomb waiting to go off. No one’s fault except maybe the bastards in New Orleans who worked him over.” He paused and flicked a questioning glance at the Texan. “You know about that don’t you?”

He nodded. “Buck told me some stuff. Not a lot, but I got the picture.”

“Yeah, Buck has a big mouth.” He sighed. Not something anyone was going to keep a secret. “Well, this is just more crap from that and nothing you did could change what was gonna happen sooner or later.”

“Guess not when you put it that way. Still doesn’t stop me feelin’ bad for kicking him in the guts.”

Chris shook his head, out of patience.

“Christ, Vin! If you feel so bad, come on, and if he’s shaken off that goddamn anaesthetic yet, you can apologise to him in person. But I’ll warn you now, this is a guy who can sleep, and I mean sleep. You might be in for along wait!”

oooOOOooo

Tanner knew from the echo of gunfire reverberating around the underground gallery that someone had beaten him to the practice range, although at this early hour he was used to having the place to himself. Slowly walking along the back of the stalls, he cursed to find his usual favoured spot already taken and took up a place further along the range. Listening to the rapid-fire coming from the other end of the stalls, Vin came to the conclusion that whoever it was either very good, very bad or very pissed, and had money to burn from the quantity of ammunition he was going through. Putting his own boxes of shells down he moved quietly along the gallery, curiosity getting the better of him. Standing back, not wanting to disturb the shooter’s concentration, he watched.

Ezra, dressed uncharacteristically in sweat pants and a t-shirt, stood in a relaxed stance, alternating hands and weapons in a dazzling display of ambidexterity that became almost hypnotic as the Southerner fired a clip right-handed, reloaded, fired the second clip left-handed, reloaded, then switched to the first weapon again and all with an effortlessness that belied the co-ordination and concentration that Vin knew was needed to accomplish the feat without any compromise in accuracy. Finally, Ezra paused and laid down both guns, tugging off his ear-protection and hitting the switch to bring his target forward.

Stepping out of the shadows, the Texan slowly moved forward.

“You’re up early for someone who likes to sleep so much.”

The Southerner showed no surprise that Vin had spoken and the Texan suspected that his approach had been noted and catalogued even as Ezra was concentrating on the task at hand. No less than

he would have expected from a fellow professional; an affirmation of the inbuilt caution and animal instinct that kept people like them alive for so long. Not always out of trouble, he mused wryly, but alive. Ezra unclipped the paper target, affixed a new one and sent it back along the length of the gallery before answering.

“Mr. Tanner. I believe, in my defence, I can offer the perfectly valid excuse that I was under the influence of a potent narcotic at the time.”

Vin grinned.

“Good enough. I thought you were just tryin’ to avoid Chris!”

Standish sent a baleful glare towards the Texan as he reloaded both his weapons.

“Hardly sufficient reason to induce me to remain in any medical facility a moment longer than absolutely necessary, Mr. Tanner.”

The marksman stepped up next to the Southerner, leaning on the frame of the booth as he cast a practiced eye over the two guns; a Ruger Vaquero three-fifty-seven magnum revolver and a SIG Pro nine millimetre pistol.

“Pretty impressive arsenal you got there, Ezra.”

Standish deftly fitted shells into a speed-loader and refilled a clip for the automatic, each movement sure and smooth, before giving a half-smile and turning towards Vin.

“Well, Mr. Tanner, I abhor violence and as such leave nothing to chance.”

The Texan examined the clusters of bullet holes in the target. Head and chest shots only, every one of them placed within a two to three inch radius. If Ezra had a dominant hand it was undetectable here.

“Very tidy. Ever done competition shooting?”

“Good Lord, no, Mr. Tanner. My sole interest in shooting well is purely selfish; it lengthens the odds in my favour when some misguided person is assiduously attempting to blow me away. It’s to my own advantage to maintain a certain...” He paused. “...proficiency.”

“Pity.”

With a nod that acknowledged Vin’s oblique compliment, Ezra slipped his ear protectors back in place signalling an end to the conversation as he picked up the Ruger and took aim.

The Texan retreated to his own gallery and took out his own Browning HP35. He was a long-range marksman, preferring the rifle to any handgun but he could hold his own in a firefight and was no slouch with the nine millimetre but he doubted he could best the Southerner. Ezra seemed to be one of a rare breed whose exceptional hand and eye co-ordination made him a natural for shooting well and the fact that he could use either hand with equal facility made him a formidable opponent. Vin was beginning to appreciate the talents of this team that Larabee had put together. Ezra was someone he would not mind having in his corner, or at his back for that matter when the

going got tough, although he found the former FBI agent a little aloof and the signals he gave off stated quite clearly that he preferred to keep his distance.

Vin shrugged mentally as he slipped his own ear protectors into place and lined up on the target. Privacy was something he both understood and respected. Everyone had a right to keep their own counsel and from what he had learned over the past few days, the Southerner had more reasons than most to be wary of others. He rapidly emptied the thirteen shot clip and retrieved the target, gratified to see that he had made creditable showing. Maybe he would take Ezra on one day in a friendly match. He sent down a new target and smiled crookedly. On second thoughts he seriously doubted anything Standish did could be counted on as being friendly. He had the sudden image of a shark, constantly forced to keep in motion to stay alive, swimming serenely through the water but ready to turn into a killing machine as soon as it scented blood. With that thought he reloaded his Browning and aimed once again at the outline of a human body, thinking that possibly Standish was not the only shark in this particular pool.

Ezra slowly packed away his gear. His shoulders were protesting the sudden abuse after months of enforced idleness and he could feel the tightness in his neck and upper back. Too long away from the job. Shooting well on the range was all very well, but no one was firing back at him and the very real possibility that he may have lost his edge made him suddenly feel sick. With a sigh he rubbed his neck, easing out the knots, and told himself that nothing had changed. He had been away but now he was back, and ready for business. He stood up and tried to ignore the fact that he had broken out in a cold sweat.

“Need a ride, Ezra?” Tanner had come within three feet of him before he was aware of his presence and although startled by his sudden appearance, the Southerner smoothly covered his chagrin and stood up.

“Thank you but no, Mr. Tanner.”

The Texan shuffled and looked awkward, immediately drawing a keenly suspicious glance from his green-eyed colleague.

“Look, Ezra. I probably shouldn’t say this...”

“Then don’t!” Standish picked up his jacket and pack-barriers up-and made to leave.

Tanner pressed on regardless. Having made his decision to speak, an acerbic Standish was not about to stop him and his exasperation overcame his natural reserve.

“Fucking hell, Ezra, don’t you ever listen to anybody? You look like shit. Are you sure you’re okay?”

The Southerner turned a cold stare on Tanner.

“Your concern for my health, Mr. Tanner, while touching is totally misplaced.” His voice dripped sarcasm. “Now, if you’ll excuse me...” He looked at his watch, “I really do have somewhere I need

to be.”

Standish shouldered past the Texan and strode down the length of the gallery, suddenly eager to be out into the fresh air, his head pounding from the noise and the fumes in the underground range, and wishing his leg did not ache quite so much in the cold.

It felt good. Cutting smoothly through the water with a strong but easy overarm stroke, Ezra finally let the tension go from his body as the warmth of the heated pool seeped into his aching muscles and he was able to relax. The solitude of the exercise suited his mood as he rhythmically completed lap after lap, not trying for speed but building up his endurance. Able to block out everything but the satisfying monotony of pulling himself through the water, breaking the surface only to take a breath while the measured stroke itself became a soothing litany of a counted beat in his head. He would have been a happy man if he could have stopped the memory of his earlier altercation with Vin intruding into his thoughts, deciding that it had been a lot easier for him to function when there was no-one to give a damn.

Now Vin had extended the hand of friendship and he had snapped at it like an ungrateful cur. The analogy, he decided, was probably a fairly accurate description considering his behaviour. Still, with any luck he might have convinced the Texan to keep at arm's length in future. He did not want to be fussed over; he did not want to have anyone looking out for him and more than anything he did not want anyone's sympathy. He tuck-rolled and turned at the end of the pool, pushing off from the wall for a final lap, the water roaring in his ears as he glided underwater for the first ten metres before breaking the surface. Strong shoulder muscles rippling, he powered through the water, wondering if he had made the right decision in throwing in his lot with Larabee and InterSept but as his mother no doubt would have quickly reminded him: beggar's can hardly be choosers, dear.

Reaching the end of the pool he touched the wall and stopped, treading water as he flicked wet hair back from his forehead and cleared water from his eyes and nose, breathing hard but invigorated rather than fatigued. Leaning his forearms on the edge, he rested for a moment, letting himself relax and allowing his respirations to slow. Looking at his watch, he sighed and realised he had better move it if he was going to make it to the InterSept offices without incurring the wrath of Chris Larabee. While he might not want sympathy, he did not want any grief either. Gathering himself, he thrust upwards, biceps bulging as he locked his elbows and levered himself from the pool, easily clearing the side and swinging first one foot up and gripping the ledge with strong toes before bringing the other leg up and immediately straightening to stand. He smiled to himself as he remembered not too many weeks ago hauling himself out with his belly over the edge to flounder like beached whale.

Reaching for his towel, Ezra glanced down at his body, all too conscious of the midline scar that started under his sternum, its terminal end concealed by the black speedos that closely hugged his lean hips. He rubbed the towel first through his hair, then blotted the water still coursing in rivulets over his chest, belly and thighs, as he considered how truly lucky he was to be standing at the poolside drying off after a swim when he could so easily have ended up a cripple. Sitting down on one of the benches he slowly rubbed the towel over his legs, every scar a memory; each one a painful reminder of his downfall. The left leg below the knee was a criss cross of still-healing scars from multiple incisions and the tell-tale markings of the external fixators that had encased his leg. Above the knee, a single incision where this femur had been pinned and plated in two places. His right leg had fared better but not by much. A single break in his femur, and multiple breaks in the lower part of his leg. He just remembered at the time there was no difference in the pain, the only difference now was that he had fewer scars on the right.

Shaking the sudden feeling of overwhelming depression that threatened to swamp him, he quickly rose and vigorously towelled off the rest of his body, reprimanding himself for inviting the memories back in. Bare feet slapping on the tiles, he hurried to the change rooms, the white towel over his shoulder contrasting starkly with his tanned skin, and pushed aside the hollow feeling that had taken up residence in his gut. He had just fifteen minutes to get across town and to his new place of employment. Appreciating the fact that he could stand, let alone walk, would be little consolation to him if Chris cut off his balls for being late.

Chris strode into the conference room and glanced quickly around the oval table feeling a definite sense of *deja vu* as it came to him that every man there had taken up the same position they had chosen on the first day they had come together almost a month before. A slight frown creased his forehead as he realised that one place was still empty. Standish. He moved to the head of the table and tossed a thick file onto the highly polished surface, starting to wonder just how much more slack he was expected to cut the Southerner but at that moment the man himself came through the door, putting an end to any further speculation on Chris' part as to Ezra's likely whereabouts. Immaculately dressed as usual but with his hair still damp and uncharacteristically tousled, Standish immediately made eye contact and quickly nodded an apology, skirting the edge of the room as he moved to take his seat next to Chris.

"Well, now that Ezra has finally decided to join us," he started, not about to let it go without some comment, "Maybe we can begin." Out of the corner of his eye he saw Buck smirk, making him feel like a school teacher bringing a class into line.

He sat down and pulled the buff coloured folder towards him, nostrils flaring as he caught the distinctly sharp odour of chlorine instead of the subtle aroma of expensive cologne that usually

emanated from the man on his left, and as a result was inclined to be more forgiving of his tardiness. To give the former FBI agent his due he was putting in the hours to make sure he was up to speed after his two brief sojourns in hospital, making up for lost time. Switching his attention back to the brief in front of him he flipped open the front cover.

“Time for you to start earning your money, boys.” His gaze swept around the table. “If you were looking for travel and excitement when you signed on then you’ve got it now. And just so that no one feels left out, the whole team’s up for this one so I hope your passports are all valid.”

“Somewhere warm I hope,” murmured Vin, who was still feeling the pinch of the northern winter, “and soon.”

“Guatemala warm enough? And in two weeks time.”

“Jesus! I said warm not the seventh level of hell,” countered the Texan quickly.

“Just no pleasing some people.” Buck shook his head in mock despair, “What more could you ask for? Tropical climate, black beaches, mosquitoes, yellow fever...”

Ezra leaned back and crossed one ankle over the opposite knee.

“Add murder, rape and kidnap just for a dash of excitement,” he commented drily, “Kidnapping capital of the world I believe, unofficially their number one industry.”

“Exactly,” affirmed Larabee, “and InterSept has been contracted to provide protection for a visiting German executive and his family for that very reason.”

“Family?” questioned Josiah, “How many principles are we looking at here?”

“Two principles; Mannfred Hengst and his daughter, Lisa and,” he flicked a page, “Connie van der Schoor, the nanny.”

Vin shifted in his seat and frowned.

“How old is this kid?”

Buck grinned and slapped the edge of the table.

“Goddamn it man! More to the point is, how old’s the nanny?”

JD laughed, a ready audience, as Chris shook his head.

“For Christ’s sake don’t encourage him, JD,” he warned, “And Buck, can you keep your mind out of the gutter for just five minutes?”

Wilmington laughed richly as Chris turned to respond to Vin’s question.

“Just turned thirteen.”

“No mother in the frame?” questioned Nathan, as he doodled idly on the notepad in front of him.

“No.” Chris checked the notes again. “No mother.”

“Lucky child,” muttered Ezra, under his breath, “I’m envious,” and Chris got the impression that he was only half joking.

Chris continued. “Hengst will be spending a full week in Guatemala City, then four days in Flores.”

He passed a xeroxed sheet around to each man. "This is the tentative itinerary."

"Busy guy," commented JD, as he scanned the list, "Do we ever get a chance to sleep?"

Buck playfully shoved him.

"Hell, Kid, you don't get paid to sleep! Christ, you think we're made of money?"

"Buck, you and JD will be going in first to set up. Sorry guys, commercial airline for you," he grinned, "The rest of us will follow in the company jet."

"Bastard!" swore Buck, good naturedly. "First class?" he ventured, then reading Chris' expression, less hopefully: "Business?"

"Christ, Buck! You think we're made of money?" He took great pleasure in throwing Wilmington's words back at him. "Economy all the way."

"Thanks, I'll remember that come Christmas."

Larabee laughed and started distributing briefing sheets.

"Okay, enough of the bullshit, let's get this show on the road."

It had been one of those days. Chris had been on a routine escort job. Simple ask: close protection for a local diamond trader who insisted on carrying his deliveries in his coat pocket. After he had become antsy about walking the streets unprotected with up to quarter of a million dollars in uncut gems, the buyer had engaged InterSept to cover his assets-not to mention his ass. So far he had rotated with Buck, Josiah and two other bodyguards from the second string but he was the lucky one who happened to be on the job the day someone decided to relieve the buyer of his cargo, and had been prepared to use a sawn-off shotgun as a means of persuasion. These were the times when Larabee decided that he earned every penny of his salary. The principle was safe, the diamonds were safe, but, while sparing a moment to appreciate the effectiveness of kevlar, Chris was still hurting like hell. By the time he had finished with all the questions from the police, giving a statement and then filing an internal incident report, all he wanted to do was to pop a couple of painkillers and not move for the rest of the day.

Feeling as if a particularly mean tempered Brahma bull had tap-danced its way across the middle of his back, he tried not to think about the massive bruise he was likely to be sporting or the dull ache that had settled in his left flank. Briefly cursing the bastard who had opened up on him with both barrels, he tossed his ruined jacket aside and hunted in his desk for some codeine then, slamming the drawer shut in frustration, wondered if Nathan might have something stronger. With a sigh he consoled himself with the thought that his day could not get any worse.

He looked up as Buck launched himself through the door without even the pretence of a knock to announce himself.

"Chris? You all right? I just heard you got rumbled." The concern on his face was genuine and

Larabee's building anger suddenly dissipated.

"I'm fine. Bruised, pissed, and sore, but fine." His smile was strained but he knew Buck was not the type to fuss.

"Shotgun, huh?"

"Both fucking barrels in the back," confirmed Chris, ruefully, "Felt like I'd been hit by a truck."

"I bet." He leaned on the desk then quickly jumped up again. "Say, Doc Travis is here with the Judge! She can take a look."

Chris straightened up, shaking his head.

"Uh-uh. I'll just get some painkillers off Nathan, thanks. I don't need a doctor. Any doctor."

Too late, Larabee recognised the look on Wilmington's face with a sinking feeling. Buck was a man on a mission.

"Buck!"

"Doc Travis!"

His warning went unheeded as his friend charged out of the door and with a sigh he slowly lowered himself into his chair and closed his eyes. His day had not just got worse it was turning into a disaster.

"All right, Mr. Larabee, shirt off."

Chris sat up and stared evenly at the woman who now stood in front of his desk, raising an eyebrow just enough to signal his surprise while trying to decide if Travis was joking or not.

"Your bedside manner could use some work," he commented drily, already wishing he had not sat down.

"Buck said you needed checking out, so I'm here to take a look."

"It's noth..."

"Shirt," repeated Travis, firmly, "Now."

Half-smiling, Chris rose from the chair and unbuttoning his shirt slowly peeled it off before turning to present his back to the woman.

"Well, I'll say one thing," she sighed, "You boys never do anything by halves do you?"

He heard her move up behind him and suddenly winced, jerking forward as her fingers unerringly located the most tender spot on his back.

"Shit!"

"Sorry."

"Yeah, you sound it." He started to shrug back into his shirt.

"I haven't finished yet."

Sighing, he waited as she explored his back and shoulders.

“No other bruises, no other surprises you want to tell me about?”

“No.”

“You know if you hadn’t been wearing body armour I can guarantee that at the very least you’d now be minus one kidney.”

“Well, I was, so I just ended up with a fucking great bruise instead!”

She ignored the heat in his voice.

“Anything else? Passing any blood yet?”

This time Chris did put on his shirt, not answering as he concentrated on fastening the buttons again, and pretending this woman wasn’t standing in his office asking him personal questions about his bodily functions.

“Chris?”

Still nothing.

Travis sighed. “How much?”

Larabee turned to face her then, one eyebrow lifted again. “You gotta be kidding me! Gimme a break, lady.”

“Listen, Chris. You might think that this is something normal and I guess in your line of work it may just be par for the course but it’s potentially quite serious. So cut the crap and tell me what we’re talking about here. A little or a lot?”

“You don’t give up easily do you?”

“A lot,” she judged eyeing him critically.

“I didn’t say that.”

“You didn’t have to.”

“Okay, so I’m pissing blood,” he answered quickly with deliberate crudity, irritated by her persistence. “No big deal. It’s happened before.” He angrily tucked his shirttails back into his pants. “I’m fine.”

“Actually I doubt that very much. You’re looking at a contused kidney, maybe worse, but you’re obviously in no mood to listen! I’d like you to go in for some tests; at least an MRI.”

“Ain’t gonna happen.”

“No, I guess it isn’t unless you pass out from shock!” she responded sarcastically. “So I want you to go home and rest for twenty-four hours, and I mean rest.”

“Can’t do it, doc. Got a big job coming up. Can’t afford the time.”

Travis folded her arms with a self-satisfied smile on her lips and played her trump card. “I’ll tell the Judge. Get him to stand you down.”

Larabee slowly raised his head and glared in disbelief at the blonde woman.

“You’re threatening me?” He looked away from the pale green eyes, on which he suddenly felt

impaled and stared at the desk. "You'd do that wouldn't you?"

"Whatever it takes," she admitted easily, "Now let's see. Mother of Orrin's only grandchild up against the head of his security firm." She pretended to mull over the outcome but merely smiled archly. "No contest really is it, Mr. Larabee?"

He paused, pursing his lips as he considered his options.

"Okay," he conceded, finally, "You win. I'll go home."

"I'll drive you."

"That's not necessary," he protested quickly, "I can..."

"I'll drive you."

There was no point in arguing. Larabee finished tucking in his shirt, wincing as the simple action pulled on his abused back muscles. Damned woman. He glanced up to find her holding out his jacket to him and he knew he was beaten. Round one to Doctor Mary Travis.

"Tell me. Do you always get what you want?"

She smiled and reached out to turn the door handle.

"Usually, Mr. Larabee. Shall we go?"

Chris could not remember when he had last felt quite so gauche, but Mary Travis was making him nervous. Uncompromising and business-like she had made it quite clear that she was calling the shots and suddenly he felt as if she had managed to pull the rug out from under him and set him right on his ass. The closer they got to his apartment, the more he was beginning to regret not having opted for the hospital where at least he could have remained comfortably anonymous. Instead he had Travis getting up close and personal, and playing doctors was not on his agenda, even if she really was one.

By the time she pulled up at the apartment block he was wishing he had managed to get a couple of pain-killers off Nathan before Travis had sunk her hooks into him. He was starting to hurt badly but he had a feeling that any such admission to Travis was likely to make him regret he had ever opened his mouth. Through the mercifully short trip he had slouched in the passenger seat of her Mercedes and closed his eyes to deter any conversation, wondering if she would at least leave him in peace when he got home but the fact that she picked up her medical bag once they had stopped left him with a distinctly uneasy feeling. Her assurance that she just wanted to check his blood pressure seemed to him about as genuine and as likely as a three-dollar bill.

The apartment was a mess. He had left early and Vin was not the man to whom domestic chores came easily, so it currently looked like the stereotypical bachelor pad and Chris was more irritated by the fact that it bothered him to have Travis see his home this way, than by the mess itself. He enjoyed Vin's company but the Texan was an unmitigated slob. In fact some days he felt like they

were nothing more than a parody of the Odd Couple. While he hardly saw himself as being overly tidy, Vin's habits made him look compulsively neat. Chris threw his keys on the table and stood for a moment, undecided as to what exactly he should do next. Finally he spread his hands and turned to face the woman.

"Well, here I am. Home. Isn't that what you wanted?"

Doctor Travis set her bag on the table, pushing aside the morning paper and some candy wrappers-Vin again-before snapping open the catch.

"No. Ideally I wanted you under observation at the hospital for twenty-four hours. This was a poor compromise."

Larabee sighed and pulled out a chair, feeling suddenly tired as he recognised the familiar signs of adrenaline let down. Apart from the pain in his left flank he really did feel fine. Hell, an afternoon reclining on the couch in front of the TV with a beer would fix that. He did not need his own personal physician watching his every move and asking awkwardly embarrassing questions, yet as she unfolded the blood pressure cuff he offered up his arm without protest.

"You know, you'd think I was asking you to consider a heart-lung transplant," she murmured quietly, "instead of a day on bed rest."

He tilted his head and watched her as she pushed up his sleeve and secured the cuff around his biceps before thumbing a button on the electronic device.

"I'm used to looking after myself," he said evenly.

"I think it's more a case of you don't like being told what to do," she observed, but her voice had softened and a sudden smile took any sting out of the words.

"That too," he admitted, then promptly wondered what had made him do that so readily.

The machine beeped and she slowly unfastened the cuff.

"Well, Mr. Larabee, I'm telling you now to rest. Not advising, not asking, but telling you. Your B/P is way down, your pulse is way up and if you don't do as you're told you'll end up in hospital anyway."

Chris ducked his head. "Put that way, I guess it doesn't leave me much choice, does it?"

"Believe me, it's not that difficult to spend a day in bed. Most people would jump at the chance."

He pushed himself away from the table and quickly got to his feet.

"Well, I'm not most people."

"Yes, I did notice that, Mr. Larabee."

He was still trying to decide if she was making fun of him when he broke out in a cold sweat and the world suddenly started to spin giddily out of control before, vision greying, he felt himself falling and knew there was not a thing he could do about it.

He felt like a complete idiot. He had fainted and, worse yet, he had done so in front of Travis.

Chris Larabee, veteran of the Gulf War and with years of service in the Special Forces under his belt had, for the first time in his life, fainted. He blinked as full consciousness returned, the rushing that had filled his ears gradually subsiding but leaving him momentarily disorientated. Travis' voice still seemed to be coming to him from a long way away and he was thinking in a detached way, how ridiculous it felt to be lying on the floor. He resisted his first instinct to try and get up, and instead took several deep breaths deciding it was far easier to stay just where he was. He came to the conclusion then, as he stared at the ceiling, that the day had finally gone all the way to hell in a handcart.

Travis was right about one thing though. It really wasn't difficult to spend a day in bed. At least not when you'd been heavily sedated. He remembered self-consciously stripping down to his boxers and reluctantly allowing himself to be subject to a more thorough going over by the relentlessly persistent doctor before gratefully crawling to relative safety between the bed covers. Then Mary had finally played her ace and stuck him with a hypodermic. He had quickly drifted into a twilight zone that soon became a deep sleep from which he surfaced just once during the middle hours of the night to respond to an urgent call of nature, after which he had stumbled back to bed to again crash into the smothering depths of sleep. Round two to Dr. Mary Travis.

Ezra Standish was in love; absolutely, irretrievably and unequivocally in love, and the object of his affections stood aloof, unaware and indeed, uncaring, on the glistening tarmac in front of the hangar. Sparkling diamond-prisms of light reflected off the fine mist of rain that had settled over her perfectly formed body and it took all of the Southerner's iron will not to reach out and touch her. Had he been alone, he knew he would not have been able to resist the temptation to run his hand over those smoothly, contoured curves but he was being watched and he doubted that either man would understand his need. Reluctantly he tore his eyes away, realising that one of them was speaking to him, and quickly pulled himself back from the siren's lure.

Buck was standing a couple of feet away watching him with obvious curiosity and a wide grin on his face. Vin, who was standing beside him, merely waited patiently and Ezra got the impression that the Texan was someone who might just understand.

"Goddamn it, man! Thought you were about to have an orgasm for a minute then," Wilmington joked, then taking a step forward, grabbed the slightly smaller man by the shoulder and started to laugh, "Ezra, in case you haven't noticed, it's a machine. A plane for Chrissake!"

Standish smiled sheepishly, an expression neither of the other men present had ever witnessed, or for that matter ever expected to witness, on the urbane Southerner. He stole another glance at the twin-engined jet and pushed both hands deep in his pockets.

"Not just any plane, Mr. Wilmington. Forty million dollars of heaven," he sighed, his smile

widening, “And I get to fly her. Fucking incredible.”

Wilmington shook his head, seeing nothing but one very expensive piece of hardware.

“So what’s the turn on, Ezra? The forty million or the airplane.”

Ezra chewed his lip thoughtfully for a moment then turned and started walking slowly towards the Gulfstream.

“If you have to ask, you wouldn’t understand.”

Vin trailed after him as he climbed up the airstair and into the aircraft, curious to see the inside of a private jet. His experience of aircraft was restricted to travelling coach class on commercial airlines within the United States and he was always airsick. In fact he hated flying. As he ducked his head to clear the doorway he wondered how he was ever going to cope in such a confined space when he finally had to fly in her and that day was getting closer by the minute. At the highest point of the cabin he could stand upright with an inch of clearance and if he had stood with arms outstretched he guessed there would be perhaps eight inches to either side of him spare. In spite of his trepidation at the size of the cabin space, it finally registered in the Texan’s mind that this was like no other aircraft he had ever seen before. It reeked of wealth and privilege; leather upholstered captain’s chairs and couch, a bar, state-of-the-art audio and video equipment, plush carpet and polished wood fittings that left him momentarily speechless. He turned, about to comment on the opulence of the interior, to find Ezra settled in the cockpit in front of, what to him looked like, a confusing array of gauges and dials. The Southerner had shed his jacket and was intent on studying the controls in front of him, eyes raking the instrument panel as nimble fingers moved with practiced ease from one switch to another. Vin recognised that underneath the obvious competence lay something greater—a passion—and as he leaned on the pilot’s seat watching the man as he worked, he thought how much Ezra seemed to belong.

“You really can fly this baby can’t you?”

Standish didn’t look up but Tanner saw him smile. “Bet your ass.”

“So how long have you been flying?”

The Southerner aimed a suspicious look from under raised eyebrows at Tanner that begged the question of trust.

“You have doubts as to my abilities, Mr. Tanner?”

Vin held up a hand, recognising a defensive stance when he saw one. “Hell, no. Just curious. Flying scares the shit out of me no matter who’s at the wheel.”

“Yoke.”

“What?”

“It’s a yoke. This is an aircraft not a truck.”

Vin laughed. “Whatever. You still didn’t answer my question.”

Standish relaxed, resting one arm across the back of the lambswool-covered seat, and turned to look directly at the Texan.

“Twenty years. Is that sufficient?”

“Twenty years of what?” Buck’s voice unexpectedly joined in the conversation as he stuck his head into the cockpit having finally decided to check on his companions.

“Flying,” supplied Vin.

“No shit?” exclaimed Wilmington, obviously surprised if not impressed, “I know Chris was really bustin’ his balls to get you to sign on, you being a hotshot pilot an’ all.”

Ezra turned back to the instrument panel, but not before Vin had seen a flash of something in the Southerner’s eyes, although his expression remained closed and unreadable.

“Really?” he responded stiffly, as he busied himself with the centre console instrumentation, “Glad to know I’m good for something.”

Buck frowned, exchanging a puzzled look with Tanner, his response dying on his lips as Vin gave a quick shake of his head. Instead Wilmington shrugged and retreated into the cabin, his voice drifting back as he continued to walk the length of the jet towards the rear compartment.

“How long’s it gonna take you to fly this crate to Guatemala next week, Ezra?”

“Haven’t done a flight plan yet but maybe four and a half, five hours.”

Vin groaned and the Southerner looked up, suddenly sympathetic.

“You’ll be okay. Trust me.”

The Texan gnawed at his lip and looked back down the forty-five feet of cabin to where Buck was standing, checking out the galley.

“I trust you. I just don’t trust me-or my stomach.”

Wilmington strolled back up the aisle, shoulders hunched, having to keep his head low to clear the ceiling. “So when do you get to take her up on a test flight?”

Ezra had turned his attention to a sheaf of documents on a clipboard and, apparently engrossed in navigational detail, did not look up. “Now if you want. Provided, of course,” he added, with a feral grin, “you pick up the \$5,000 an hour tab.”

The Texan knew a challenge when he heard one and his pulse began a rapid tattoo in response.

“Yeah? I reckon I can clear that with Chris.” Challenge accepted.

Vin held up a hand, suddenly not so keen to be on a plane that might just be about to take off.

Flying for a purpose was bad enough, flying for the hell of it held no attraction whatsoever.

“Hey, guys. Now, wait just a minute...”

Ezra finally turned his head, ignoring Tanner, and smiled, green eyes fixed instead on Wilmington.

“And where, precisely, would you like to go, Mr. Wilmington?”

“Hell, anywhere.”

“Give me an hour to fuel up and lodge a flight plan and you’re on!”

The Texan stood up, his alarm palpable, almost banging his head on the low roof in his haste.

“Well, I’m outta here! Count me out of this one, fellas. No offence, Ezra but I ain’t gonna stick around to lose my cookies by choice.”

Wilmington took a nimble step sideways and blocked the exit, a huge grin creasing his face.

“Come on, Vin! You can’t bail out on us. Gotta stick together.”

“Yeah? So Chris can kick three asses instead of two you mean? Uh-uh. No way. Not this momma’s boy. Just let me by.” He paused and looked quickly from Buck to Ezra and back, his expression remarkably like that of a cornered animal. “Guys.....?”

It was close to midday before Chris could keep his eyes open long enough to consider himself to be awake. Light-headed and heavy-limbed, he had spent long intervals throughout the morning staring vacantly into space, his mental processes stalled, unable to shift his brain out of neutral, and utterly and completely demotivated. Now, moving carefully, not wishing to aggravate the dull ache in his left flank that still nagged like a persistent toothache, he finally overcame his lethargy and levered himself up to sit on the edge of the bed. Reluctantly he conceded that Travis had been right; he wasn’t fine. Not even close.

Shit! He screwed his eyes shut and massaged his temples, wishing he did not feel quite so wasted. There was still the Guatemala job to finish setting up. Buck and JD were due to fly out in just a few days and there were a million and one details to go over. He sighed and absently moved his hand to his chest, scratching and yawning as he contemplated the complexities of getting a shower, something which suddenly seemed a long way beyond his capabilities. Damn the woman! He had work to do, a business to run, and right now simply getting out of bed was more than he could manage. Hell, she’d had him roped and tied before he’d even made it out of the chute.

He showered and dressed without haste, partly because he had neither energy or purpose but also recognising-without needing Travis to remind him-that to ignore her advice was going to do nothing more than invite even more trouble for himself, and now the very fact that he was still bleeding heavily was enough to force him to sit up and take notice. And he was hurting. He might have a stubborn streak in him as wide as the Grand Canyon but he knew that this time he was going to have to listen to someone else, as much it went against the grain. It took him another hour to pick up the phone and ask for help.

He had heard the term, had even used it himself, but now he knew exactly what it was like to sweat bullets. A ureter was just millimetres in diameter, not intended to accommodate blood clots, and he was discovering the hard way just how agonising the process could be, as pain lanced

from his flank all the way down through his groin and into his left thigh with monotonous regularity. The Demerol he had been given had taken the edge of it but it was still an unpleasant and incredibly uncomfortable experience. The MRI had confirmed that the left kidney was contused but, to his immense relief, not torn and the urologist had opted for conservative treatment. In short, that meant lying in a hospital bed for twenty-four hours, with an intravenous line supplying measured input, and a urinary catheter measuring output, while his battered kidney oozed coagulated blood into a too-narrow pipeline and he sweated bullets.

He wondered what Travis thought of him now and was vaguely surprised that it even mattered to him. He had behaved like a complete jerk with her. Jesus, if he'd acted like that in front of Sarah she'd have slapped him. He smiled at the thought, the pain of remembrance no longer so keen, and decided he would not have blamed her one little bit. Mary Travis was different though and he had the impression that rather than a slap across the face, she would have delivered a smack in the mouth that would have knocked him right on his ass. He would have deserved it too.

"Mr. Larabee." Chris' head swivelled sharply to the right, surprised to find the object of his musings standing at the door, and he realised then that the Demerol had taken more than the edge of his pain, it had dulled his senses. He had not even heard the door open. "Feeling better I hope." Chris sighed. "I wish."

She moved forward and gently closed the door behind her.

"You know, this is where I could say, I told you so, but it's beneath me as a doctor so I won't."

"Thanks," he replied drily, "I really appreciate that."

Travis smiled then. "Would it help if I said sorry?"

Larabee did a double-take and frowned, staring hard at the blonde doctor, wondering if he had misheard. "Sorry? You? I'm the one who's been a complete asshole."

"Okay, I'll pay that one," she answered, coolly, although her smile was still in place and her voice had subtly softened, "but you at least had an excuse."

Chris dropped his gaze and shifted, trying-and failing-to find a more comfortable position.

"No, I didn't." His voice was tight as he was rewarded with yet another colicky spasm spearing through his flank. "I was just being Chris Larabee."

Travis tilted her head to one side. "Don't be so hard on yourself, I suspect yesterday wasn't one of your better days."

He glanced up, one eyebrow cocked as he allowed himself a long look at the woman standing beside his bed.

"So...what's your excuse?"

Vin felt a pang of guilt that he should feel so pleased at another person's misfortune, especially as

it was Chris who was suffering, but in truth it was a case of rather him than me and, having escaped being press-ganged into an impromptu airplane flight during which the occasion of him being violently ill would have been inevitable, he had every reason to be grateful. The realisation that Ezra really could have had them airborne within an hour brought him out in a cold sweat and he tried not to think about the upcoming trip to Central America; he would cross that particular bridge when he came to it but, like a horse through fire, he suspected he may have to be blindfolded to do it.

As Buck manoeuvred the Camaro through the heavy traffic, Vin marvelled at Wilmington's uncanny ability to slot perfectly into the smallest gap without attracting a torrent of verbal abuse and his almost psychic prediction of prevailing conditions. Several times he veered off the main route and sped through lesser-frequented streets to avoid bottlenecks and slow-moving vehicles with enviable ease and the Texan understood why Chris valued his driving skills so highly. Vin was generally a bad passenger. He liked to be the one driving, the one in control, but his growing confidence in the older man's expertise at the wheel allowed him to relax, and rather than watching Buck's every move, trying to second guess his reactions, he slouched in his seat and turned his attention to the man in the back seat.

The vanity mirror behind the sun visor reflected a partial image of the Southerner and Vin found himself studying the former FBI agent who had barely spoken since Buck's pager had gone off at the airport and resulted in the hasty abortion of the test flight. Ezra had retreated again into the closely guarded shell that Vin was coming to recognise as his personal defence mechanism, and he knew it had nothing to do with missing the opportunity to be airborne but rather, he suspected, a genuine concern for Chris Larabee. A concern he both shared and understood.

The Texan flicked a glance at Wilmington. "So what's the deal with Chris again?"

"Nathan just said he'd checked himself into the hospital. Guess he should've taken Doc Travis' advice after all."

Vin smiled. "Stubborn son-of-a-bitch, ain't he?"

Buck flashed a broad smile, not taking his eyes off the road as he negotiated the car through a chicane of roadworks. "Yup. Never did like being dependent on anyone-and he hates hospitals."

Ezra's soft Georgia drawl came from the back seat.

"I can identify with that particular sentiment," he commented drily, "Hospitals tend to have decidedly negative connotations for anyone in our line of work."

The Texan's smile widened and he looked over his shoulder at the Southerner.

"You're not wrong there, Ezra. Been on the receivin' end few times myself." He turned back to Buck. "But you're the one who really got him pissed by siccing Mary Travis on him. Might've had a fighting chance of getting him to go quiet-like if you hadn't done that."

Buck gave a good impression of innocent confusion. "Who me? I was just trying to be helpful."

"Hell, Buck, I don't know you or Chris that well but even I could see asking Mary to check him out was like stirring up a diamond-back just to see if it'll bite."

Wilmington laughed. "Now there's a good enough reason to wind up in hospital." He looked in the rear view mirror and addressed Ezra's image reflected there. "What's she really like Ezra?"

"Doctor Travis?" He sounded surprised that Buck should be asking him.

"Yeah. She was in ER the night we took you in," he rolled his eyes in mock exasperation, "Remember?"

Standish sighed. "My clearest recollection of that most forgettable night is the fact that at the time I was convinced that every doctor there was a close relation of Josef Mengele."

"Shoot, Ezra, I was hoping for some first hand intell."

The Southerner raised one sceptical eyebrow. "Planning on some insider trading, Mr. Wilmington?"

"You never know your luck in a big city," he quipped, "Ain't got a problem with Mary Travis checkin' out my equipment

Tanner slowly shook his head. "Careful what you wish for, man. Things have a bad habit of not workin' out quite the way you want."

"The monkey's paw," murmured Ezra, looking out of the window again.

The two men in the front exchanged a puzzled glance at the apparent non sequitur, then Vin turned in his seat.

"Okay, I'll bite. Monkey's paw?"

"Just a tale that bears out that having a wish come true can be a double edged sword."

Wilmington spun the wheel as he turned into the hospital grounds and shook his head.

"Hey, this is getting way too deep for me, guys. I reckon I'll be safer if I just stand on the sidelines and watch. Maybe stick around and pick up the pieces."

Vin threw an amused glance at the man beside him. "As long as the pieces aren't yours, Buck!"

"I was never a fan of blood sports," added Standish, matter-of-factly, "And I think we have an uneven contest here."

"Oh, I reckon Mary can hold her own," countered Buck, quickly. "She sure as hell got Chris to toe the line."

Ezra suddenly smiled, his grin almost wolfish.

"It isn't her I'm worried about."

oooOOooo

"Beer, Chris?"

Larabee shook his head with some regret.

“Not tonight. Doctor’s orders.”

Buck grinned and moved on to take orders for the first round as the rest of them claimed seats around the table. Friday night at the Hoosegow, a corny western-themed bar in Cambridge, was quickly becoming both a ritual debrief and social exercise for all of them. Now as Chris glanced around the table he could pinpoint the natural alliances that had already formed within the group: Josiah and Nathan, Buck and JD, Vin and himself even. Then there was Ezra, who didn’t quite fit anywhere, yet managed to fit everywhere. He circulated among them like a predatory animal, warily keeping his distance, not trusting anyone but himself, yet prepared to hunt with the pack when the time was right.

He had noticed Vin’s quietly persistent interaction with the Southerner, as subtle as waves invisibly eroding the rocks against which they ceaselessly and tirelessly washed and wondered how long it would take for him to make any impression. The man certainly seemed hell-bent on keeping everyone around him at arm’s length and given his recent history, that was probably a fair enough response. Yet, Chris had seen the man when he had been alone, vulnerable and afraid, stripped of the exterior trappings holding up the facade that he so carefully maintained, and knew that if anyone needed friends right now it was Ezra Standish. A bottle of Perrier suddenly appeared in front of him and Buck’s voice shattered his reflective mood, drawing him quickly back into the here and now.

“That should be safe enough, pard.”

“Thanks, you’re all heart.”

Wilmington laughed and turned a chair around to sit astride it, leaning his elbows on the table as he deftly twisted the cap off a bottle of Budweiser and sank half the contents in one swallow. Chris slowly unscrewed the cap on the mineral water, remembering other nights like this; different towns, different men, but always Buck-his constant-someone so well grounded that he could keep him from spinning out of orbit. Everyone needed a Buck Wilmington.

Buck wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and sighed heavily. “Thank God it’s Friday, huh?”

“Hell, Buck, you always say that no matter what kind of week it’s been!” countered Larabee with a snort of derision.

“Yeah?” he sounded genuinely surprised. “Well this time I mean it.”

Chris allowed himself a smile and took a tentative sip of the imported water, not liking its effervescence. If he had to drink water for God’s sake-yuppie designer-labelled or not-he preferred it without bubbles.

“So what was so bad about your week?” scoffed JD, lightly, “You spent two days of it drooling, and eye-balling those models at that fashion shoot we did the security on!”

Wilmington managed a look of absolute sincerity that anyone who didn't know him might just have believed. "Eye-balling! I'll have you know that was just old Hawk-eye, doing what he was bein' paid to do."

JD chuckled as he took a drink of his beer. "Sure, Buck! More like doing what comes naturally. You took the meaning of close protection to new limits. Reckon you were barking up the wrong tree, though. Jail bait, every last one of 'em."

Buck soberly drew a scrap of paper out of his jacket pocket with what was obviously a phone number scrawled across it and waved it in front of the youngest member of the group.

"Not all of 'em, son. Not all of 'em."

JD, who had been leaning precariously back in his seat as he balanced his chair on two rear legs, almost lost it. With remarkable skill he quickly adjusted his position and corrected the apparently lost battle with gravity to set the chair back on all four legs with a resounding thud, his look of astonishment fuelling an outbreak of raucous laughter around the table, followed by whistles and catcalls of encouragement for the moustached man and not a few ribald remarks from his companions. Buck just smiled and sipped at his beer.

"Shoot, Buck! Which one?"

Wilmington raised an eyebrow. "A gentleman never tells."

"How fortunate," drawled Ezra, "I take that then as affirmation that you intend to share all the intimate details at the appropriate time."

In the ensuing round of laughter and more jokes at Buck's expense, Chris saw Vin surreptitiously nudge Standish and as the Southerner leaned closer to catch the Texan's whispered comment, then grin devilishly. He smiled to himself. Yes. Everyone needed a Buck Wilmington.

"I don't want to be the bearer of bad news, Buck, but have you forgotten that as of tomorrow you're gonna be out of town for the next few weeks?"

Wilmington looked at his watch.

"That still gives me..." He paused as he made a rapid calculation, "at least a couple of hours."

Vin leaned forward, shaking his head as he reached for his beer. "And they say romance is dead."

Buck pegged a bottle cap in the Texan's direction, which Vin neatly snatched out of the air and returned with a flick of the wrist.

"Fuck you, Tanner!"

"No thanks," the ghost of a smile appeared on the Texan's face, "I prefer a slow hand."

The table erupted in a noisy explosion of uncontrollable laughter and gutter-talk which even Wilmington was finally forced to join in and as Chris leaned back, watching the complex interplay between the six men he had brought together, he was rewarded by an absolute sense of rightness. These men were his. And even if they didn't yet know it themselves, they would be the best.

So this was Guatemala.

As the jet banked gently into a turn, Chris finally looked away from the overwhelming greenness of the lush tropical landscape below and glanced with a smile at the sight of Vin stretched out on the couch opposite, dead to the world. In just over four hours, Tanner had barely stirred. The combination of a sedative and the medication for motion sickness had proved an unexpectedly potent mix for the Texan and Chris wondered now if they might not have to carry him off the plane.

Pushing against the arms of the tan leather chair, Larabee launched himself out of his seat and moved forward to the cockpit, leaning between the two men who shared the responsibility of flying and navigating the multi-million dollar piece of equipment. Ezra acknowledged his arrival with a quick turn of his head as he spoke into his microphone communicating, Chris guessed, with air traffic control at La Aurora. The Southerner finished his conversation and moved his headphones to rest around his neck.

“Everything okay?”

Larabee nodded.

“Fine. How much longer?”

“Twenty-five, thirty minutes.” He looked beyond Chris to the cabin. “Problem?”

“Vin’s still out to it. Wondered if I should wake him now...” he smiled, before continuing, “Or let sleeping dogs lie.”

“Depends whether you want him looking at least half-human by the time we land, or whether you want to explain to the Guatemalan authorities why we have an unconscious man onboard.”

“See your point.” Chris raked a hand through his hair. “Reckon Vin’s not used to takin’ anything stronger than aspirin from the way that stuff pole axed him.”

Ezra turned back to look at the instrument panel, a subtle change coming over him as his expression became as unreadable as a closed book. “Unlike me, you mean.”

Larabee scowled and shook his head, his exasperation obvious before he finally aimed a hard stare at the man in the left hand seat.

“Damnit, Ezra, don’t read something into my words that’s not there! You want to go on feeling sorry for yourself, then go right ahead, but leave me out of it and don’t ever make the mistake of trying to put words in my mouth. If I’ve got something to say to you, I’ll say it, I don’t have time for bullshit or soft pedalling.” He paused allowing his frustration to dissipate before he continued with a sigh, his voice low and meant for Ezra alone. “For Christ’s sake, right now there are a whole lotta people putting their trust in you Ezra, not just me. And get this straight, ‘cos I don’t like repeating myself, if I thought for one minute that you weren’t on the level, you wouldn’t be here!”

The Southerner turned slowly in his seat, his face devoid of any expression and the aviator glasses that hid his eyes adding to the impression of utter detachment that he managed to project, and with which Chris had come to associate, paradoxically, with intense emotion.

“My apologies, Mr. Larabee.”

Chris lowered his head for a moment, sensing that for once Standish had dropped the attitude and was being absolutely sincere. Impulsively, he squeezed the younger man’s shoulder, an unspoken promise in the strength of his grip. You’re not on your own any more.

“Just remember,” added Larabee, only half-joking, as he released the Southerner, “Let me down and you’re fucked.”

At that, a ghost of a smile crossed the pilot’s lips, and he graciously inclined his head. “Understood, Mr. Larabee. Now might I suggest that you make an attempt to raise the dead and wake Vin before we actually touch down?”

“Vin!”

The Texan responded groggily to his name.

“Hmnnnn?”

“Okay, cowboy. You can wake up now. We’re here.”

Tanner struggled valiantly to remember just where “here” might be. Another shake of his shoulder told him he had slipped back into the dream-state in which he had comfortably spent the last few hours; it also told him that he was expected to react.

“I’m awake,” he mumbled, unconvincingly, having difficulty opening his eyes.

“Okay, I’ll take your word for it. Now how about showing those baby blues to really convince me.”

Vin realised he did not really want to. He wanted to sleep.

“Vin! Wake up, goddamn it!” A definite command this time.

He took a deep breath and blinked. Chris could be a bastard sometimes. “Piss off.”

He was surprised when Larabee laughed and helped him to sit up, although without Chris supporting him he knew he would have simply keeled over and crashed back onto the couch. Hell, his head felt as if it was about to implode. Tanner finally succeeded in keeping his eyes open long enough to recognise where he was. The whine of the jet engines as they subtly altered pitch and the gentle cant of the aircraft as it banked into a turn immediately set his stomach roiling.

“Bastards!” He accused, head hanging forward as both Nathan and Chris continued to steady him.

“Should’ve left me asleep.”

“Ezra didn’t think it was a good idea to land with you too wasted to stand up.”

Vin took the cup of black coffee that Nathan pressed into his hand and automatically sipped the strong, unsweetened brew without answering, although he privately vowed to get even with the

Southerner at the first opportunity. The medic pressed a couple of tablets into his hand.

“Here these should help.”

Vin looked dubiously at the two tablets nestling in his palm.

“What’s this?”

“Caffeine to wake you up and acetaminophen for that god-awful headache you’re going to have!”

Tanner looked sideways at Jackson as he obediently swallowed the medication with a generous mouthful of coffee.

“What do you mean going to have?”

The aircraft’s engines abruptly reduced power and the three men felt the familiar swooping sensation that suggested they were rapidly descending. Chris slapped Vin on the back.

“Look on the bright side, Vin. At least you didn’t throw up.”

As the Gulfstream banked again while still maintaining its descent, the Texan visibly paled, his knuckled whitening as they gripped the cup in his hand. Jackson raised his eyebrows and cast a quick glance at Larabee, murmuring: “I wouldn’t bet on it.”

The trip from the airport to the hotel was just a ten minute drive but it had taken three hours to wade through the airport formalities when, for some reason known only to themselves, the Guatemalan customs officials had decided to be less than accommodating. Vin had narrowly avoided being strip-searched and only Ezra’s timely intervention, smoothly demonstrating his command of the language as he launched into a long drawn out and obviously convincing dialogue in Spanish with the airport authorities, saved the Texan from being detained even longer. Now he sat hunched against the door in the rear seat of the rented seven-seater Mitsubishi Montero, complexion almost matching that of the pristine white shirt of the Southerner sitting beside him, as he stared out at the passing cityscape while Buck, after the obligatory wisecracks at Vin’s expense, settled down to get them through the dense traffic and to the hotel as rapidly as possible.

Tanner had wrapped his arms, almost defensively, around his chest as if he was cold and with each passing mile melted further into the corner of the Montero, his body language announcing quite clearly his wish to be left alone.

“You all right, Vin?” Ezra’s voice was a low murmur, intended for Tanner’s ears alone.

The Texan flicked a wary glance at the Southerner before looking again out of the window and giving an abrupt nod.

“Just tired.” After a few moments of silence, Tanner turned back to look earnestly at Standish.

“Thanks.”

The Southerner gave a shrug of indifference. “And to what do I owe such misplaced sense of

gratitude?”

“Ezra, you just saved my ass.”

The pilot inclined his head slightly with just the hint of a smile touching his lips. “Quite possibly in the most literal sense, Mr. Tanner.”

The Texan returned a faint smile of his own, his next words breathed in a relieved sigh as he wearily leaned his head against the window and closed his eyes. “Fuckin’ A.”

The Westin Camino Real was impressive, it’s gently curving facade fronting the Avenida La Reforma in the Zona Viva, a stunning piece of architecture that at least promised five star accommodation. It mattered little to Vin. The fact was, he was not only finding it increasingly difficult to concentrate but remaining upright was becoming more of a challenge by the minute. The initial high of the stimulant had quickly dissipated and the rebound effect was one of utter exhaustion as he plunged headlong into the following low. Feeling a firm hand on his elbow, steering him gently away from the potted palm he had almost walked into, he slowed to a halt suddenly unable to process the next logical step.

“Chris. We have a problem.” Ezra’s voice was just loud enough to alert the man standing in line immediately in front of him waiting to register. “Mr. Tanner appears to be running on empty.”

Chris turned to glance over his shoulder at the pale and glassy-eyed Texan.

“Shit.” He took a step back and dropped smoothly into place on Tanner’s right, adding his support before the man succeeded in making a public spectacle of himself and collapsing in the foyer. “Vin? You still with us? Come on, pard. Talk to me.”

“S’okay, Chris,” he mumbled, “Jus’ tired. I’ll be alright.”

Larabee looked from Vin to the check-in clerk laboriously processing the registration forms of a tour group, which had arrived minutes before them, and finally aimed a calculating stare at the Southerner. “Any chance of moving this along, Ezra?”

Standish was genuinely surprised at Larabee’s assumption that he was capable of exerting that kind of influence. “Me?” He looked sceptically at the cluster of tourists in front of the counter, not bothering to hide his sarcasm as he responded. “Certainly, legerdemain is, after all, my particular forte.”

“Come on, Ezra! You’re the best bull-shitter I know; only shovel some of it in Spanish this time, just like you did at the airport.” Chris’ voice suggested he was rapidly running out of patience. “At least see if you can’t fast-track Vin through.”

With another look at the fading Texan, he wordlessly detached himself from the group and moved towards the desk, his passage barely causing a ripple as he threaded his way to the front. Chris watched his almost effortless progress and had to admit that Buck was right about one thing; the man was indeed as slippery as a greased pig and he had every confidence that with his grasp of the

language and his inherent self-assurance he was more than capable of oiling the wheels of Central American bureaucracy.

It took him less than five minutes.

In the elevator, Chris kept a grip on Vin's arm, as much to stop the Texan wandering away as hold him up. For some reason Tanner seemed driven to keep moving, but he was in constant danger of constantly walking into stationary objects.

"I don't know what you told them, Ezra but thanks."

Standish leaned nonchalantly against the wall, his hands resting on the rail behind his back.

"American dollars have a language of their own. When all else fails, offer money."

"You bribed the desk clerk?"

"A small gratuity," admitted the Southerner, readily, "A simple system of supply and demand. The situation demanded it and I supplied it."

Larabee shook his head, as a slow smile spread across his face. "Ezra, I think you got out of the FBI just in time."

Standish responded with a brazen grin. "Hell, I was perverted a long time before the Bureau ever got to me. Being a Fed just gave me the opportunity to refine the art."

"Hidden talents?"

The Southerner looked up as the elevator car whispered to a halt and the doors slid apart with a sibilant hiss. "Let's just call it a natural proclivity towards subtle deception."

Chris guided the punch-drunk Texan towards the doors as Ezra held them open. "Yeah, well, it works for me."

Ezra released the doors and followed the two men out into the sumptuously carpeted hall.

"And me, Mr. Larabee. And me."

"No, Nathan. Avenida go north-south, Calle go east-west."

Buck abruptly stopped his circuit of the table and stabbed a finger at the map, a large-scale aerial reconnaissance map of the city.

"Right there is where our man's going for his first meeting. Smack bang in the hairiest district of the city. Don't know who his trading partners are..."

"Best not to ask that kind of question, Mr. Wilmington," offered Ezra, looking back over his shoulder as he poured himself another coffee.

"...and I don't care," he continued, "but this place makes Jamaica Plains look like Park Avenue."

"Traffic a problem?" This from Nathan.

"You could walk faster," snorted JD, from his place in front of his laptop computer, "We reced it

by car and on foot, every day for the last three days and it sucks!”

“Lots of road works,” agreed Buck, “Diversions constantly change, never know where you’re gonna be redirected from one minute to the next never mind one day to the next. Got a few side routes sussed out but it’s gonna be tricky.”

“Could work to our advantage too, though,” argued Nathan, “If we don’t know where the hell we’re going, then any bad guys can’t second guess the route we’ll take on a given day.”

“If there are any bad guys.” Josiah had settled himself in the corner, in a meditative yoga pose, legs crossed and hands resting on his knees as he regulated his breathing while still managing to pay close attention to the ongoing debriefing from Buck and JD.

“Yeah, that may well be true, but we have to assume that our principle may be targeted. He’s paying us enough to take him and this job very seriously.”

The door to the suite opened with a soft snick as the electromagnetic lock released and five pairs of eyes swivelled expectantly in that direction.

“Chill out. It’s only Chris,” muttered JD softly, checking the image on his computer, relayed from a small wide-angle camera that had replaced the peep hole viewer in the door.

Larabee closed the door behind him, slipping the security bar into place and immediately crossing to one of the queen size divans where Tanner still slept, oblivious to all the activity going on around him. Chris flicked a questioning glance at Nathan but the paramedic shook his head.

“Nothing. Out like a light. But he is still breathing.”

“That’s comforting at least.” With a sigh, Chris walked towards the table pausing to frown at the man sitting in the corner like a bearded buddha. “Josiah, what the hell are you doing?”

“Just getting my balance back, Chris. Great way to ease the stress and get the kinks out of the spine. Lotus position. You should try it.”

“Josiah, these days I need help to get into the missionary position never mind the lotus position!” he replied drily, “I’ll give it a miss thanks.”

Ezra poured Larabee a fresh cup of coffee and reached across the table with a sly grin on his face.

“It might be worth reconsidering. Yoga’s supposed to do wonders for your sex life, Mr. Larabee.”

“What sex life?” Chris leaned over the paper-strewn table and changed the angle of the map, tracing the route Buck had marked in green with his finger. “Right! Tomorrow. Buck and Nathan, you’ll have car 1 and pick up Hengst from the airport, Vin and me will take the daughter, Lisa, and the nanny in car 2. JD you’ll be based here and on communications, Josiah you’re co-ordinator. Ezra, you be ready for when we bring ‘em in ‘cos you’re CP on Lisa. Okay?”

“What if Vin’s not up to scratch,” ventured Buck, “Time frame’s pretty tight, boss, and he’s not exactly firing on all cylinders.”

Chris lifted his eyebrows and threw down the chinagraph pencil he had been toying with as he

spoke, the frustration evident in his voice.

“Then we’re pretty much fucked!”

“Not entirely,” countered the Southerner, smoothly “Just put Josiah in as second driver, I can co-ordinate and Vin can be...”

“A sleeping partner?”

“Quite. I was going to be more charitable and say back-up.”

“Fine, that could work. You’re still CP for the girl though however this pans out. I really need you for that.”

“Whatever you say.”

Wilmington made some adjustments to the duty sheet and started his part of the brief.

“Okay, Hengst isn’t wasting any time. He has his first meeting tomorrow at 2pm. Again we use both vehicles. Chris will CP Hengst in number 1, I’ll drive. Number 2 will be Vin-or Josiah if sleeping beauty there doesn’t cut it-driving and Nathan backup. Ezra, you’re CP on Lisa, JD communications and...” he paused, “Shit! That leaves us with no co-ordinator.”

“I can do it,” volunteered JD, “If I’m on communications anyway, I can co-ordinate too.”

Chris chewed his lip thoughtfully, then shrugged. “Gotta do it someday kid. If we have to go with the second string, you’re on...”

“Great!”

“...but fuck it up and I’ll have your ass...”

“In a sling!” chorused Buck and Nathan obviously used to Larabee’s ways.

JD looked quickly around the table, not sure whether Chris was being on the level and caught a quick, conspiratorial wink from Standish. He thought Ezra was telling him he was in his corner, but he was still wary of the former FBI agent and was never certain which way the Southerner would jump. Buck had told him on several occasions that Ezra Standish always looked after number one and Dunne had wondered just how much he would be able to trust him if push came to shove. He hoped he would never have to put it to the test. Whatever Buck might think of him, all he knew was that he had seen Ezra fight and he had seen him shoot; and for now having someone like that on his side was enough.

“Any questions?”

“Yeah, when do we get to eat? I’m starving.”

“Buck,” sighed Chris, “do you think that just once we could end a briefing without that being the first thing you ask?” He turned to the rest of the team. “Other than when the next meal is scheduled, any questions?”

There was a gentle ripple of laughter but no questions and Larabee started to gather up the maps and operations data.

“Okay, but before you go, I want to make one thing clear to all of you. The principle might not be here yet but, make no mistake, we are operational. That means no drinking-not even a beer, no getting into trouble with the locals and Buck, this is a warning especially for you, no dicking around. Try to keep a low profile. I don’t want any of you going anywhere on your own, not even to the john, stick together and watch your backs. This is not Boston. Don’t forget to take your anti-malarials and for God’s sake don’t drink the water.”

“Yes, mother,” grinned Buck, “I hear ya. Now, can we eat?”

Chris waved a hand. “Go! Before I change my mind.”

Wilmington grabbed JD by the shoulder. “Come on. Party time! Coming Nathan? Josiah?” He charged out of the room with Dunne in tow and Nathan following at a more leisurely pace, while in the corner Josiah remained seated, eyes closed, breathing deeply, and tuned out; not going anywhere.

Ezra picked up his cup of coffee and walked away from the table, a small shake of his head and a knowing half-smile on his face, the only indication that Buck’s obvious slight had not gone unnoticed. Chris slowly gathered the assorted papers together and sighed. He was going to have to talk to Buck, and soon.

Vin had felt worse. He was just having a hard time remembering when.

“Any better, cowboy?”

Tanner slowly lifted his head and allowed Chris to again press an ice pack against the back of his neck, peering through slitted eyelids at the older man, his voice rasping through a dry throat.

“You’re joking, right?”

“I think he means no.” Unmistakably Ezra.

The Texan cast a baleful glance at the Southerner. “Glad you think it’s funny, Fly-boy.”

“On the contrary, you have my most sincere sympathy, Mr. Tanner. The last time I saw anyone look as bad as you, he was on a slab in a morgue wearing a toe-tag.”

“I think I know how he felt.”

Chris sighed and suddenly grabbing Vin’s hand, turned it palm upward and dropped the cryo-pack into it.

“Well, good news, pard, you’re back in the land of the living now, so think about getting your sorry ass into gear and quit complaining. In case you forgot, we came here to work.”

Tanner sighed unable to shake off the residual lethargy that came with an extended period of sleep and lazily scratched his chest, suddenly pausing as his nose wrinkled in distaste. “Jesus, I stink.”

“Now that you mention it,” agreed Ezra, readily, as he took a deliberate step back, “Rank is a word that springs to mind. Might I be so bold as to suggest a shower?”

The Texan groaned and sank back against the pillows. “Thanks a million, Ezra.” He closed his eyes again. “What the hell happened?”

Chris gave a half-smile. “Apart from the fact that you slept for sixteen of the last twenty hours, not a lot? What do you remember?”

“Not a lot,” echoed the Texan, raising himself on one elbow, “Just being so goddamned tired!”

“Well,” started Ezra, “based on a long-distance diagnosis from our own on-call physician, the charming Doctor Travis, the theory is that you had some sort of reaction to the travel sickness medication. When Nathan gave you the caffeine it kick started you, kept you going for a while but once that wore off there was a rebound effect which put you well and truly out for the count.”

“Yeah. Did that alright.”

“Oh,” the Southerner added, archly, “and Mary recommends that you avoid taking any kind of similar medication in future in light of your probable sensitivity.”

Vin sat up slowly, like a man with a hangover and, on the second attempt, managed to throw back the covers and lever himself to sit on the edge of the divan.

“Suits me. Feel like Rip Van-freaking-Winkle.”

Tanner struggled for a moment to gain his feet and Ezra took a hasty step forward to grab his arm him as he swayed unsteadily while Chris looked on and shook his head.

“Vin, I know this isn’t what you want to hear but I’m pulling you off driving tomorrow.” Larabee glanced at his watch. “Correction - today.”

The Texan’s head came up with a snap and he grimaced, rubbing the back of his neck and regretting the sudden move. “I’ll be okay.” He started to protest, stumbling as his limbs refused to co-operate, and steadied only by Ezra’s hold on his arm. “Damn! Just give me a coupla hours, Chris.”

“Sorry, Vin. Can’t risk it. You still look like shit and I’m not convinced you’ll be up to speed in time. It’s already gone one. I’ll get Josiah to take your place. You can stay here as back up for Ezra.”

The Texan shook his arm free of Standish’s grasp and abruptly pulled away, his expression mirroring his inner turmoil. Not willing to believe what he was hearing. He was being left out of the action.

“Fuck that!” He replied heatedly, then quickly: “No offence, Ezra.”

“None taken.”

“You’re not going.” Chris didn’t raise his voice, but the effect was the same as if he had shouted.

“I have to think about the big picture.”

For a brief moment Tanner’s eyes blazed, suddenly animated as he struggled with his emotions before he brought himself under control. “Fine,” he responded coldly, “You’re the boss.”

“Vin...”

The rigid set of his shoulders wordlessly conveyed disappointment and barely suppressed anger as he unsteadily crossed the distance between the bed and the en suite without acknowledging that Chris had even begun to speak. Both men winced as the door slammed shut behind him.

“That went well,” muttered Ezra, sarcastically, “Good strategy, Chris. Let him down gently, huh?”

Chris levelled a frosty glare at the Southerner.

“He’s not a kid, Ezra, and I’m not his fucking nursemaid. Get this straight, we’re being paid more than any of us are realistically worth to do this job and I’m not going to risk blowing it for the sake of sparing Vin any hurt feelings!”

Ezra returned the glare with a coolly appraising one of his own. “Quite.”

One word, spoken without inflection after the merest pause. Enough to leave Larabee in no doubt that Standish was delivering an unspoken criticism. The moment stretched uncomfortably, until Larabee finally broke eye contact.

“It’s one-fifteen,” he continued tersely, already starting to turn away, “Final brief is at six. Be there! You and Vin both. I’m turning in.” The older man snatched up his cell phone from the table, then hesitated and slowly turned back. “This is important, Ezra. I’m counting on you.”

The Southerner, his face revealing nothing of his thoughts, watched as Larabee let himself out and continued to stare at the door long after it had closed.

“Yes, boss.”

Chris slipped his key card into the lock and quietly pushed open the door to the room diagonally opposite the one he had just left, feeling not only physically and emotionally drained but, just to put the finishing touch on a less than perfect day, like a complete bastard.

“Hey, Stud. How’s Vin?”

Larabee had not expected Buck to still be awake but neither did it surprise him that his friend was lounging comfortably on one of the beds in just his shorts, flicking through a magazine by the soft glow of the bedside lamp. Chris sighed and sat down on his own bed, rubbing a hand over his face.

“Pissed.”

Buck flipped the magazine shut and tossed it casually aside. “Sleeping Beauty’s awake then?”

“Sort of.” Chris paused and turned his cell phone over and over in his hands. “I’ve grounded him, Buck.”

Wilmington sat up, suddenly alert, not prepared for or expecting such a revelation from the blond man. “You what?”

“I’ve taken him off the driving rotation,” he confirmed, “It’s too big a risk. He’s still punchy and we’re only five hours away from system go.”

“Still,” mused Buck, “we did plan for that. Josiah can take the second vehicle. But what about Vin?”

Chris chewed thoughtfully on his bottom lip. “He’ll stay here as agreed. Backup for Ezra.”

Buck snorted. “No wonder he’s pissed then.”

The implication was there, the merest suggestion of unspoken criticism of the former FBI agent, just as it had been with the more open slight earlier in the evening and Chris suddenly stopped fidgeting with the Nokia in his hands to pin Wilmington with a stare that would have done the Medusa proud.

“Buck, we’ve been friends a long time, but I’m telling you you’re way outta line here so I hope you’re listening good because I won’t be saying this again, okay? Now I don’t care what your personal opinion of Standish is, not that you’ve bothered making any secret of it, and I don’t think he particularly gives a shit either, but if I see you try another stunt like you pulled tonight, or take any more digs at Ezra without you have a damned good reason just once during the rest of this operation I’ll have you sitting on your ass in this hotel doing sysop every goddamn day that we’re here!”

Wilmington’s expression registered a degree of surprise. “That’s one hell of a speech, Chris, but I don’t know what the hell you’re talking about. What stunt?”

Chris gave a short bark of a laugh that was totally devoid of humour. “Spare me, Buck. I’ve known you too long. Consider this a warning; you either play as a team member or you sit on the bench. Got it?”

“Chris...”

“Got it?”

Buck had the sense not to pursue the argument. This was a Chris he knew too well and had seen too often, not to take him seriously. “Got it.”

“Okay, end of lecture.” But Larabee was not quite ready to let go: “Just cut the guy some slack for Christ’s sake and instead of looking so hard for something that’s not there, try looking for what is. Remember he’s one of us now.”

“We’ll see,” answered Buck, quietly, “I just hope I don’t end up having to say I told you so when he folds under pressure.”

Chris’ eyes narrowed. “You’re so sure he’s going to let us down aren’t you?”

“Are you so sure he’s not?”

“I’m staking my reputation on it, Buck.”

Wilmington stood up and roughly pulled back the covers ready to get into bed. “Yeah? Well that’s just fine, only there’s always a chance you might end up staking your life on it.”

With that Buck dropped back onto the bed and pulling up the crisply starched sheets, abruptly

switched out the light before turning his back, signalling an end to the conversation. A few feet away, Chris reached across to put his phone on the nightstand and slowly took off his watch, placing the two side by side. Well, Larabee, that's a record even for you; three of the team alienated in one night. Great start. Not bothering to undress he turned off his own night light, plunging the room into a darkness relieved only by the muted glow of the street filtering through the chinks in the curtains, and stretched out across the bed. Bloody job. He hated it sometimes.

oooOOOooo

The briefing had not gone well. As if the tension of a first op together had not been enough to contend with, Vin had remained subdued to the point of truculence, Buck uncharacteristically withdrawn and Chris himself had been irritable and tired. Even JD's normally irrepressible enthusiasm had been missing, as the truth that something was not quite as it should be filtered through to the whole group. The result was tersely delivered instructions and equally brief responses. The seven men might well have been strangers.

Now, as Josiah competently guided the big 4WD through the city's always-heavy traffic, Chris wished he had cleared the air right then because the strain was already beginning to show and they had been on the job for less than two hours. Instead of a team of closely interlocking parts that revolved with smooth precision, he was faced with a bunch of goddamned mavericks. Prima donnas. Fuck! He ran a hand over his face and sighed. His fault.

"They'll be alright."

Sanchez had not once let his attention shift from his driving but his soft, rumbling voice let Chris know that he was fully aware of what was going through his head.

Larabee nodded, acknowledging Josiah's reassurance, but not wanting to enter into any discussion. Not here. Not now. Sanchez was probably right. So far everyone had gone through the motions perfectly, following the drill and the plan to the letter, but the tension was there underlying every action, every word. Ezra's Southern drawl came through his earpiece at regular intervals, monitoring their movements, doing his job with deceptive ease; the others were equally faultless in their roles yet he was experienced enough to know that below the surface was a ripple of unrest. So Vin was pissed at being left out of the loop, he could deal with that; he could wear Ezra's quiet censure of his tactlessness but Buck's simmering anger had come out of left field.

"You did the right thing," he added, as if he had read Chris' mind, "With Vin."

Larabee stifled his first instinct to snap at the driver and respond that he was not looking for consensus and instead continued to scan the cars around them on the alert for anything unusual.

"If he can't learn to accept an order then he's no use to me," he muttered, keeping his voice low,

“and I’m getting too old to play at these games.”

Josiah flicked the turn signal and deftly changed lanes, following the dark green Ford in front that Buck was piloting, with Nathan riding shotgun in the seat that Chris would traditionally occupy.

“Too old or too ornery? Be fair, Chris. I think Vin is mad at himself more than you.”

Chris spared a glance for the two female passengers but they were talking quietly and paying no attention to anything that might be taking place in the front seat. Larabee got the fleeting but distinct impression that he and Josiah were looked upon as no more than hired help. He sighed.

“No excuses, Josiah. For anyone.”

Sanchez shrugged and kept his attention on the car in front as the vehicle swung into the hotel forecourt, smoothly drawing up behind the Ford as it came to a halt.

“Mobile 2 to base. We’re home.”

Chris smoothly exited the car and moved to open the back door, ushering the occupants out and closing in to shield both of them, one arm around the young girl’s shoulders as he drew her towards to him. He wondered briefly if she was at all reassured by the fact that if she was threatened in any way his body was her shield, and if necessary he would put her life before his own.

“Stay close, okay.”

He waited a beat until Josiah joined him to assume the protection of the girl’s older companion, before releasing the woman’s arm with a nod to Sanchez. Switching sides to leave his gun hand free he swept the teenager into the hotel foyer, minimising any time spent in the open but without any suggestion of haste or urgency. Several feet away Nathan had already mirrored Chris’ actions with Hengst while Buck brought up the rear, his eyes hidden behind sunglasses but, Chris knew, sweeping the area for potential problems. So subtle was the bodyguards’ protective cordon that to a casual observer it would have appeared to be nothing more than two carloads of guests arriving, but a closer look by a keen eye might have shown the hard-eyed expressions and businesslike demeanour of the four men for something far more dangerous.

Ezra wheeled away from the table and tossed the marker pen he had been sketching notes with to Tanner, before snaring his suit jacket from the chair back and shrugging into it.

“Looks like I’m on.”

Vin, he noticed, was still a little glassy-eyed and he had been subdued since the two of them had joined JD as sysops in the room they had designated as operations centre. It had been no random selection that had brought them to the Camino Real but the very practical aspect that the hotel had a business floor complete with electronic communication devices that allowed JD to plug in his specialist equipment and go. Dunne currently had two laptop computers in front of him; one of them, \$10,000 of military grade hardware with built in GPS to enable him to track both cars and

personnel that reminded Ezra of the navigational system on the Gulfstream. Very hi-tech. Very necessary.

The Texan nodded and slapped his arm as he passed, an expression of goodwill that needed no verbal qualification as the brief contact communicated a range of sentiments not the least of which was: take care. Ezra paused, momentarily nonplussed by the unexpected gesture, then nodded and sketched a brief salute in acknowledgement as he headed for the door. Once outside in the corridor, the Southerner leaned with a sigh against the door, his hand still resting lightly on the handle, as he struggled to bring his emotions under control. Intentionally or otherwise Vin had, in that one brief moment, succeeded in touching a hidden chord that awakened in him the feeling of connecting with another human being that had long been suppressed. It was a feeling he had neither invited nor welcomed. Taking a moment to straighten his jacket and tie to give himself a space to breathe -- he quickly blocked the emotion. He could not afford to let anyone past his guard so easily. Getting close to people he had found was a mistake and one he had no plans on repeating. Ever.

Tanner sighed as the door closed behind the Southerner and turned to watch as JD shut down the tracking computer, switching focus to the commlink instead. While he appreciated the technical expertise involved, the behind-the-scenes manoeuvring bored him and he wondered how Ezra managed to seem perfectly at home either directing operations from a hotel room or getting up close and personal with a principle. If it had bothered him at all that he was out of the immediate action, Standish had not let it show. He, on the other hand, had been champing at the bit and pacing restlessly for the last two hours wanting nothing more than to be allowed to do his job. He had taken Ezra's point that he was still not fully recovered from the drug reaction and that Chris was only doing what was best for the team but it hardly made accepting it any easier.

"Well, kid. Looks like it's just you and me," he muttered, "and I'm just along for the ride."

Dunne turned from the screen and swung the microphone attached to his headset away from his mouth.

"You'll be on the roster tomorrow, no sweat," reassured the younger man earnestly, then smiled, "At least you won't be stuck babysitting the kid."

"Babysitting?"

"Like Ezra. Got the short straw."

The Texan frowned.

"That's what you think, JD? That Ezra's got the crappiest job?"

JD hesitated, on the brink of responding but alerted by the subtle change in Vin's tone.

"That's not what I meant," he protested, "but I mean, a thirteen year old girl...?"

Tanner's face was fixed in a hard expression that surprised the younger man into sudden silence.

“You’ve got a lot to learn, JD.” Vin started to turn away then paused and looked back, his blue eyes intense. “You might know more than God himself about all that technical stuff, kid, but you’re gonna find out fast you know squat about people, and I’ll tell you this for nothing...” He stopped abruptly as his voice started to rise and sighed. “Ah, forget it.”

Dunne swivelled round in his chair, face flushed.

“No. Finish it, Vin! I hate people who start something and then don’t follow through.”

Tanner looked thoughtful for a moment, surprised that JD had come back at him. The Kid had some grit after all. He had not intended to be confrontational but he was beginning to hear something of Buck in JD, enough to stir him to anger. Taking a breath he let it out slowly and dug his hands in his pockets. Don’t blow it, Vin.

“Just remember before you judge a man, JD, try walking a mile in his shoes.”

Dunne chewed his lip.

“You mean Ezra.”

“I mean any man.”

A burst of static drew JD’s attention to the console and he swung his mic back into place as he acknowledged the speaker, turning his back on the Texan, doing what he knew best. Vin walked slowly to the window and leaned against the frame, staring out across the Avenida La Reforma. Some lessons just had to be learned the hard way.

Lisa had at first paid little attention to the men who had escorted them from the airport. Bodyguards. A fact of life. Her father was an important man and as such open to many threats, so she understood that these men were necessary even if they were sometimes an inconvenience. She felt uncomfortable always being under someone’s watchful eye, as if she could never be herself, but it was something she had learned to accept and mostly to ignore. Only she was finding these particular men were very hard to ignore. Arrogant, American, unlike any of the other bodyguards her father had engaged, these men exuded confidence and had an aura of quiet menace about them at once made her feel both safe and a little intimidated. It was unsettling to have the four men milling about the room now. The one with the moustache had smiled and winked at her as he crossed to look out of the window, but Lisa somehow still felt as if four tigers had been set loose to prowl with no handler in sight to control them.

Connie had called them gorillas but she noticed that it had not stopped the Dutch au pair from feasting her eyes on the blond man since the moment they had been escorted from the arrivals lounge to the waiting cars. The fact that their previous bodyguard had been fired because of her did not seem to have made any impact whatsoever on the woman and Lisa had liked Marcel. She cast a quick glance at the au pair as she moved in on the dark-haired man with the moustache.

Maybe her father should have fired Connie instead. With a sigh she dropped into the corner of the sofa and ran a hand through her long, dark hair as she watched the activity ebb and flow around her. Lisa Hengst - once again a small and insignificant part of the big picture.

Ezra swept the room with a practiced eye as Josiah swung the door open to admit him. Hengst standing with Chris to one side, deep in conversation; a twenty-something woman hovering around Buck-no surprises there-near the window; Nathan apparently talking to himself but, Ezra knew, in contact with JD in the next room and finally a teenage girl, typically dressed in jeans and a sleeveless t-shirt slumped in the corner of the couch obviously unimpressed with the circus going on around her.

The Southerner moved without haste towards Larabee and nodded briefly to the man who was paying their salary for the next couple of weeks, smoothly interrupting the conversation.

“Bitte entschuldigen Sie mich für einen Moment.” He excused himself to the German and turned slightly to address Chris in a soft, murmuring drawl. “You rang, Mr. Larabee?”

Chris’ expression relaxed and he almost smiled, also half turning away from Hengst to respond.

“About time you did some work, Ezra,” he said in equally low tones, “I’ll get Hengst to introduce you to Lisa.” He glanced across at the girl on the sofa. “Don’t think she’s going to be much of a handful.”

“I can be thankful for small mercies.”

Both men turned to face the businessman full on again.

“Mr. Hengst, may I introduce Ezra Standish. One of the team who will be looking after Lisa and Miss van der Schoor. Ezra, this is Manfred Hengst.”

Ezra inclined his head. *“Sehr erfreut, Sie kennenzulernen, Herr Hengst.”*

The man smiled and offered his hand.

“Die Freude ist ganz meinerseits, Mr. Standish.” Having dispensed with the expected exchange of superficial pleasantries he keenly scrutinised the well-dressed American. *“Sie sprechen deutsch, Mr. Standish? Das ist großartig!”*

The Southerner responded with a brief but firm handshake. *“Ich befürchte, meine Kenntnisse sind eher unvollkommen.”*

Hengst laughed. *“Keine falsche Bescheidenheit! Von Ihrer Aussprache her würde ich Sie nicht für einen Amerikaner halten. Sie sprechen sehr gut Deutsch.”*

“Vielen Dank.”

The German turned to Chris who was looking openly surprised at the unexpectedly fluent exchange between the two men.

“My apologies Mr. Larabee. That was most inconsiderate of me. Now come, Mr. Standish, let me introduce you to my most charming daughter.”

As he moved away, Chris caught Ezra’s jacket sleeve, momentarily detaining him. “Okay, smart ass, what do you do for an encore?”

“Mr. Larabee, one has to be prepared to utilise all the necessary skills to ingratiate oneself with a client, you should know that.” The mocking smile was there again. Rack up another point for Ezra Standish.

Larabee shook his head and barely kept the smile from his own face. Cocky bastard.

“Any more party tricks you might want to tell me about?”

Standish looked pointedly at Hengst and his daughter, and eased his arm out of the older man’s grip as he neatly evaded a straight answer.

“If you’ll excuse me, our host awaits. Wouldn’t do to keep him waiting now would it?”

Chris watched as the Southerner, like a chameleon, smoothly assumed a subtly different persona as he interacted with Lisa and was not surprised when for the first time in two hours he saw the girl smile.

Buck leaned into the corner of the window recess and rested his thigh on the narrow sill as he watched Ezra’s progress across the room. From the moment he had walked through the door the Southerner had been playing to the audience. His initial exchange with Hengst had been a masterpiece. Hengst might be paying the bills but Ezra had immediately established who was calling the shots by deferring to Chris before the German and Larabee’s expression had been priceless when Standish had launched into an obviously fluent dialogue with the businessman. The canny bastard could even speak the lingo; another card he had played close to his chest. A born hustler. Yet, Wilmington had to admit that the guy was a smooth operator. The German was obviously delighted and impressed with Ezra’s linguistic skill and Buck recognised the thin edge of the wedge being eased into place. Slick as snot.

The fact that Chris was prepared to put such unquestioning faith in the man’s abilities was what worried him. Standish had a history that Chris seemed willing to ignore, but there were shades of grey in Ezra’s past that left Buck with more questions than answers and he was not about to be quite so accepting as his long-time friend. Not that he had any personal beef with Ezra--hell, no man deserved to go through what he had suffered -- but his feelings for the Southerner remained ambivalent. The man was full of secrets and in the weeks that they had been together as a team, no one had succeeded in getting any closer to knowing anything about him.

As he watched the former FBI agent move on to his next mark, the girl Lisa, he considered what he knew about the man. All he knew for certain was that he was thirty-six, came from Savannah,

could fly a plane and had been an FBI agent. He could make an impressive showing with a handgun and had shown himself to be no slacker when it came to unarmed combat either but his personal life remained a closely guarded secret. Secrets. That was Ezra. An enigma. No wonder he worked covert operations for the Feds.

Buck thought back to the night at the bar when he had found Standish on the point of collapse and, even now, chided himself again for having thought the worst about the Southerner. He had wanted Ezra to be flawed; to have some reason to justify his mistrust of the man but had instead found himself in his corner. Christ, the son-of-a-bitch had even puked on him. He shook his head at the memory and felt again the tug of ambivalence pulling him in opposite directions.

All he knew was that his heart was telling him that Standish was not a man he could put his trust in. Rather he was someone who would look out for himself first. He never did anything without first assessing exactly what would be in it for him and for Buck that rubbed against the grain. Having spent many years in the army his sense of comradeship-of putting the good of the team before the individual -- was unshakable; to a lesser degree the ATF had reinforced that and for him there was no place for mavericks in the scheme of things. And Ezra was just that. A loner. A stray. By nature he was always going to look out for number one. For Buck that meant a risk, and an unacceptable one.

Chris had ripped into him for his unthinking rebuff of the Southerner the previous evening, and the accusation still stung. More because Larabee was quite ready to side-line him in favour of Standish than any sense of having been wronged. Of course, he mused, he should never have tried to bluff his way clear. Not with Chris. And especially not with an angry Chris. The fact that he knew just why Chris was so pissed had not helped. By excluding Ezra he had made the mistake of openly drawing a line and in doing so had forced Larabee's hand. Bad move, Buck. Even now, he was hard pressed to come up with any reasonable explanation as to just what had made him do it but knew it was something he was unlikely to be able to undo easily. Hell, he was not sure if he even wanted to undo it. Let Chris hold Ezra's hand if he wanted to.

Shifting slightly he switched his gaze to Larabee. The blond man was watching Standish too but for a brief moment their eyes met and locked, then Chris looked away and Buck was disconcerted that for once he was unable to read his friend's mood. They had not spoken except for formal radio exchanges during the morning and he was beginning to wonder if in drawing that line he might not have made the biggest mistake of his life by pushing Chris over to the other side of it. Vin, he knew, was already there. He had gravitated to the Southerner, finding something-although God alone knew what-in common with the disgraced FBI agent. Maybe the fact that they were both outcasts from their respective agencies had something to do with it. With a sigh, Wilmington closed his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose. It was going to be a long day.

Lifting his head he again allowed his gaze to fall on Standish, now in earnest conversation with Lisa, his smile warm and encouraging as he listened to her and Buck understood why Chris had been so keen to have Ezra as the girl's bodyguard. Grudgingly, Buck acknowledged that the Southerner was a natural choice. The fact that the teenager was actually smiling, albeit shyly, gave credence to the man's innate ability to charm. Smiling he shook his head. Damn it that was part of the problem! If he disliked Ezra it would be easier, but rather than dislike him he distrusted him. As if aware of not only his scrutiny, but his emotional conflict, the Southerner's head lifted and he made eye contact, a brief nod and the hint of a smile an indication that he at least bore no ill will. Wilmington, unable to resist, gave a quick grin and a mock salute in return before launching himself away from the window. Cocky bastard.

Buck hesitated seeing the au pair, Connie, turn towards him. He had already neatly headed her off at the pass once but she was a persistent girl. Not that the Dutch woman wasn't attractive but he kept his personal and professional attitudes very separate, and Chris had one very simple rule-look but don't touch. Wheeling, he angled away from the woman and found himself instead walking towards Larabee. The blond head lifted as Buck came closer and again the eyes remained flat and expressionless, giving no hint as to what Chris was thinking.

"Chris."

"Buck."

Silence.

Buck tried again. Jesus, Chris could make it hard sometimes.

"Chris. You were right, I was outta line..."

"Yep."

Buck sighed. Really hard.

"I just..."

"Don't! I don't need rationalisation. I need a working team."

Wilmington nodded once, biting back a response, an abrupt gesture that was a silent admission of a mistake made.

"You got it, Chris."

Larabee's expression relaxed, the hard lines around his eyes gradually softening.

"I'd better, or you're a dead man Wilmington." The smile was just a flicker as he checked his watch. "You wanna go with Nathan and Josiah and take five? Me and Ezra will hold the fort. Have the transport ready and waiting by thirteen hundred. We go at thirteen-fifteen. Okay?"

Me and Ezra.

Buck stared for several seconds at the Southerner across the room then ducked his head and quickly turned away.

“Okay. No sweat.” But wondering suddenly what had happened to Me and Buck.

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Lisa had quickly decided that she liked Ezra Standish. From the minute he had turned those incredibly green eyes on her and spoken in his soft, American accent she had felt as if for once someone was interested in her. Not as Manfred Hengst’s daughter but as a person in her own right. She was not even sure why she should feel such an immediate and implicit trust in a complete stranger but there it was. He was her bodyguard. A slight thrill of excitement sent a shiver down her spine and she smiled as once again he focused his attention on her and started talking.

His German, she decided, while very different from her own had not been learned in any high school class. He spoke with the confident ease of someone who had a familiarity with the language that came from an intimate knowledge of colloquial everyday speech, but it had a hard edge and a strong accent to it that had nothing to do with him being an American. No it was something different. After a few moments of close attention she thought she had it.

“You had some time in Switzerland, Mr. Standish?”

The smile surprised her, but even more the approval she read in his eyes, something she rarely saw from either her father or Connie.

“A few years, a long time ago.” The American ducked his head almost shyly, like a schoolboy caught in a deception. “Is it so obvious?”

“Only to a German,” she answered cautiously, afraid of saying something that might upset or offend the bodyguard and, by default, her father, “Or a Swiss.”

Instead he gave her an amused look and slowly shook his head.

“You’re a born diplomat, darlin’.” He made a sign that she should walk with him as he started to move towards the window out of earshot of any of the others, although he knew JD would be monitoring every word. “My mother married a Swiss businessman when I was fifteen and I was obliged to complete my schooling in Geneva.”

She detected a hint of something in his voice that suggested those had not been happy years and at once felt a connection with him; a shared understanding of a disrupted childhood.

“I had a stepmother for a while,” she admitted staring out at the impressive view over Guatemala City, then with a guilty look, which rapidly transformed into one of defiance, she folded her arms. “But I’m glad she’s gone.”

The American’s expression remained neutral but she caught a slight flicker of emotion that may or may not have been sympathy.

“Are you married?” She asked impulsively, suddenly interested in the man who was being paid to protect her.

“No.” She thought he was going to stop at a monosyllabic denial but he sighed and leaned against the window frame. “The kind of work I do doesn’t go too well with being married, Lisa.”

She nodded. It made perfect sense to her. She turned thoughtful eyes to the man beside her; old enough to be her father really but at the same time nothing even remotely like a father-figure. For one thing she knew this man wore a gun and that, like Marcel, he had an awareness about him that was at once reassuring and frightening. He was there for one reason and that was to keep her safe, and she found she liked that idea very much. Idly musing, she wondered if he could keep her safe from Connie, then frowned as the thought crossed her mind that maybe Ezra would need protection of his own from the manipulative au pair and at that moment Lisa vowed to herself that she would not let the Dutch woman use her tricks on Ezra as she had done with Marcel. Lisa plunged her hand into the pockets of her jeans and flicked her hair from her face with a quick toss of her head.

“Yes, I can see that.”

The sharp sound of her father’s voice interrupted any further conversation as he moved to intercede and she recognised the subtle warning in his voice that meant she was doing something of which he did not approve.

“Lisa! I hope you are not making a nuisance of yourself.”

She guiltily avoided making eye contact recognising that he was telling her in his own way that he thought she was, but before she could open her mouth to respond, Ezra had smoothly stepped forward, a physical barrier between herself and her father. The action surprised her as she had been prepared to accept a reprimand, the usual iron fist in a velvet glove that her father was an expert in delivering.

“Not at all, Herr Hengst. Just getting to know each other.”

She wondered how Ezra managed to make those few words somehow sound like a challenge but his voice, while it remained charmingly polite, had an underlying suggestion of menace. Whatever it was that he did, she knew her father had picked up on the inflection as his eyes narrowed fractionally.

Hengst hesitated, on the verge of speaking, then abruptly changed his mind and giving a sharp nod, turned away again. Lisa pressed her lips together trying not to smile. It was not often that Manfred Hengst was prepared to yield quite so easily, especially not where his only daughter was concerned but for once his over-protectiveness had been nipped cleanly in the bud. She folded her arms again and cast a surreptitious glance at the American bodyguard, forced to stifle a giggle as he winked and gave her a knowing smile. This was going to be a very interesting two weeks.

Ezra flicked the safety bar on the door and moved back into the room, now empty with Hengst on his way to his first meeting, accompanied by four of the InterSept team, and Lisa and Connie having retired to the bedroom to change, ostensibly into something more comfortable. With a sigh he peeled off his jacket and hooked it over a chair back before unbuttoning his cuffs and rolling up his sleeves, grateful that his role for the day was not going to be overly taxing physically. He still wondered if that was one of the reasons that Chris had chosen him for the less demanding task of watching over Lisa. Chris was never exactly forthcoming in offering reasons for any of his decisions but the Southerner suspected that Larabee was not yet convinced of his fitness. For once the knowledge did not rankle, rather he found himself appreciating Larabee's foresight.

Holstered snugly beneath his left armpit, the 9 mm SIG in its shoulder rig nestling comfortably against his ribcage was a stainless steel extension of himself that he barely noticed. He wished he could say the same for the other, less obvious, stainless steel extensions that were hidden beneath living tissue, the screws, pins, wires, nails and plates holding shattered bone together. Right now he was sure he could feel every one of them. Sitting on the arm of the sofa and glancing around the luxurious suite, he absently massaged his aching left thigh.

Lisa had been a pleasant surprise. He had expected a difficult rich kid, the archetypical spoiled brat and had instead found a rather sad, shy and spiritless thirteen year-old who had immediately touched a sympathetic nerve deep inside him. I had a stepmother for a while. The wry smile that momentarily curved his lips held little suggestion of humour. No, not sympathy. Empathy.

His earpiece crackled with static and JD's voice came through from the next room as clearly as if he was standing beside him.

"Radio check. Op Three. Status."

That was him.

"Check. OK."

"Everything alright there, Ezra? Thought I'd lost the connection."

"No problem. Just quiet."

"Cool. Out."

Ezra smiled to himself; he was going to have no secrets from Dunne by the end of this assignment. Being wired was no novelty, he had been in that situation often enough in the FBI, but to be monitored almost twenty-four hours a day was something new and, he decided, required a certain degree of trust. Standing up again he moved stiffly to the window. Stick around long enough kid and you'll learn more than you ever wanted to know about me. Hopefully JD understood the meaning of discretion.

Tanner was bored. First he had tried offering some help to JD but the young ex-cop was handling the sysop role just fine on his own, so he had spent the remaining time trying to keep out of his way. There was no room for idle chatter even if the Texan had been one to engage in it and, truth be known, he was not. Dunne had concentrated on his computer equipment, his back to the room and to pass the time Vin had drunk so much coffee that he had spent the last half hour ducking in and out of the bathroom getting rid of it. He had even tried to sleep, but if anything he was now borderline hyperactive and lying down had just made him more aware of his restlessness. He had not realised that he had been constantly prowling until JD's voice finally sliced through his teeming thoughts and brought him to an abrupt halt.

"Vin! For Christ's sake can't you sit down for just five minutes?" Tanner turned sharply to see an obviously exasperated Dunne leaning back in the chair with a hand over his the mouthpiece of his headset. "You've already worn a track in the goddamn carpet and you're making me dizzy!"

The Texan reluctantly sat down on the foot of one of the beds.

"Sorry, JD. Go ahead and ignore me." He realised he was already drumming a tattoo on his thigh with one hand and quickly stopped himself, adding acidly: "Just like everyone else."

Dunne shot him a look of sympathy, before turning to talk briefly into the microphone. A few seconds later he rotated his chair to face a morose Tanner.

"Look, why don't you go and check on Ezra. Even things up." He gave a smile. "Remember he's outnumbered right now."

Vin looked mildly interested, at the same time extremely conscious of the fact that his antics were driving the younger man to distraction.

"Anything happening?"

JD listened for a moment and shook his head.

"All quiet on the western front."

Tanner sighed then stood up.

"Okay, tell him I'm on my way." He moved to get his Browning from the nightstand and reached behind him to attach the holster to his belt at the small of his back before pulling on his jacket.

"Hey, Vin, you want a wire?"

The Texan shook his head as he straightened his collar.

"Nope. I'm not part of this op, remember? This is strictly off the record. A social call."

Dunne shrugged and turned back to his console, again activating the mic.

"Op Three. Incoming friendly."

Vin allowed himself a wry smile at the code. He wondered if Ezra would see it that way.

If the Southerner thought anything of Vin's impromptu visit he gave no indication of it, instead waving the Texan through the door and into the Hengst suite.

“Change of scenery, Mr. Tanner?” He kept his voice pitched low, a trace of amusement creeping into his voice although his expression gave nothing away.

“Stir crazy,” confessed Vin just as quietly, moving past him. He paused and automatically did a visual sweep of the room, adding: “And too much coffee.” .

“Bathroom’s that way.”

Vin gave a brief smile. “Wise ass! Gimme a break, will, ya? I’m going nuts here.”

Ezra secured the door behind them and gestured with a quick motion of his hand to the empty room.

“Far be it from me to disillusion you, Vin, but it’s not exactly a hive of activity in here.”

The Texan shrugged and, walking slowly forward into the suite with the Southerner a bare half-step behind, dug his hands into his pockets.

“So what’s the story?”

Ezra sat down on the sofa and immediately resumed a game of solitaire that he had started, with deft economy of movement and without seeming to pay a great deal of attention to what he was doing.

“Lisa crashed about half an hour ago, a combination of jet lag and...” He raised his eyes to the still-standing Texan, “...dare I say, boredom. Miss van der Schoor is currently engaged in doing whatever it is that women find to do for inordinate lengths of time in hotel bathrooms.”

“Best not to ask, I guess,” replied Tanner absently, lowering himself to sit awkwardly on the sofa arm.

Standish flipped over another card and looked away again with a half-smile. “Quite.”

After several moments of silence in which neither man seemed inclined to speak but which held no suggestion of unease, the Texan sighed and stretched one arm along the back of the sofa.

“You know, Ezra, this is nothing like I expected it to be.”

Standish gave a brief snort. “In my experience nothing ever is,” and continued to play out his hand. A few seconds later he glanced up again, then carefully setting aside the deck of cards he had been holding, gave the Texan his full attention. “Something on your mind, Mr. Tanner?”

Tanner hesitated then: “I don’t know if I’m cut out for this kinda stuff, Ezra. I’m a cop...” A beat. “...was a cop. Just a simple, uncomplicated guy. This is so...” He shook his head as if unable to find the words, then sighed, “...not me.”

Standish gave him an odd look. “So what is you? Sleeping on the streets of Boston with all your worldly goods packed into your truck like an itinerant gypsy?”

Vin stood up. He should have expected the sarcasm. “In a way, yeah. No complications.”

Ezra raised his eyebrows and Tanner knew he was walking straight into another one of the Southerner’s barbs.

“Also no money, no job and no prospects, not to mention being arrested on a charge of possession of an unlicensed firearm. Definitely no complications.”

Standish picked up the deck of cards again but started to slide them through his fingers, shuffling smoothly, his game abandoned.

“Hell, Ezra,” he responded impatiently, “You know what I mean!”

The Southerner tilted his head to one side, his expression thoughtful. “No, I’m not sure that I do, Vin. What is it exactly that you’re looking for?”

The Texan shrugged. “Not sure that I know that myself yet,” he confessed, seriously, then after a moment’s consideration: “Probably the same as you.”

To his surprise Ezra laughed as he gathered up the remaining cards from the coffee table, but it was a hard, self-mocking sound. “Now, that Mr. Tanner, I seriously doubt!”

“Come on, Ezra,” countered Vin, “You really think we’re that different? Any of us?”

Standish paused and let the cards cascade easily through his nimble fingers, and a brief shadow momentarily seemed to darken the brilliance of his green eyes, although his expression never altered. When he spoke his voice was quiet with a hint of regret.

“More than you can ever begin to imagine.” Abruptly he stood up and, as he moved towards the cafe of coffee steaming fragrantly on the bureau, gestured to the transmitter button on his collar reminding Tanner that their conversation was far from private. “And, Vin, for the record, I don’t think I’m the right one to be telling this to. Talk to Chris.”

As Standish turned to pour some coffee, Tanner stared at the former FBI agent’s back. The man sure knew how to end a conversation.

The scream, entirely unexpected, drilled through the Texan’s ears, triggering a lightning response that was immediately mirrored by Standish several feet away. Weapons drawn they both advanced at a run on the suite’s adjoining room, uncertain what danger could possibly present itself from within a closed room several storeys up, but taking no chances. The scream subsided into near hysterical sobbing as Connie, the au pair, burst out into the main room, shaking out her long hair and frantically brushing at her arms and shoulders. The two bodyguards exchanged a puzzled look, unable to make any sense of the torrent of Dutch that she was spouting, only knowing that she was not only distressed but in a blind panic.

Vin could see Ezra already talking to JD as he moved to the door of the ensuite, and he held back, sparing a moment to check on the blonde woman. She did not appear to be hurt in any way and he snared her arm, succeeding finally in getting her attention and halting the constant stream of words.

“Are you all right, ma’am?”

Her head reared up as if he had made an indecent suggestion.

“Do I look alright?” She snapped impatiently. The voice was only lightly accented, and Vin noticed that her voice shook slightly.

Tanner quickly looked her up and down, thinking that standing there in just a satin and lace camisole, she looked more than all right.

“Well, yes, ma’am. You do.” Her response was short and sharp and, by the tone and inflection, less than complimentary and he had a feeling that their association was already off to a rocky start. “That is,” he added, “you don’t seem to be hurt.”

He released her, more concerned with what had prompted her outburst and Ezra’s well-being, than her state of health which seemed not to be in the least bit compromised.

“Ezra. Got anything?”

He heard a single word obscenity, followed by a brief laugh. “How do you feel about arachnids, Mr. Tanner?”

Vin let his gun drop from the ready position, and slowed his approach to the bathroom, feeling the anti-climax of an adrenaline rush.

“Depends on what scale we’re talkin’ here,” replied the Texan cautiously, “Ain’t partial to nothin’ that has more’n four legs.”

Standish leaned out of the door, his face creased in a mischievous grin. “Well, you know how they say everything’s bigger in Texas, Vin?”

Tanner looked wary, not trusting the Southerner and his almost feral smile. “Yeah?”

“They’re wrong.” He disappeared back inside the ensuite, his voice echoing off the tiled walls.

“Tell you the truth Vin I’m not sure whether I should wrestle the beast into submission, or just shoot the bastard.”

The au pair came up beside him having regained some of her composure, but still kept him between herself and the bathroom. She held out a hand, spreading her fingers wide.

“This big,” she affirmed, then shuddered, “It dropped on me. I can still feel it crawling.”

Unconsciously he put an arm across her shoulders, an awkwardly protective gesture.

“It’s just a spider, ma’am. Ezra’s taking care of it.”

The woman moved a step closer. “He is going to kill it, yes?”

“Don’t think he’s plannin’ on inviting it out to dinner.”

The young woman frowned and levelled a serious glance at him. “This is a joke?”

Tanner sighed, thinking the au pair was going to be hard work, and reholstered the Browning, responding quietly: “Not so’s you’d notice.”

Vin had not expected his day to get any worse but he had come to the conclusion that Connie van der Schoor had decided to entertain herself by making his life uncomfortable. At first he had been

willing to put it down to co-incidence but on the third time that she had managed to embarrass him he began to understand that she was waging some perverse campaign against him. An elaborate game that was at once as unsettling as it was irritating. If he had been bored before, he was now on edge enough to be waiting for her next gambit, and studiously maintaining a safe distance between the two of them had become his number one priority but an additional complication that he did not need. Hell, this was more Buck's territory.

Tanner would have been the first to admit that he was a man who liked space. Part of the attraction of being a sniper had been the long periods of time he spent in solitude with nothing but his own thoughts for company. His perspective had necessarily changed when he had become a part of InterSept. By definition close protection meant just that; getting up close and personal with a client. He had to adapt. Had adapted. Then suddenly he was being manoeuvred, back to the wall, by a woman who seemed to know just which way to yank his chain. At the end of a long afternoon he was juggling the need to maintain cordial relations with a client with the almost overwhelming desire to tell the Dutch woman in no uncertain terms to back off. He smiled grimly to himself - or words to that effect. Looking out over the Avenida Reforma and further, across the city, he wondered how Chris and the others were faring. He sighed, leaning one shoulder against the wall and folding his arms in front of him. A damn sight better than he was he could guarantee it.

"Mr. Tanner."

Vin turned his head to acknowledge the Southerner, before resuming his pensive examination of the view.

"Feel like a goldfish in a bowl," he mused quietly, "Don't even know what the weather's really like out there."

"Believe me, Vin, it's hot, humid and makes you sweat. I don't need to experience it to know it."

Vin laughed. "No one ever drowned in their own sweat, Ezra."

Standish gave a devilish grin as he sat back on the sill, resting his hands on the ledge to either side of him. "Maybe so, but if I have to put it to the test I'd prefer it to be later rather than sooner."

Tanner watched him for a moment thinking he had not seen the Southerner quite so relaxed before, and while he was beginning to feel more and more like a square peg in a round hole, Ezra seemed to be perfectly at ease. He wanted to ask if he was okay, thinking of the painkillers he had seen him taking earlier, but knew that if he did the walls would immediately go up, and that was something he was trying desperately to avoid. "You're going to love it up-country then."

Ezra rolled his eyes dramatically. "Don't remind me, Mr. Tanner. I have yet to understand why we must spend hours cramped in two SUVs, driving on unsafe roads through inhospitable territory notorious for bandit attacks, when we could be at our final destination in twenty minutes by air. Instead we have a man, a fully qualified pilot no less, cooling his heels watchdogging a multimillion

dollar jet at Aurora airport while we go bush.”

Vin frowned sceptically. He knew which he preferred. “Look at it this way, Ezra. At least you get to see some of the country.”

It was the Southerner’s turn to look sceptical. “It’ll take a better reason than that to convince me.”

The Texan’s smile broadened slowly as he levelled a bright blue gaze at the Southerner. “Chris says so.”

Ezra snapped his fingers as if suddenly struck by a revelation, his own face creasing in a smile. “That’s the one!”

Vin was not entirely sure how it had all come about but one moment he was keeping Ezra company, a quiet afternoon, with no demands other than to keep an eye on two principles who had so far done little more than talk, watch TV, eat and sleep, then he was hastily being press-ganged into backing up the Southerner on a shopping excursion that Connie and Lisa had decided they simply had to take. There was no reason that they should not go out and explore the city, in fact that was why Hengst had spent an inordinate amount of money on engaging InterSept, to protect not only him but his daughter. And now his daughter wanted to see something other than the inside of a hotel room. That he could understand. He was restless enough himself to jump at the chance to breathe some fresh air, even if it did mean being thrust into Connie van der Schoor’s close company again.

Tanner checked his weapon again and slid it back into his belt holster. He knew he was going to suffer for wearing the leather jacket but he could hardly walk the streets of Guatemala with a Browning Hi-Power on display and he hated ankle rigs. Ezra always favoured a shoulder harness and his lightweight suit was cut perfectly to accommodate the additional bulk under his left armpit, and not for the first time Vin found himself wondering at the cost of the man’s always impeccable wardrobe.

“You think Chris is going to go for this?”

Standish’s expression made it quite clear that what Chris Larabee thought was of little consequence.

“My call,” he responded bluntly, “You coming or not?”

“Hey, it was just a question. Remember I’m officially off the roster for today.”

“Well, I’ve just put you back on.” The Southerner rolled his shoulder testing the sit of his shoulder rig. “I need you.”

“I’m cool with it. Besides can’t get myself in much deeper with Chris than I already am, might as

well go for broke.”

Ezra’s face suddenly relaxed.

“Christ, Vin, it’s only a run out to the mall, what the hell can go wrong?”

The Texan shrugged and then nodded, agreeing. One on one close protection. It was what they were trained to do, it was what they had come hundreds of miles to do and it was what they were going to do. No sweat.

“I’ll call a cab.”

Tanner leaned back into the corner of the car seat, grateful for the air conditioning. The moist heat had hit him like a wave as they had come out of the hotel, and he had to admit that Ezra was right. Within two minutes he was sweating, his shirt sticking uncomfortably to his back under his jacket. He edged closer to the door as Connie moved up to press against him followed by Lisa taking up the remaining space in the back while Ezra sat up front beside the cab driver, chatting amicably in Spanish.

Vin ignored the hand that crept onto his thigh, determined not to react to what he knew was a deliberate attempt to get him off balance, something the Dutch woman seemed to take a particular delight in. He had yet to figure out why. Some game he supposed. Harmless but incredibly irritating, especially as she had already managed to make him blush back at the hotel. He could have kicked himself then for letting her get to him but he was not used to having females he barely knew grab his butt. And now here she was, invading his space again.

He glanced out of the window at the passing traffic, watching not just looking at the scenery. In the front, although he looked very relaxed and casual, he knew Ezra was doing the same. Even without Lisa being the daughter of an important businessman, they were already potential targets for robbery as foreign tourists. None of them had anything of value on them that would attract thieves, that had been Ezra’s directive before they even set out, for while it was unlikely that any would-be thief would get past either Vin or the Southerner there was no point in attracting any unwanted attention. Lisa carried a small purse, Connie a nondescript canvas bag and their money was in the form of plastic. First rule: minimise the risk.

Jesus! He jerked as the hand that had been resting on his thigh slid across his groin, fingers closing around him in a fleetingly intimate but highly suggestive squeeze that both shocked and disgusted him. This was not about desire or even about sex, it was about control. He moved quickly back as the hand continued down between his thighs and in a lightening fast but barely noticeable movement he grabbed her wrist, strong fingers applying painful pressure as he made, and held, eye contact. For a long moment he held the crushing grip, only easing up when he saw the moisture

gathering in the corner of her eyes. He exhaled noisily, hardly aware that he had been holding his breath and, with a slight shove away from him, released her.

“Don’t ever do that again.” His voice was low and intense, meant for her ears only, although he saw the Southerner half turn, his eyes quickly scanning the back seat before looking away again. “Now back off!”

The look he got in return was venomous, and for a moment he thought the au pair was going to spit at him but as she rubbed her wrist she deliberately turned her back on him focusing instead on Lisa and speaking rapidly to the girl in German. He shifted uncomfortably in his seat, knowing he had made an enemy for himself. Damn! Ezra could ride in back next time. He was staying as far away from Connie van der Schoor as he possibly could.

“What’s going on?”

Vin, waiting for Lisa and Connie to exit the cab, glanced quickly at the Southerner, the question catching him unawares.

“Nothing.”

Standish smoothly steered Lisa to his left and looked back over his shoulder at the Texan with an expression that suggested disbelief but to his credit he passed no further comment, instead taking a moment to give a status report to JD back at the hotel while Vin took a moment to study the plaza. Open space, lots of people, uncontrolled situation, an indeterminate number of variables but in spite of all that a low risk factor. Taking a deep breath he took up station half a step behind Connie. No sweat, Tanner. Just a day at the mall. He suddenly became aware of Ezra’s scrutiny and frowned as the Southerner gestured to his ear, cursing inwardly as he remembered his refusal of a wire when he had first left the ops centre. Now he was out of the communication loop.

“Jesus, Ezra. I didn’t think about it,” he confessed, moving closer to the former FBI agent and keeping his voice low. “Fuck up number one.”

Standish flicked Tanner’s arm with the back of his hand and gave a fleeting grin.

“Well, let’s try and keep it at one, okay? Just stay close and maintain visual.”

Ezra moved off, and he heard him start a conversation with Lisa in German. He smiled before silently bringing up the rear, keeping a measured step behind and to one side of Connie. Standish would have no worries about anything he said being monitored this time, he might as well have been speaking in code for all any of the rest of them could tell. Just another smoke screen for the enigmatic Southerner to hide behind.

Vin listened with half an ear to the busy chatter around him as they circulated around the plaza, mostly in Spanish but with a liberal sprinkling of other ethnic flavours that he could never hope to

accurately identify but which he suspected might be indigenous languages. At the same time he was acutely aware of the armed military presence of Guatemalan soldiers freely moving among the citizens and he wondered how they would react to a couple of armed Americans in their territory. He knew Chris had made sure they had permission to carry weapons but he had a nagging feeling that these boys might be the kind to shoot first and ask questions later. There was something vaguely unsettling about having soldiers with automatic rifles on the streets and he tried to forget the appalling history of civil war that had plagued the country for decades. War had become a way of life to these people and the peace had been a difficult one.

“May I look here, please?”

The request was unexpected. It was the first time the Dutch woman had acknowledged him since the incident in the cab, now she was asking his permission to look in a shop window. The Texan had the uneasy feeling that she was still trying to push his buttons.

“Sure. You don’t have to ask me, you know.” I’m just the hired help.

He checked to see how far ahead Ezra and Lisa were, not wanting to lose them in the crowd but Standish had already marked the fact that they were no longer following and he was gesturing to one of the tables at a colourful open air cafe to let the Texan know they would wait there. Glancing back at the au pair, he thought the smile she gave him looked more like it belonged on a starving wolf who had just seen its next meal, and he found himself hoping to God that Larabee had put him back on the driving roster for the next day. Ezra was welcome to have this lady all to himself.

Reluctantly following, the Texan moved again to within half a step of the Dutch woman, reminding himself that close protection hardly meant standing out on the sidewalk while his principle disappeared into a store, although had he been given any kind of choice he would have gladly just walked away.

The coffee was good. As he took another mouthful of the dark, aromatic brew Ezra had to concede that the Guatemalan maragogype was a great coffee, enough to dispel some of the unease he had been feeling since sitting down at the cafe with Lisa. Enough even to take his mind off the crushing humidity that was making his head ache. But not quite enough to forget the haunted expression on Vin’s face as he had stepped out of the cab. Tanner was not comfortable with Connie, that much was clear. What concerned Ezra was why. He had not been unaware of the dynamics between the two of them back at the hotel but he had figured Vin was old enough to look after himself. Now he was beginning to have second thoughts. Connie was a predator, he had recognised that fact soon enough and Vin, it seemed, was not used to dealing with man-eaters. Ezra leaned back in his chair

and sighed as Tanner briefly appeared, watching as the lean Texan followed the woman into yet another of the stores. Compared to the lovely Miss van der Schoor, Tanner was a mere babe in the woods and if he didn't watch out the Dutch vixen would soon have him eviscerated, if not emasculated.

"Connie plays games."

Caught off guard by the unexpected comment, the Southerner quickly looked at the young German girl and back to where he had just seen Vin disappear. "Games?"

Lisa sighed and slowly rotated the can of soda that sat in a pool of condensation on the table. "She made your friend, Vin...?" she hesitated a moment over the unfamiliar name before pressing on, not looking at Standish as she spoke, "...very angry in the taxi." She looked up. "And he almost made her cry."

Ezra picked up his cup again and tilted his head to one side, his expression inviting her to continue. He already knew something had gone down between the two of them from Tanner's behaviour but it seemed she had rattled the Texan's cage enough to get a reaction out of him that he had missed. That was all he needed, for Vin to start upsetting the clients. Pissing off Chris was one thing, pissing off the customer was likely to get the Texan sidelined for the duration of the operation.

"Connie does that to men. She likes to touch them."

The Southerner managed to swallow his coffee without the indignity of choking on it, but only just. "Lisa..."

The teenager's head lifted, and he wondered how she managed to look so ingenuous, after having implied that Connie had given the Texan a quick feel-up in the back seat.

"It's what she does. A game. I know this." She shrugged then: "Some of them like it."

Standish set his cup down, running his index finger around the rim, as he cast a keen eye across the plaza; a routine check. He did not particularly want to pursue this line of conversation with a thirteen year old but he needed to know.

"And Vin?"

Lisa shrugged. "I was not looking..."

"But..." he prompted, knowing she still had more to say.

"He was not very happy and...I think he may have hurt her, here." She indicated her wrist, wrapping her fingers tightly around it to demonstrate. "Then she called him a boerelul and started talking to me instead."

Ezra quickly suppressed a smile. His Dutch was limited solely to the profanity he had picked up during several summers in Amsterdam in his misspent youth but it was enough to know that she was basically calling Vin an asshole. Considering the alternatives available the woman had been positively restrained. Whatever Tanner had done, winning hearts and minds had not been part of

it.

“Mobile Two confirm contact! Mark...three hostiles.”

The Southerner was startled by the sudden intrusion of Dunne’s tightly controlled voice in his left ear cutting across his thoughts like a sonic boom. Contact. Mobile Two. Hell, that was Chris and Josiah. Something was going down with Hengst.

“Mobile One status!”

“One evading. Switching route D.” Then a half-beat later, no change in inflection: “Shit, we’re fucked, man.” Buck.

“Mobile Two engaging...”

Standish pushed away his cup and started to rise, lightly touching Lisa’s arm to get her attention.

“Come on, darlin’. Time to be on our way. See if we can’t get the delightful Miss van der Schoor to at least enter only every second store.”

He found himself scanning the crowd, suddenly feeling unsettled and aware of the subtle but significant increase in his own heart rate, an immediate reaction to Dunne’s radioed alert. There was nothing he could do about something that was taking place half way across the city but his natural survival instincts dictated that he respond and that response included getting the hell out of the open and a potentially vulnerable position. He moved a step back to let Lisa pass in front of him as she crossed to his left and he smiled. Clever girl. He preferred to keep his right hand free, for while he could shoot with equal facility with either hand, a left handed draw from his shoulder rig was awkward and wasted valuable seconds. Now he just had to catch up with Tanner again. The Texan was going to love this.

In his ear the multiple streams of communication came together in the rapid-fire speech of the embattled and it was clear the four InterSept operatives were having a hard time of it. His expression hardened as he heard Chris yell that they had been rammed, his gut clenching as he imagined the scene playing out from the staccato bursts of dialogue assaulting his ear.

“Op three. Status?”

That was his call sign. JD checking. Good kid. Doing it by the numbers.

“Three and four clear,” he reported tersely. No point in saying more, Dunne would already have his hands full and sure enough another burst of invective from Wilmington suggested that the engagement was far from over.

“Something is wrong?”

He realised Lisa was watching him closely and he quickly shook his head assuming an air of conviction that tested even his remarkable skills as a fabricator of untruths. “Routine radio check.” He glanced around again, examining the milling crowd in a new light as his natural mistrust of humanity took on the added dimension of occupational paranoia. Damn! He would not be satisfied

until he had Tanner in his sights again.

“There.” As if reading his mind, Lisa pointed out the reassuringly familiar leather-jacketed figure of Vin Tanner as he escorted a package-laden Connie from a store.

The nudge from behind might have been an accident; a passer-by jostled by the crowd. It wasn't, but the following straight-fingered jab aimed at his kidney missed the mark as he wheeled, shoving Lisa behind him and using his body to shield her. As he raised his arm to block the pile-driver coming at him, he marked a second target and delivered a reverse kick to the man's knee that effectively stopped his forward progress at least temporarily, and found himself hoping that Vin might, by some good fortune, have been a track star in college because right now he needed him to do the hundred metres sprint in under ten seconds or he was going to be in real trouble. Lisa shrilled his name and he realised with a sense of dread that she was struggling with a third assailant.

“Op three. Contact!” he snapped, smoothly dropping into a fighting crouch and launching into a series of rapidly executed moves that delivered separate attacks on three different fronts. “Engaged!” He grunted as knuckles met ribs. His ribs. Engaged indeed. He had time enough to see Lisa kicking and biting her attacker, then he was fighting with purpose and blessing every dirty street-fighting tactic he had ever learned.

Tanner froze, feeling as if he was watching some surrealistic mime unfold, observing through the wrong end of a telescope as tiny mannequins performed some complicated and bizarre dance. Only this was no dance, this was Ezra and he was definitely in trouble. It took less than a second for the Texan to process the information and react, although it seemed to him as if he was moving in slow motion while paradoxically his heart was racing in double-time and his mind had already hit light speed.

He started forward, remembered Connie, backed up and grabbed her arm, keeping his voice low and more in control than he felt. “Come on, we have to go. Now!”

The Dutch woman looked up, puzzled but totally unconcerned, trying to shrug out of his grip.

“Why? I haven't...”

“Listen, lady,” he snapped, “I don't have time for this so just shut up and do as I say. We got trouble.”

He pulled on her arm, almost dragging her along the sidewalk as he broke into a run. Forced to clumsily follow she dropped one of her packages, baulked then stumbled trying to retrieve both it and her balance, and finally wrenched free of his grip. Vin swore once under his breath and wheeled back to take her arm again but she was screaming something at him in Dutch, her face a

mask of fury as she slapped his hand away.

“Leave me alone!” That he understood, and the temptation was almost too much to resist but he had little choice, especially if he expected to keep his job beyond today. Ezra was going to have to hold out a little longer.

“Connie!” In spite of her struggles he grabbed her wrist again, ignoring the casually curious audience the woman’s antics were attracting. “That’s enough! I’m not asking you, I’m telling you. We have to go. Now come on!” He jerked her roughly forward and again broke into a jog, trailing her behind him and hoping the Southerner was as good as he thought he was in a fight.

There were three of them. Two focused on keeping Ezra occupied, the third struggling with a less than compliant Lisa who, to her credit, was spitting and clawing like a wildcat. Making a rapid assessment, Tanner shoved the breathless and stunned pair into one of the cafe’s vacant chairs and wheeled abruptly away. “Don’t move!” He ran then, hurdling a low planter to launch himself at Lisa’s attacker. Time to get down and dirty.

Larabee swore under his breath as the 4WD was shunted sideways and the passenger door buckled inwards under the impact of the other vehicle, punching him in the hip and sending a lightning bolt of pain through his lower body. Josiah was spinning the wheel and slamming the Montero into reverse to disengage, ripping away part of the front fender as he shot back then rocketed forward again, leaving the Ram - appropriately named from Chris’ point of view-to pursue.

“Buck?”

“Free and clear, Chris. Thanks.”

The black Ram had come from nowhere, had cut between the two vehicles and rear ended Hengst’s Mitsubishi, then had swerved out and tried to shove the big 4WD off the road. Josiah had promptly done his own version of a demolition derby and neatly interceded, allowing Buck some time to take evasive action, power away and get some clean air between himself and the Ram. Chris was not too worried about Wilmington, he knew he would now randomly switch routes, in an evasive pattern guided by JD, finally heading back to the hotel. With Hengst clear, his concern now was not letting the Ram get away.

“Okay, Josiah. Let’s get the bastards.”

Josiah suddenly threw the SUV into a turn and doubled back towards the still manoeuvring Ram.

“Op three. Contact!”

Ezra. What the hell...

“Engaged.”

Fuck!

“JD?” Chris dropped the formal call sign. “What’s going down with Ezra?”

“No data,” Dunne’s voice was strained, “Reported clear, then contact. Sounds like he’s got trouble.”

“You got Vin there? Lemme talk to him.” He stopped to brace himself as Josiah bore down on the floundering Ram.

“Um...Op Four is...uh...live.”

Chris grabbed the dashboard as Sanchez hit the brakes and the Montero slewed sideways to broadside the other vehicle with a bone shaking crunch.

“Say again!”

“Vin’s backing Ezra.”

Chris closed his eyes briefly wondering at just what moment the whole goddamn thing had progressed from a routine op to a complete fuck up.

“So what’s his status?”

“Offline.”

Larabee slammed the dash with his fist, as the Ram managed to right itself and roar away, slewing wildly from side to side, part of it’s rear bumper trailing on the ground and smoke curling from the front tyre.

“Goddamn, you lost contact?”

A split second hesitation. “Chris, he’s not wired.”

The blond man reached out and grabbed Josiah’s arm, quickly shaking his head his message clear. Abandon pursuit. For a long moment he sat in silence, his expression hard, keeping a lid on the adrenaline-fuelled emotions raging through him.

“Pursuit abandoned,” he snapped tersely, “We’re coming in.”

In his earpiece as the chatter died, he could hear the distinctive sounds of ragged breathing and in the distance he picked up a single piercing scream; one word: “Ezra!”

Lisa. The Southerner twisted sharply, pulling one of his attackers with him and driving him to the ground with a forearm smash to the side of the head as he spared a moment to quickly search for the girl. A knee driven with force into the muscle of his thigh instantly claimed his attention, almost as readily as it momentarily numbed his quadriceps, and he was forced to turn again to react to the new threat from the second assailant countering a potentially disabling kick with an awkwardly executed, but nonetheless effective, drop kick of his own. He landed heavily feeling the jar of unyielding cement all the way up his spine, and immediately dropped to a crouch to follow-through with a lightning fast combination that finally finished his opponent. Breathing heavily, he

let the man go, more concerned with the remaining two men and Lisa's safety. Jesus, where the hell was Tanner. He whirled back to hastily search for the girl.

"Lisa!"

She was fighting; making herself a difficult target, not allowing her attacker to get a reasonable grip but he was bigger and much stronger and it was only a matter of time before he would prevail. Ezra started forward, but a blur of movement caught his eye and he managed a grim smile as a blue-jeaned, leather-jacketed figure, that could only be Vin, launched himself at Lisa's attacker. That was enough for the Southerner. It was now a fair fight although, considering the mismatch in skills, maybe not quite so fair as it would first seem-but at least equal in numbers. With an intensity of purpose he moved in on the man still struggling to get up off the ground.

Ezra was the superior fighter but his opponent was fuelled by desperation and for several minutes the two men engaged in a vicious struggle, no quarter given or expected by either, but the SIG nestled beneath his armpit was never an option. This was a city plaza, he was not about to pull a weapon and start shooting although as the man's elbow connected solidly with his face, his natural restraint was severely tested. Pain exploded across his cheek and he staggered back, a technicolour display of lights and stars momentarily illuminating his vision, then there was a split second of complete blackness and no sound but the rush of blood in his ears before he regained hold of his reeling senses. Staggering slightly he blinked to bring his eyes back into focus, seeing multiple images in front of him, that gradually coalesced into a solid figure. Vin.

"Ezra?" He was breathing heavily. "You okay, man? Ezra, talk to me."

The Southerner didn't shrug off the hand on his shoulder, but only because he first wanted to make sure he was stable enough not to fall over without the Texan's support. Sniffing, he swiped a hand across his nose leaving a smear of red across the back of his hand and, grimacing, swallowed the blood flowing unpleasantly down the back of his nose and into his throat before speaking.

"Lisa?"

A sudden clinging hug, forceful enough to make him take a step back as the girl's arms went around his waist, answered his question, then she was crying against his chest and talking rapidly in German between sobs. He gave her shoulders a quick reassuring squeeze, bending his head close to hers as he spoke, his tone quiet but urgent, the guttural and familiar accents of her own language quickly bringing her panic under control. A discreet nudge from Tanner briefly distracted him and he nodded silent thanks as he took the neatly folded handkerchief that the Texan was offering him to blot the blood trickling steadily from one nostril. He scanned the plaza, through not-quite-in-focus eyes.

"They got away." It wasn't a question.

"Took off like a pack of coon hounds on a scent." Vin's grip on his shoulder firmed as Ezra swayed

slightly, feeling suddenly light-headed. “You sure you’re okay?” persisted the Texan, his concern obvious. “Look, there’ll be local action crawling all over this place in a few minutes askin’ a lot of awkward questions. How d’you want to play this?”

Standish sighed and pressed the handkerchief to his nose, silently cursing. His leg was starting to throb as the natural analgesia of the adrenaline rush that had seen him through the fight began to dissipate and he had a headache that started at the base of his spine and ended at the top of his skull. He could have done without the elbow in the face as a parting shot.

“Don’t worry. I’ll do the talking.” He gently disengaged from Lisa’s grip, but kept a protective arm around her shoulders, suddenly aware of the sizeable crowd of bystanders that had gathered. He gingerly fingered his cheek and wondered with a sense of foreboding what the hell Chris was going to say.

“Op Three! Status? Ezra! Report.”

Ezra took a moment to process the fact that a familiar voice was urgently prompting him through his earpiece, and he glanced quickly at the press of onlookers who seemed to be watching him with the casually morbid interest of spectators the world over. He turned slightly towards Vin before responding.

“Three and four check.”

“Christ, Ezra, it’s about time!”

The Southerner closed his eyes for a moment, feeling slightly sick.

“Sorry, JD. I’ve been a little preoccupied.”

“Confirm current status.”

“We’re clear. Got some local action happening though so keep your ears on.”

“Problems?”

“Nothing we can’t handle.” Standish glanced up again allowing his gaze to roam around the plaza and levelled an enquiring look at Tanner. “Where’s Connie?” he mouthed, reluctant to transmit that particular question, or its possible answer over the air.

Vin quickly searched the tables of the cafe, softly swearing as he pinpointed the blond au pair gathering her packages together and moving off in what looked suspiciously like the opposite direction. He gave the Southerner’s shoulder an apologetic tap before he broke into a jog, intent on intercepting the Dutch woman before she disappeared from sight.

Noting the rapid approach of two of Guatemala’s finest and seeing several onlookers pointing in his direction, Ezra gently tightened his arm around Lisa and murmured into his microphone.

“Imminent appointment with the authorities, JD. Three out.” There would be time enough for details at the debrief.

Ezra tucked the bloodied handkerchief into his pants pocket and sighed. Debrief? Who was he

kidding? It would be an inquest, and he knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that once again he would be defending his actions. Perhaps Chris would be more forgiving than Internal Affairs, but somehow he doubted that Larabee would be feeling remotely charitable under the circumstances.

Chris again shoved the warped door of the Montero with a sharp thrust of his shoulder-it certainly was not going to yield without persuasion of the violent physical kind-and almost fell out of the cab as it finally popped open with a protesting shriek. Dropping awkwardly to the forecourt, he staggered slightly as his left leg failed to support him and slammed the ruined door shut. Goddammit! He rubbed his thigh. Felt like he'd been hit with a sledgehammer. He looked up as Josiah walked slowly around the front of the vehicle surveying the damage.

"Hope you took out collision insurance with this lease," the big man murmured, tongue firmly in cheek as he fingered the crumpled metal of the door, then frowned as Chris winced again. "You alright there, Chris?"

"I'll live," he answered, shortly, "Just took a knock when we were t-boned."

"Better let Nathan take a look at that soon as you get inside."

Chris shot the ex-marine an irritated look and limped away from the Mitsubishi, pain momentarily forgotten as he contemplated just how Manfred Hengst was going to react to the debacle of being chased and rammed on his first day in the city, while his only daughter was in the middle of some bag snatch attempt on the other side of town. Holy Christ! What the hell Ezra might have been thinking escaped him as he tried again to consider the big picture, but he always came back to the same bottom line. Taking Vin as back up made sense, taking Vin without a commlink was a basic breach of operational procedure that had somehow gotten by not only Ezra but JD as well. As sysop it was Dunne's responsibility to see the team wired. As team leader it was Ezra's responsibility to double check. As for Vin, he was beginning to wonder if he had made a grave error in judgement taking the Texan on. One way or another all three of them had some explaining to do.

Lisa sat very close to the Southerner, shocked and silent, taking reassurance from his nearness with one hand still gripping his arm as if letting go of him would mean letting go of herself and giving in to the uncertain emotions still raging within her small frame. On the other side of her sat Connie, equally silent but furious rather than upset. Staring intently out of the cab window, her body held stiff in her anger. Even Vin was subdued, sitting up front, keeping his thoughts to himself-but alert; watching.

Ezra leaned his head back against the padded upholstery, considering the uncomfortable build up

of pressure in his sinuses and felt the slight trembling of the girl next to him. Dammit, he should have been quicker! How could he have let it happen? Thankfully Lisa had come out of it surprisingly well; unharmed physically but still shocked by the violence of the attack. She had stayed close since then, clinging almost, and Ezra understood, as he felt the continued pressure of her hand on his arm, that for now she needed that reassurance of personal contact. Connie on the other hand had merely been furious that she had lost two of her packages, stolen when she had dropped them as Vin had dragged her bodily along the plaza. The very real possibility that Lisa could have been hurt seemed to have completely escaped her and, not for the first time, the former Federal agent wondered at her dedication to her charge.

Vin, for his part, had been obliged to chase after the Dutchwoman and fetch her back to the cafe until the report to the police was finished, and Ezra had heard the ranting and swearing from fifty feet away. He had also heard the Texan, at the end of his rope, answer her accusation that it was his fault that she had lost almost two hundred American dollars-worth of items, with an irritated: "Fucking well bill me!" Hardly SOP, but the Southerner had smiled at not only the au pair's stunned expression but the sudden silence that followed. He had already decided that if Connie made a formal complaint, he had heard nothing of the exchange.

The official verdict from the police had been an attempted mugging, targeting obviously well-off tourists, a regrettable but common occurrence in the city. Had not the young lady lost her purse in the fracas? They had given their statements and been allowed to go, but not before Ezra had tactfully refused medical assistance while hoping to God that his cheek wasn't fractured. He sighed as he caught sight of his reflection in the rear vision mirror. There was a splash pattern of now oxidised blood across his shirt, and to his disgust there was still congealed blood around one nostril but other than that he looked in reasonable shape. Any other damage he had sustained was at least not on display. He rubbed his torn and skinned knuckles, wondering if he had succeeded in detaching a few teeth from their moorings. Considering the distinct impression of an upper incisor just above the second knuckle on his right hand, he certainly hoped so.

JD had abandoned his post in front of the computers, overwhelmed by the urge to move and expend some of the nervous energy that was building up inside him. His heart still hammered hollowly in his chest, the aftermath of an adrenaline surge as he had juggled the combined challenge of directing Buck through the city, checking on Chris and Josiah's location as they ran interference and monitoring Ezra. His ears still rang with the assault from five separate commlinks all active at once and as the thought crossed his mind, he glanced at the earpiece and mic still sitting on the table. Vin's earpiece and mic. It should have been six. A fact he had no doubt Chris

would remind him of again and again. Larabee's silent fury had been almost palpable across the airwaves and Dunne had already prepared himself for a roasting.

He had checked Buck and Nathan in fifteen minutes before; they were already in the next room with Hengst. Chris and Josiah were back and on their way up. He had forced a check from Ezra and according to the Southerner they had an ETA of five minutes. JD again looked at the earpiece, feeling the profound disappointment of having failed and decided that as soon as the Texan walked back through the door he was going to weld the fucking thing to his ear.

OooOOOooo

The scene was familiar. Seven men in conference. Just like any other meeting of the team, except no one was talking and the uncomfortable silence that now hung over the room was charged with tension.

"Well, I guess things could've been worse..." Larabee's voice was deceptively mild when he finally spoke, but not one man in the room was under any illusions that it was likely to remain that way. "...at least nobody wound up dead!" Chris looked slowly from one man to the next. "But I've just spent almost an hour with Hengst explaining why the hell his only daughter, while under our so-called protection I might add, was allowed to be in a position where she was subject to a physical assault. As if that's not enough, I have to deal with an equally pissed, and not so understanding, Connie van der Schoor who's claiming harassment!" Larabee straightened and plunged his hands into his pockets as if he needed to restrain them, the implication being that at that moment he would like to use them on somebody. "Now whichever way you look at it, this was a major fuck up. I would have had a better chance of running a successful op with a bunch of girl scouts!" He swung his gaze towards Standish and Tanner. "At least they'd have known how to follow procedure, for Christ's sake!"

Wilmington, relaxed and leaning back in his chair, did not even bother to look at Larabee as he spoke, instead keeping his eyes focused on the rest of the group. "Hell, Chris. Don't hold back now. Why don't you just go right ahead and tell us how you really feel?"

Chris ignored the barb as if Buck had not spoken. "JD."

Dunne's head came up, expectantly.

"Tell me, isn't there an SOP for maintaining communication with active operatives?"

The youngest of the team paled as Larabee's uncompromising glare found him. "Chris, I..."

"Isn't there?" The words were hurled at him, cracking like a whip, leaving no room for excuses.

"Yes."

"Would you care to remind Vin and Ezra of just what that is?"

JD hesitated as he flicked a glance at the two men sitting opposite while Chris ignored the softly mocking laugh that came from the Southerner, keeping his attention on the stricken Dunne.

“JD!”

“Really, Mr. Larabee,” interrupted Ezra smoothly, “If you’re looking for someone on whom to vent your obvious displeasure then may I suggest we dispense with the unnecessary inquisition and cut to the chase? I made that call, Chris; I was at fault for failing to ensure that Vin was appropriately wired; I made the decision to leave the hotel. My fuck up. End of story.”

Vin, his eyes darting momentarily between Chris and Ezra, started to protest but Standish, without raising his voice, quickly over-rode him.

“Vin, didn’t you ask me if Chris was, quote, going to go for this, unquote? And what did I say?”

The Texan stopped abruptly. Silent.

“Go on,” urged the Southerner, as an adult would to a hesitant child, “Tell him.”

“You said it was your call.” He sighed as if he had just given the Judas kiss.

Ezra switched his focus to Larabee again. “My call.”

There was a moment of absolute silence, the challenge hanging in the air like a missile launched and unable to be recalled but not yet having reached its target. JD glanced in alarm at Buck, a protest forming on his own lips, only to be stilled by a barely perceptible shake of the head from the older man: stay out of it kid. The Texan apparently had no such reservations.

“Thanks, Ezra, but I don’t need anyone steppin’ in to fight my battles for me. The goddamn commlink was my responsibility and I blew it. Ain’t nothing else to say, Chris. I can’t change it now. So don’t go blastin’ off at JD for something I did.” He gave a half smile, his blue eyes meeting Dunne’s across the room. “Besides, JD’s already torn strips off my hide for it. Don’t get quite so ornery as you, but he knows how to make his point just the same.”

Chris thoughtfully chewed his lip for a moment, then allowed his expression to relax although he did not smile. “Well at least you cover each other’s asses, I guess that’s something.” He turned to the Southerner, hesitating before he spoke. “And you’re right, Ezra. It was your call.”

Standish inclined his head, acknowledging Chris’ admission, but his own expression remained fixed and unyielding even as Buck’s sotto voce: “Oh, I bet that hurt,” earned him a Larabee glare while at the same time easing a little of the tension in the room.

Larabee raked his fingers through his hair and sighed as he paced a few steps, a man under pressure. “So what happened? Lisa tells me there were three of them.”

The Southerner hooked one arm over the chair back and crossed one ankle over the opposite knee, in an uncharacteristically relaxed pose. The blood on his shirt, dried to a dull brown, a reminder that he had not come out of the fight unscathed. “Three males. One possibly indigenous, the others two might have been either latin or caucasian. A co-ordinated attack; two and one. No weapons...”

“The guy I tackled was strapped,” interrupted Vin, “Didn’t make any move to use it though.”

“...more beef than brains and obviously didn’t want to stick around when they couldn’t make an easy mark.”

“Motive?”

“Police are calling it an attempted robbery. ‘A regrettable but common occurrence’, I believe the officer said. Lisa’s purse was taken.”

Chris turned and put one foot on his chair, leaning one elbow on his raised knee. “And what are you calling it?”

“One man..” he shrugged, “Even two men, I could be persuaded to see it as nothing more than an attempted mugging. Three men, one or more of them armed? That’s no routine tourist mugging.”

“I think you could be right.”

Josiah leaned forward, a puzzled frown on his face. “But if this was a planned attack, presumably aimed at Lisa Hengst, how could they know you’d be at the plaza when it was a spur of the moment decision to go.”

“That’s right,” interjected Jackson quickly, “It wasn’t on the agenda and if none of us knew you were going, how the hell could anyone else?”

“Good point, Nathan,” agreed Chris, “Anyone got any ideas?”

“Cab company?” suggested JD, “If someone has Hengst targeted, and with the double header attack today that seems pretty much a given, they’d be watching this place for sure. Probably had us under surveillance since Hengst landed.”

“They’re not wasting any time then,” said Buck softly, “Puts a whole new spin on things if we’re dealing with a real, instead of a possible threat.”

“Got it in one, Buck, and I think we now have to assume that the target is Lisa. The attack on Hengst this afternoon was probably a feint, no more than a diversion to keep us busy.” Larabee was on the move again, pacing restlessly. “Any chance these phones could have been tapped, JD?”

“Every chance,” affirmed Dunne, “but I ran a scan as soon as we checked in and nothing. I’ll step up monitoring though.”

“We’re in enemy territory, Chris,” added Tanner, “Anyone right here at the hotel could be an informant.”

“Yeah.” It was a reluctant concession from Larabee. “Buck and Josiah, I want you to stake the Hengst’s suite tonight. You’ll be pulling an all-nighter, so you might want to get a couple of hours shuteye before then. JD, I want you in there right now.”

Ezra shifted, adjusting his position, and winced as he straightened his leg.

“Might I assume you have a particular reason for replacing me at this stage, Mr. Larabee?”

Chris glanced briefly at the Southerner. “Yep, first up you’re going to let Nathan check you out,

then you're going to take a break. Get some rest."

Ezra sighed, not bothering to hide his irritation. "Chris, I'm fine..."

"Just do it, Ezra." He switched his attention back to JD, pre-empting any response from Standish.

"Okay, JD. You're on, kid."

Dunne hastily got to his feet, pausing only to collect one of the laptops, as he made his way to the door.

"Hey, JD." He stopped abruptly as Chris called after him and waited expectantly, his young face betraying his apprehension. "You did good today."

Dunne gave a quick, almost shy, smile in response and silently nodded his thanks, before quickly turning and letting himself out of the room.

Wilmington chuckled as he unfolded his lanky frame and stood up. "Getting soft, Chris?"

For the first time since entering the room, Larabee smiled. "Yeah, in the head. Now get. I want you and Josiah to relieve JD at..." he looked at his watch, "...eleven, okay?" Chris turned finally to Tanner, again serious. "Vin, I need to talk to you. Now. In private."

The Texan nodded once and stood up, the merest exchange of glances between himself and Standish, the only indicator that he was in any way concerned by the summons. Then he was dutifully following in the older man's wake as, wordlessly, Chris limped into the adjoining room.

Ezra, prepared to ignore Larabee's directive, was taken aback as Nathan grabbed him by the sleeve as he moved away.

"Ezra. Wait. Chris wasn't joking. At least let me take a look at that cheek. Looks like you took quite a hit there."

Standish raised his arm, ready to shrug Jackson's hand off, then hesitated and slowly let it fall. Instead of putting up the argument he had intended, he curtly nodded his assent, forced to acknowledge that he felt lousy and would be grateful for anything Nathan could do for the pounding headache that now drummed against the inside of his skull. With a weary sigh he loosened his tie and sat down on the end of one of the beds, slowly taking off his jacket and finally allowing Jackson to approach. Nathan turned Ezra's face to one side and used his thumb to gently apply the barest pressure to the swelling along the Southerner's left cheek.

"Nobody ever teach you to duck?" Standish gave him a disparaging look that said: "everybody's a comedian" a moment before he jerked his head back to avoid Jackson's touch. "Sorry." murmured the medic, almost distractedly as he looked directly into the Southerner's eyes. "Got a headache? Blurred vision?"

"Headache."

"Okay. Now, did you lose consciousness at all?"

The Southerner arched his back, stretching and obviously hurting, before answering.

“Saw fucking stars if that counts!” admitted Ezra candidly, if a trifle impatiently, “Didn’t black out, more like greyed out. Just for a second.”

“Uh huh. Anything else you wanna tell me about?”

Nathan’s tone was suspicious but Ezra decided to keep the bruised thigh to himself, although it hurt like a bitch, reluctant to be shucking out of any more of his clothes and offering himself up for scrutiny. He hated anyone looking at his scars at the best of times and right now a bruise was the least of his worries.

“Listen Nathan,” he sighed, tired, “I’m okay. It’s just a bloody nose and a headache. Nothing a couple of Tylenol won’t cure.”

The medic frowned, unimpressed. “How ‘bout you let me be the judge of that?”

Standish raised his hands, palms outward in surrender, finally submitting as the pulsing throb inside his skull seemed to leech all the way down his spine. He made no protest, sitting patiently as Nathan flashed a light in his eyes, checked his reflexes and asked him to count the number of fingers he held up; all the standard checks for concussion. Then, before he knew it, he was stretched out on the bed, the blinds drawn and an icepack covering most of the left side of his face, as whatever kick-ass pain-killers Nathan had given him seeped pleasantly into his system.

Chris sat down and stretched his left leg stiffly out in front of him, absently rubbing his hip as he waited for Tanner to close the connecting door behind him. He was surprised when the Texan launched into a defensive speech before he had even managed to muster his own thoughts.

“Look, Chris, I know what your going to say...”

“No,” snapped Larabee but his voice was weary rather than angry, “You don’t. Because I don’t! So before you go putting words in my mouth at least give me a chance to open it first.”

Vin leaned back against the door, his fingers still closed around the handle and looked down at the floor with a reluctant smile, accepting the mild censure in the spirit in which it was delivered.

“Sorry. Guess I’m still a little spun out.”

“Yeah.” Chris realised just how much his leg hurt now that he had a chance to relax. Damned if it didn’t feel like he’d busted something in his hip. He looked up suddenly. “You okay?”

A nod, followed by an expectant silence and Chris recognised that this was not the moment to attempt even the most rudimentary bridge building. He pressed on. “I don’t know just how to do this, but...” He paused and resisted the overwhelming urge to get up and pace if only because his leg was giving him hell. “...but when a client levels a charge of misconduct against one of my men, I’m obliged to investigate it.”

Tanner bit his lip, his suddenly slumped shoulders speaking volumes. “Connie.”

“Whether I believe it or not,” continued Larabee, “is another matter.”

“Chris, I don’t know what she told you but she’s the problem not me...”

Larabee held up his hand. “Hold it right there, Vin. I’m not accusing you of anything - at least not yet.”

“But she is!” Tanner pushed himself away from the door and crossed the room in four belligerent paces, although his voice when he spoke again was resigned. “Well, I guess you’d better get it over with, Chris. Might as well finish what you started out there.”

“Sit down, Vin. We can either talk or we can fight, and as I’m not in any shape to fight anyone right now, I guess we talk.”

After a moment of hesitation, the Texan roughly grabbed a chair and sat down. “Okay, I’m listening. So talk.”

Larabee slowly shook his head, muttering, “Christ, and I thought I was the one with the attitude.” He finally met the younger man’s gaze, reading accurately some of the hurt beneath the anger in the steady blue eyes. “Do you want to tell me what happened today?”

Vin leaned forward and rested his elbows on his knees and dropped his gaze to stare at the ground between his feet. “Which part would you like? The part where I got so fucking bored sitting around that even JD got sick of me and sent me off to bug Ezra instead? The part with the spider...”

“Spider...?”

“...when Connie came sashaying out in her underwear or the part where that scheming bitch decided that the best way to keep herself entertained would be to use me as her fall guy? Got so every time I was within spittin’ distance she was squeezing whatever she could grab, like I was some kind of fucking melon at the market!”

Chris struggled to contain a smile at Vin’s indignant outrage but said nothing as the Texan continued.

“So I ignore it, in the interests of maintaining ‘good customer relations’, but that’s not good enough for Miss Holland and she ups the ante.” He finally raised his head. “And I blew it, Chris. She stepped over the line and I lost it.”

“Did you use force?”

“For what, for God’s sake? I grabbed her wrist!” He shrugged. “Maybe I was a bit rough but I tell you Chris, if I hadn’t done something, she’d have been going for a blow job right there in the back of the cab.”

Larabee raised a surprised eyebrow, murmuring quietly: “You should be so lucky.” But Vin was too uptight to appreciate Chris’ attempt to lighten the intensity of the moment. Instead he stood up, his agitation plain to see, and dug his hands into his pockets. “Look Chris, I’ve been thinking. Maybe this whole bodyguard scene just isn’t me. I’m not cut out for this kinda work. Give me a

gun, ask me to shoot someone, from half a goddamn mile away if you'd like, and I can do it but getting this up close and personal...I can't." He allowed his shoulders to slump again and sighed. "I screwed up and...I let you down."

"Well, I gotta tell you, the Connie version turned it around some. She says you've been sexually harassing her."

Vin unexpectedly snorted a bitter laugh. "Figures." A moment later, he lifted his head again and pinned Larabee with a hard stare. "So what are you going to do?"

Chris shifted and flexed his injured leg, the prolonged extension having become uncomfortable.

"About Connie? Nothing. I already told you I'm obliged to investigate any complaint and if it had been Buck, then maybe I might even think there could be something in it, but you? No."

Vin gave a tentative half smile. "Thanks." He paused, frowning. "I think..."

The older man allowed himself a smile. "Not that you couldn't Vin, just that you wouldn't. But I'm going to take you off CP detail anyway. Tomorrow you can drive Hengst. Buck can take your place and backup Ezra." His smile broadened into a grin. "Should be right up his alley."

"I can guarantee he'll have his hands full."

"Yeah, that's the only thing that worries me! But better than her having a handful of you, huh, Vin?"

"You got that one right."

With an effort Chris got to his feet, grasping the back of the chair to support himself. "As for the rest...letting anyone down...that's just crap and if you don't already know it, I'm telling you now. You didn't let anyone down. Screwing up is one thing and you managed that just fine. In fact I reckon we all got straight As in fucking up today but that's how the dice fall sometimes." He sighed. "Who knows, maybe this isn't the job for you-hell, sometimes I think it's not for me either -- but don't be too hard on yourself or it's going to be a long couple of weeks."

The Texan nodded slowly. "I'll think on it."

"You do that."

For a moment neither man spoke, an awkward silence filling the gap between what had already been said and what would never be said, before Tanner frowned and a shadow of concern passed over his face. "You know you should take some of your own advice, Chris."

"Yeah, and what's that?"

"Let Nathan take a look at you."

Larabee tested the weight bearing capacity of his leg and winced. "You know, I think you might be right." He glanced up as Tanner moved purposefully towards him. "First time today, but it's a start."

Vin grinned as he looped Chris' arm around his neck and eased a shoulder under his armpit to

support him. "So? Better late than never."

"Yeah, right. You just keep telling yourself that..."

Larabee had to concede that he had finally met his match. He was discovering the hard way that Nathan did not take no for an answer. Ever.

"I'm telling you, Chris. You're off the active list."

Chris was lying on his left side on the bed, stripped down to his shorts while Jackson checked his opposite hip. He abruptly rolled onto his back, hitching up the side of his shorts again and covering the worst of the injury, but the expanse of deep purple extended all the way down his quads.

"Bullshit, Nathan. It's just bruising."

"You can hardly put any weight on it, for God's sake. You sure as hell can't be operational like that," protested the paramedic, "So you listen up, or all you're gonna do is get somebody killed trying to cover your sorry ass!"

"Nathan..."

Jackson leaned forward not in the least intimidated by Larabee. "Don't you ever learn anything, Chris? You wound up in hospital just a couple of weeks ago because you were too damned stubborn to listen. Now I'm telling you. You're nixed. No argument. So just get used to it."

Vin, appreciating the irony of the situation, laughed quietly as he flicked through a magazine, earning him a glacial stare from the blond man. Unconcerned, Tanner bit into the candy bar he was casually devouring and, without looking up from the magazine, muttered sagely: "What goes around, comes around, pard."

"Bastard," Chris accused, but his tone was resigned and he sounded more amused than annoyed, although it was obvious he was not impressed with Jackson's verdict.

He started to get up, but stopped again as Nathan snapped out: "Stay!"

"Huh?"

Vin was laughing again and muttering something facetious about having had a dog that wasn't as well trained as Chris.

"Uh uh. You ain't going anywhere yet." The medic reached into his bag and quickly activated a disposable chemical ice pack. "This is probably too little, way too late, you know. Should've been done right away. Rest, ice...you know the drill well enough."

Larabee stared at the ceiling, listening patiently as Nathan read him the riot act, only to gasp in indignant shock as Jackson unexpectedly bared his injured hip and laid the towel-wrapped cryogel pack across the traumatised tissues.

"Shit, Nate. Give a man a little warning!"

The medic slowly shook his head in mock wonder. "And you were Special Forces?" Nathan was sarcastically incredulous in his response. "Gimme a break..." He checked his watch. "Twenty minutes on, then ten minutes off for the next two hours and don't move till I say you can."

Larabee sighed and, briefly closing his eyes, tried to get comfortable, holding the frozen gelpack in place with one hand as he shifted onto his good side again. Sometimes you just couldn't win.

"Gentlemen, please. What does a man have to do around here to get some sleep? It's worse than Friday night in a college frat house." The slow and exaggerated Southern drawl that came from the occupant of the second bed, raised a smile from each of the three men.

"Sorry, Ezra. How's the headache?" Jackson moved across to his other patient and gently lifted the cold pack away from his cheek.

In response Standish slowly opened one eye. "You mean the mother of all headaches, Mr. Jackson?" "Well, I guess that answers my question."

Ezra closed his eye again with a sigh. "Good." There was a definite finality about the way he delivered that single word which suggested any further discussion would be far from welcomed.

"Okay. I can take a hint, Ezra."

"Really? Well, here's another..."

"I think that means he wants us to leave," interrupted Vin, rising quickly from his chair and abandoning the magazine he had been browsing through. "I'll give JD a hand next door." He flicked a casual glance at Larabee. "Okay, boss?"

Larabee hesitated, recognising that the Texan was not seeking permission but rather extending his own particular Vin Tanner version of an olive branch. He gave a quick nod, taking it. It was very much okay. As the door clicked shut behind the former Texas Ranger, Chris raised his knee and flexed at the hip, then gingerly repositioned the ice pack at the junction of his thigh. Rest. Sure thing Nathan. Day one and the assignment is already off the rails. I don't have time to rest and I sure as hell don't have time to be sidelined. But he stayed put, sparing a moment to now wonder if this mismatched bunch of hard-assed, single-minded, generally antonymous mavericks he had brought together would ever manage to make it as a team.

He remembered then just what it was about Vin that had made such an impression on him. What it was that after minutes in his company, had him knowing beyond any doubt that he wanted him on his team. Tanner had guts and no mistake but he had something that was much harder than raw courage to find in a man. He had integrity. Absolute and unshakeable. Larabee turned his head to look at the relaxed Southerner stretched out on the neighbouring bed. Standish might be a lot of things, especially if rumour was to be believed, but he had already shown that he was not afraid to step up to the plate and take the curve balls. With a sigh, he switched his gaze to focus on Jackson, who had, surprisingly, taken Ezra's unobtrusive recommendation to leave him in peace, and

was repacking his medkit with studied concentration. Nathan had a quiet determination about him that always impressed Chris. A healer, rather than a warrior by inclination, he was still a force to be reckoned with in a fight and Chris considered the fact that right now, and against his better judgement, he was doing exactly what Nathan had told him. And why? Because he respected him and his skills enough to accept his judgement over his own, possibly flawed, instincts. He suddenly smiled and let the tension drain from his muscles, allowing his head to fall back on the pillow. Make it as a team? Damn right they would!

oooOOOooo

Buck Wilmington relaxed in one of the chairs by the window, his long legs stretched out in front of him as he watched Ezra deftly interpose between Lisa Hengst and her father in what appeared to be the latest episode in an ongoing catalogue of familial discord. A strict father and a teenager testing her limits had proven a volatile combination, and as the restrictions on sightseeing had tightened at Hengst's request after the assault in the city plaza, the friction had subtly escalated.

They had been in Guatemala almost a week, and there had been no further incidents since that first day, but Chris, taking no chances, had kept security at priority one. As a result Buck had spent all day, every day, in Ezra's company, and had been constantly amazed at the man's facility to switch not only language but attitude in the blink of an eye. He was never quite sure what the Southerner said during these face-offs but whatever it was, he had a definite way with the German businessman that seemed to rapidly defuse the situation. The interplay between Standish and Hengst had become a source of fascination for him and he had come to allow himself a grudging respect for his colleague as he realised just how adept Ezra was at reeling the German in.

He saw Lisa smile quickly at her bodyguard, the confident look of a co-conspirator, and wondered again at his skill in gaining the trust of the teenager in just a few days, yet here he was two months down the track still trying to find the man beneath the veneer, and failing. Ezra only let others see of him what he wanted them to see. Maybe Lisa had somehow gotten a little closer than most. For whatever reason, Standish had successfully established a rapport with the girl as Lisa had readily responded to his Southern charm. The fact that he had been bloodied protecting her would have done his credibility no harm either, mused Buck somewhat cynically, but the fact remained that he had done exactly what Chris had intended him to do. Hell! He was beginning to look forward to the day when the cocky bastard would fall flat on his ass.

Wilmington could see why the former FBI agent had been so successful in undercover work but in some ways seeing Ezra at work, up close, only served to increase his mistrust. Standish was a masterful role-player and what worried Buck was that in the weeks since Chris had first brought

them all together he had not yet figured out who Ezra really was. What worried him even more was that he was not completely certain that Ezra knew either. He covertly switched his attention to the Dutch au pair, using his peripheral vision to monitor her reactions to the apparently heated conversation between father and daughter but Connie's interest was not with either her young charge or her employer, rather she was closely watching the Southerner. She might have been sizing up a potential conquest if it had not been for the cold and calculating expression on her face that seemed far more in keeping with a cat eyeing an unsuspecting mouse.

Wilmington concentrated for a moment on Standish, not at all surprised when after a few seconds, questioning green eyes turned on him. Ezra's instincts were so finely honed that he always seemed to be aware of even the most casual scrutiny. Buck suddenly smiled and sketched a quick salute. Whatever it was that was going through the Dutch woman's mind he would make a bet that Ezra was already two steps ahead. Abruptly the conversation ended and Hengst glanced at his watch a split second before Larabee's voice in his earpiece announced the arrival of the A team. He smoothly launched himself from the chair and crossed to the door, automatically checking the peephole and drawing his weapon before he opened it to admit Chris and Vin. It was Wilmington's personal credo to never take anything at face value. From experience he knew that Sanchez, the third member of the first string, would be going over the vehicles and making a thorough inspection of his markers which he had set the previous day. Within minutes he would be able to tell if either of the vehicles had been entered or tampered with overnight, then he would make a sweep for explosive devices, including under the chassis, before clearing them for use. That was one routine that never varied and one that was never omitted. Sanchez, probably more than anyone else, shared his philosophy of caution in all things. There were, after all, few opportunities for second chances in their line of work where your first mistake was often your last.

Tanner held back as Chris moved into the room, nodding a greeting in typical Vin style. This was a man who spoke no more than he had to. Buck holstered the SIG, slapping it into the leather with the heel of his hand before responding.

"Long day coming up."

"Yep."

"Last one though," continued Buck, "Then tomorrow we can leave all this behind for a little R and R upcountry."

The Texan gave a sidelong look that suggested he thought less enthusiastically than Buck about the change in location.

"R and R? You goin' somewhere I'm not?"

Wilmington laughed.

"So, it's still work, but at least it's not day after day of shepherding Hengst from meeting to

meeting through traffic so thick you could walk faster. It's a chance to see some of the country; you know, kick back a little. Take some time to smell the roses."

Tanner shook his head, his doubt obvious. "Buck, sometimes I think you live in a little fantasy world all your own that just now and then touches on reality."

Wilmington laughed and playfully punched the smaller man in the shoulder. "Chill out, Vin. I just see the opportunities where guys like you only see obstacles."

"Opportunities, huh?" The Texan looked sceptical. "Well, I reckon my way means you ain't likely to fall over somethin' before you know it's there. So if it's all the same to you I'll just keep on lookin' for the obstacles, I'll leave the opportunities to you."

"Hell, you're no fun," he muttered, with a grin, "Too much like Chris for your own good, pard."

Vin smiled. "That's 'cos I plan on stayin' alive, Buck, long enough to smell the roses -- when I'm old and grey."

Wilmington looked up as Larabee ushered Hengst towards the door. "Well, looks like you're on, Hawkeye." He slapped the Texan on the shoulder, a gesture Vin accepted with resigned tolerance. "Hasta la vista...baby!"

Tanner wheeled with a snort of derision and Buck discovered to his surprise that it was entirely possible for a man to flip the bird with a look and he knew, because Vin had succeeded in doing just that.

Still grinning, Buck secured the door and walked slowly back into the main room. Another day in paradise. He had not been exaggerating when he said he was looking forward to getting out of the city. While Ezra seemed not in the least troubled by the fact that in four days they had not ventured outside the precincts of the hotel, he was going stir crazy. They had exhausted every recreational possibility that the five-star hotel had to offer; the gym, the pool, the sauna, the jacuzzi, the restaurants and cafes, even the tennis courts-hell, he hadn't played tennis in ten years or more-and if he was forced to stroll just once more through the hotel's Biltmore Plaza shopping centre he would take his gun out and shoot himself.

Even watching Connie with Ezra had lost its entertainment value after the first day or so. Without Vin to provide her with some amusement to idle away the long hours, van der Schoor had transferred her attentions to the Southerner, but she had gained little satisfaction from Ezra's coolly dismissive responses. Only once had the Southerner risen to the bait, and Buck had been taken by surprise at his reaction. Certainly it was the first time he had ever seen the facade of easy-going charm slip, but those green eyes had turned to ice and Buck had felt the frigid blast even from his remote vantage across the room. Without raising his voice Standish had thrown back a reply, not in English but whatever he had said, and in whatever language, the au pair had understood well enough. Buck remembered sucking in and holding his breath, thinking that the

sparks were about to fly, but Connie had paled, then flushed, and stormed out of the room without saying another word. Ezra had immediately resumed his conversation with Lisa as if he had merely taken a moment to swat an irritating fly but Buck had known then that Standish had done himself no favours by effectively alienating the au pair. Buck knew women and this one he had already marked as dangerous goods.

Ezra was still in shirt sleeves, but his shoulder rig was already in place and the Ruger settled firmly under his left armpit, an extension of himself rather than an attachment. Standish had been the only one of the team to pull round the clock detail, basically having to become an extension of the Hengst family, yet he had been more relaxed over the past few days than Buck had ever seen him, and although it pained him to admit it, the ex-Fed was a natural for close protection. Lisa trusted him and it was no secret that Hengst had been impressed enough by the Southerner to offer him a lucrative contract as the family's personal bodyguard when this assignment was over. An offer that Standish had yet neither accepted nor declined and which Buck knew was still open. Wilmington looked thoughtfully at the former FBI agent and wondered if he would roll over for the German.

Standish glanced up from pouring a fresh cup of coffee and tilted his head as he looked quizzically in Buck's direction. "Somethin' wrong?"

"Just thinking that as it's our last day in Guatemala City why don't we do somethin' wild and unpredictable."

Ezra looked unimpressed. "Wild and unpredictable?" he repeated doubtfully, "I've had my quota of unpredictable, thanks."

"Just a thought."

The Southerner carefully put the carafe back onto the hotplate. "Buck, I believe a prerequisite for thought is the possession of a functioning brain."

Wilmington sighed and shook his head in mock regret. "Damn! I guess that kinda puts me outta the running." He leaned back against the ornately carved sideboard and folded his arms, lowering his voice. "Still, it ain't what's under my hat that attracts the ladies."

Ezra raised a sceptical eyebrow and turned away. "Please, Mr. Wilmington, spare me the details."

"Hah," countered Buck, grinning, "You're just jealous."

"God forbid!" Ezra managed to sound genuinely aghast as he flicked open the morning paper and sat down with his coffee, prompting a spontaneous outburst of laughter from the moustached bodyguard. Buck was still grinning as he joined the Southerner at the table.

"You mean to tell me that you're really going to sit here, looking at these same four walls, for another whole day when there's a entire city waiting to be discovered out there."

"Yes."

"Yes? That's all you've got to say?"

“Yes.”

“Okay then, you’re the man giving the orders.”

“Yes.”

“Jesus, Ezra. Can’t you think of anything else to say but yes?”

Standish briefly lifted his eyes from the newspaper and appeared to hesitate for just a moment, his expression thoughtful before dissolving into an artful smile.

“No.”

Chris shoved the large-scale ordnance map across the table and waited for the six bodyguards, for once all in the same place at the same time, to manoeuvre themselves into favourable positions around the table rim. This, their last briefing, was being held in the Hengst suite as a convenience while both Lisa and her father were dressing for dinner and only Connie remained, moving with industrious efficiency to and fro across the suite as she put the room in order.

It had been a long day and Chris was not about to waste any more time. The car in which he and Josiah had been driving had been involved in a minor traffic accident, and he had been forced to spend the best part of the afternoon wading through red tape and explaining who they were, why they were in Guatemala and why they were carrying concealed weapons. He had then been obliged to arrange for a replacement vehicle and been required to pay an extortionate bond before the rental firm would even consider supplying him with another car. Now in less than twelve hours they would be heading north-east out of Guatemala City and into the remoter regions of the country. It was straightforward enough, but Larabee was taking no chances.

“This is the best I could do,” explained Chris wearily, “and it’s no improvement on the one we looked at back in the states. There are no recently surveyed maps available and this one, like all the rest, is out of date. Just so you know, some of these roads don’t even exist anymore but, as we’re not doing anything fancy, it shouldn’t make any difference to us.” He used his pen to first stab at the city then follow a snaking ribbon that indicated the main route to the north-east. “The plan is simple, we drive up to Petén-here-stopping once at Cobán. Flores will be our base for the Hengst’s to do some sightseeing and then back the same way. Major routes wherever we can. A total of nearly 500 miles which could take us a day...

“Or a week,” murmured Standish, as he casually rolled a dime across his knuckles.

Larabee shot a quick glance in Ezra’s direction pre-empting the Southerner’s ongoing argument. “And yes, I know that if we took the jet up there it would take twenty minutes, that we’d be five minutes from Flores, and we wouldn’t have to worry about all this shit, but that’s not the way we’re going to do it because Manfred wants to see some of the country.” Standish merely

shrugged, a gesture that indicated there would be no further protest from him. “We take the two vehicles. Josiah, you’ll take the lead car with Hengst. JD and Nathan, you’ll be with me on that one. Second car will be Vin with Ezra and Buck. No changes there, you’ll be CP-ing Lisa and Connie.” Nods all round. They all knew the drill. “Oh-five-hundred load and check, oh-six-hundred start. Any questions.”

“Bandit activity?” questioned Nathan, with a frown, “Can we expect trouble? By all accounts some of those roads are pretty hairy and not exactly safe for travellers.”

Chris sighed and tapped his pen on the area around Tikal and Flores.

“Up here tourists have always been a prime target; especially anyone not accompanied by a guide and who looks like they might have money.”

“Hell, that puts me out of the picture,” interrupted Wilmington, earning a frosty stare from Larabee, who barely paused in his dialogue.

“Officially it’s not a problem now, but both Josiah and JD have been doing some digging around and I think we’d be wise to be ready for trouble. I’ll be more than happy if the official version is right, but I’ll be happier if we’re prepared for anything.”

“What are we looking at here, Chris?” ventured Buck, “We’re not exactly your normal tourist group who’re gonna just roll over and cough up all our belongings for a bunch of ragged-ass bandits!”

“No. But they’re not going to know that. A couple of SUVs, rich Yanqui tourists, unescorted by an official guide.....” He shrugged, leaving the sentence incomplete.

“So what’s the plan?”

“Well, first up, we’ll take things as they come but as much as I know this goes against the grain,” he smiled, already knowing the response to his next words, “No gun play!”

The expected ripple of protest went through the group but Chris knew that what he was hearing were token objections and that each and every man there was aware of the danger of being drawn into an armed confrontation with civilians. He doubted that any of them would want to seriously contemplate the repercussions of shooting a Guatemalan citizen over a \$500 camera or a few hundred dollars in traveller’s cheques.

“Aw, Chis, you can’t expect us to go belly-up!”

“Buck, our only purpose is to keep our principles safe. They can take the shirts off your backs if they want as far as I’m concerned.”

“Speak for yourself, Mr. Larabee,” drawled Ezra, “This shirt is a Paulo Gennari, hand-made in Italy.”

Chris looked evenly at the Southerner, trying to judge whether the Southerner was serious or just pushing his buttons. “Well, I suggest you get Paulo to fight for his own shirts, Ezra, ‘cos they ain’t worth dyin’ for, even at a hundred bucks a time.”

“Hundred and fifty,” corrected Standish smoothly, “plus tax and shipping.”

Larabee shook his head but he was smiling. “Maybe you should dress down a little for this one, huh? Borrow one of Vin’s shirts for Christ’s sake, or you’re going to be a goddamn liability where we’re going!”

Vin grinned and tugged the collar of his own modest shirt. “Wal-Mart sale. Twenty bucks.”

Everyone but Ezra laughed before Chris pressed on. “Okay, enough on shirts, already! All weapons concealed and I mean concealed. That’s ankle or SOB holsters. We want to be ready for trouble, not go looking for it. Understood?”

“So low profile and keep our noses clean,” affirmed Buck, then added with a sly grin that did little to boost Larabee’s confidence, “Piece of cake. Right guys?”

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“Piece of cake,” muttered Larabee, as the Montero again slowed to a crawl to negotiate a crater in the road.

The four hour drive to Cobán, initially through arid plains then up into the highland rainforest of Alta Verapaz, had gone smoothly enough and they had left the sizeable and surprisingly picturesque city behind them by late morning. Chris had conservatively estimated that the trip would take them twelve hours, but he not counted on the abominable state of the roads. At their current rate of progress they would reach Flores in time to turn around and drive back again.

He twisted in his seat to glance at Hengst, who seemed perfectly at ease with the slow pace and even now was talking animatedly to Nathan and JD, occasionally gesturing at some of the local flora. He guessed that for the businessman the long drive was an opportunity to unwind but for Chris the surrounding rainforest reminded him too much of Nicaragua and none of those particular memories were fond ones. Glancing out of the rear window he could see the second Montero, with Vin at the wheel, dropping back slightly in order to maintain the agreed buffer between the two vehicles.

Turning back to his original position and scanning the road ahead, he shifted slightly as, under his lightweight jacket, the Heckler and Koch 9mm dug into the small of his back. If nothing else it served to remind him that this was no vacation; that and the close to six figure retainer the German was paying for InterSept’s services. With a sigh he cranked open the window, suddenly tired of the controlled climate in the 4WD and breathed in a sudden blast of moist, superheated air, rich with the distinctive smell of tropical rainforest. It was hot and no mistake, even now that they were into the cooler highlands, and the lush vegetation bordering the road coupled with the exotic bird calls, the buzz of a myriad of insects and enervating humidity triggered unwanted

memories that he rarely allowed to surface.

“Chris? You want to take a break?”

Larabee turned slowly, taking a minute to process the fact that Josiah was talking to him and a moment longer to absorb what he had said. He shook his head. Surely his thoughts had not been so transparent that Sanchez could read him as easily as all that.

“No. Just needed some fresh air.”

Josiah nodded, apparently satisfied, and without taking his hand off the wheel gestured with his index finger at the rapidly darkening skies ahead of them.

“Want to see what we don’t need? These roads are going to get mighty hairy in the wet.”

Chris shrugged, not quite as indifferent as he appeared, having seen similar roads turned to rivers of mud in minutes by a tropical deluge.

“Let’s wait to cross that bridge until we come to it, okay?”

Sanchez selected another gear and accelerated as the Montero cleared the last of the craters in the road, giving Chris a sidelong glance as they picked up speed.

“Something wrong, Chris?”

Larabee slowly wound up the window again and leaned half against the door frame, taking off his sunglasses and rubbing the bridge of his nose.

“Ghosts,” he murmured, his voice low, “Things that just won’t stay dead, no matter how many years they’re buried.”

Sanchez raised his eyebrows and gave a sympathetically sly smile. “Ghosts, or a few skeletons rattling in closets there, Boss?”

Chris snorted a sharp humourless laugh. “That’s a hell of a question, Josiah, and one you really don’t want answered, believe me.”

The older man gave a slight nod, understanding that some things were best left unsaid and turned his attention back to the road ahead while beside him Chris stared thoughtfully in the distance, wondering if Buck was experiencing the same unwelcome sense of *deja vu*.

“Did you know that the Mayans first settled the highlands of Tikal in around 700 BC.”

“Well, Ezra, now that you mention it, no I didn’t,” confessed Buck, facetiously, “but I’ll be sure to file that away for future reference.”

“And,” added Vin, “became the major power in the Peten region with 100,000 people and a city that covered 30 square miles.”

The two men in the back both turned at the same time to stare at the Texan, the sudden silence forcing Tanner to look quickly over his shoulder.

“Hey, I read the guide book,” he explained defensively, before breaking into a grin and turning eyes front again, “And did you know that Temple 4 at Tikal, is the tallest known pre-Columbian building in the western hemisphere at 212 feet?”

“Ja, 64 metres,” agreed Lisa eagerly, consulting the small book on her lap, “It says here that ‘at this height you are above the canopy of the jungle’.”

Buck rested his arm along the back of the second row seat and leaned forward to peer over the teenager’s shoulder at the book she held.

“Now, you’re gonna tell me we have to climb this thing, aren’t you?” She flicked a page and showed him a photo of the temple, smiling as he dramatically groaned and rested his head against the upholstery. “Five hundred steps and no elevator in sight!”

Lisa laughed. “Nein!” She quickly turned to the Southerner on her right for confirmation. “Zweihundert und fünfzig?”

He nodded. “A mere two hundred and fifty, Buck, but don’t worry, from all accounts the stairway is too ruined to climb now,” reassured Ezra then, with a broad smile, “I believe the way to the summit is by a series of ladders...”

Wilmington sat up abruptly.

“Ladders?”

Connie, who had wedged herself into the corner of the rearmost seat, apparently dozing and ignoring the conversation, broke in without bothering to open her eyes.

“Of course, that’s after a long trek through the jungle being eaten alive by mosquitoes. How good are you with a machete, Mr. Wilmington?”

“Well, that all depends what you want me to do with it, darlin’.”

She opened one eye and lazily appraised the man sitting beside her, “You are open to suggestions?” The woman chuckled throatily, for once seeming to be in a good mood. “Perhaps you would not like my recommendation.”

“Oh, I think I can be pretty certain of that,” he countered, not sure where the conversation might be heading. The woman had been civil enough during the trip, friendly even, and none of the expected antagonism towards Vin had eventuated, although the atmosphere between the two of them was obviously cool. Her current game-plan seemed to involve ignoring the driver completely and Buck was sure that the Texan was more than satisfied with that particular strategy.

Suddenly the au pair sat up, a look of mild alarm crossing her face as she leaned forward. “Please. Can we stop? I don’t feel well.” She pushed at the seat in front, trying to get to the door catch and Ezra tapped Vin on the shoulder, but Tanner had already hit the brakes.

“I heard,” he acknowledged, without turning round and reached for the satellite phone, following protocol to alert the lead car that they were making an unscheduled stop, as Connie struggled to

exit from the back seat of the Mitsubishi, obstructed by the row of seats in front of her.

Wilmington and Standish exchanged a look and at the same time engaged in a brief dialogue in which no words were uttered; Ezra responding to a questioning look from Buck with a barely perceptible motion of his head-Stay with her-and the moustached bodyguard responding with a quick nod of his own. Understood.

The heat outside the comfortably air conditioned Montero hit Buck in a solid wave and within seconds his body had responded and he could feel the sweat oozing from every pore and the moist, earthy scent of tropical vegetation assaulted his senses. He rounded the back of the vehicle, slowing as he found Connie at the side of the road leaning with one hand against a tree, her shoulders heaving convulsively as she threw up.

“Aw, hell,” he whispered, not quite sure how he should approach the woman. For a moment he looked back at the idling SUV, certain that Ezra was far better equipped to deal with such situations but with a sigh he kept walking until he was close enough to make sure she was safe without being intrusive. Finally she shuddered and spat noisily, slowly lifting her head and taking deep breaths, her face streaked with tears. Wilmington took a step forward and handing her a clean handkerchief from his back pocket, slid a comforting arm around her shoulders. “You okay?” Surprisingly she leaned into him and he felt her sag as if she was about to faint but instead she nodded jerkily, wiping her mouth and dabbing at her eyes. “Sorry.”

He sighed. “Come on, darlin’, let’s get you a drink. You sure you’re okay now?”

Connie slid an arm around his waist and gave a weak smile.

“Perfectly fine, now, Mr. Wilmington.”

The Sig 226 cleared the holster nestled at the small of his back with amazing speed as, caught off guard by the totally unexpected manoeuvre, he was pushed forward against the back of the Montero with surprising strength. Stunned by the rapid change in circumstance, he reacted instinctively and spun around with the intention of disarming the woman, neither understanding or caring why she had pulled his weapon, only knowing that he had been forced into an untenable situation. Jesus! The bitch had lifted his gun. Before he had fully turned he not only heard but felt a thunderous boom that shook the ground under his feet and suddenly the air was filled with choking dust, shouting and the unmistakable sound of shots being fired. Steadying himself against the Montero he found himself looking across four feet of space and down the barrel of his own gun. “Connie...” He got no further, quickly silenced as saw the woman’s finger tighten on the trigger. Shaking his head, he raised his hands. “Fine, darlin’. You’re holding all the cards. Just tell me what you want me to do.”

The Dutch woman’s eyes were flat and expressionless, although her cheeks were flushed, and Buck felt the unwelcome flutter of fear in his belly. He knew that look and in that moment he knew he

was going to die.

“Nothing, Mr. Wilmington. Absolutely nothing.”

With a chilling smile, she steadied her aim and fired.

The big SUV lurched to an abrupt halt as Sanchez stood on the brakes, swearing softly and quickly engaging reverse to power the big 4WD skilfully backwards. They had all felt the tremor and the percussion had registered at almost the same time but it had taken a moment for any of them to react and, turning sharply in his seat, JD had breathed an awed: “Holy Christ!” as the road behind them disappeared under a landslide of earth, trees and rocks.

“Jesus! Back up, back, up!” yelled Chris, the urgency in his voice a goad to the driver, although Josiah was already reversing towards the mountain of debris that now blocked the road, needing no urging from anyone.

Sanchez stopped the Montero a good distance from the landslide, not willing to get too close to the potentially unstable and still shifting mass behind them. A barrage of possibilities assaulted his already teeming thoughts as he bailed out of the vehicle and quickly scanned the area. He hoped to God that Vin had not been caught by the slip, having seen the second Montero pull off some way back a scant few minutes before through his rear vision mirror. Even if they were clear, the two Mitsubishi's were now neatly separated by a few hundred tons of debris blocking the road. Debris that was not likely to be cleared in the space of a few hours. Walking slowly forward he could hear Chris on the satellite phone patiently trying to raise Tanner, as the flat crack of a handgun closely followed by the unmistakable roar of an over-revved engine and tyres struggling for grip on the dirt road carried clearly on the still air. He looked back to find his own misgivings reflected all too clearly on the faces of his companions in the split second before Chris uttered a resigned: “Aw, hell!” and broke into a run.

“Down!”

Ezra threw himself sideways and across the girl beside him, as the first shot, almost masked by the thunderous roar of the landslide, ricocheted off the side of the car. He pushed Lisa down onto the floor, shielding her as he drew his gun, then urging her towards the open door. “Go, go now,” he whispered fiercely, “keep your head down and just do as I say!” He quickly repeated himself in German, just in case, as a second shot punched through the windscreen. He instinctively ducked, hoping Vin had done the same, but his priority was getting Lisa clear and as much as he wanted to spare a glance to check that the Texan still had his head on his shoulders he had other more

pressing matters demanding his attention, not the least of which was keeping his own hide intact. The air outside the car was filled with swirling dust and in his peripheral vision he could see the front of the Mitsubishi was nudging the jumbled detritus of the landslide, another few feet and they would all have been buried under a good portion of Guatemalan soil. He gave Lisa a gentle shove to move her out of his way and slid in a crouch from the back of the SUV to the road with a grim smile. At least he could be thankful for small mercies. The Southerner drew the teenager down beside him, signalling that she should keep quiet, then in a half crouch and using the Montero as cover moved to the rear of the vehicle, still shielding his young charge.

Lisa jumped like a startled hare as another, closer, shot rang out and Ezra muttered a curse as he pressed his shoulder to the curve of the rear bumper and prepared to make a run for the shelter of the thick forest that bordered the road behind them. His one instinct was to get out of the open, and fast. He took a quick breath and prepared to move. With any luck he would meet up with Buck and Connie.

He did. Buck and Connie, and a Sig 226.

Wilmington was already down, his face drained of colour, both hands tightly gripping his left thigh as dark blood welled between his fingers but Ezra's eyes were on the pistol; and the pistol was trained on him.

"Drop it."

He considered his options. His own weapon was in his hand and he had no doubt that he had the skill to take her down before she could get in a killing shot, and if he had been alone he might have been willing to accept the odds but there were others to consider. The woman interpreted the split-second hesitation correctly.

"I said, drop it, you son-of-a-bitch! And listen up!"

With a sigh Standish tossed his weapon at her feet, and gave the frightened girl still within the circle of his left arm a reassuring squeeze.

"Madam, I assure you, you have my undivided attention."

There was no question about it. Getting shot hurt like a bitch, and worse than he had ever imagined it could. The force of the impact had first thrown him back against the SUV, then his leg had simply given way and he had crashed heavily to the ground. Hell, he was sure he had scraped every inch of goddamn skin from his back on the way down and the tow hitch had struck him a glancing blow to the hip as he fell but the reality was that he now had a gaping wound in his thigh, from which a considerable amount of his blood was escaping.

He felt sick and light-headed, and a fleeting and totally irrelevant thought crossed his mind as to why the guys in the movies were invariably able to carry on regardless, peppered with any number

of bullet wounds, when after only one he felt like passing out. The pain was brutally intense and he wondered if the bullet might not have broken his leg. It sure as hell felt like it. He blinked then, remembering that he should do something before he bled to death and gripped his left leg tightly, which made the pain worse but at least slowed the bleeding. Bitch! She had really shot him-and with his own gun.

He tried to remember if he had made a sound when he had been hit. He thought he had-some embarrassing and incoherently articulated animal noise-and it annoyed him to think that he might have given her the satisfaction of seeing him in a moment of weakness. He closed his eyes, taking some deep breaths and tried not to think about the warm, wetness oozing between his fingers.

“Lisa! Get over here.”

Ezra’s fingers tightened imperceptibly on the girl’s shoulder. Stay.

“I think Lisa prefers the company of friends, Miss van der Schoor.”

The woman laughed. “Maybe so, but if she doesn’t get her ass over here right now, she’ll be one friend less because I’ll blow your fucking brains out.”

The sound of a vehicle being driven at high speed, its engine straining at high revs as its tyres struggled to grip the road, replaced the sounds of the jungle and it was clear that within a few moments it would be upon them. Lisa started forward, as Connie had intended, fully aware that the teenager would react predictably to such a threat. With a sigh Ezra dropped his arm from her shoulders as if he would let her go, his body language indicating surrender, but as his hand fell he moved with blinding speed and producing a set of handcuffs from his belt, snapped them around his own wrist and Lisa’s. With a casually defiant gesture he held up the small key and hurled it deep into the thick roadside vegetation. The risk he knew was enormous but the risk was his alone, and time was well and truly on his side.

Ezra seriously doubted for a moment that the truck which appeared over the rise, bearing rapidly down on the parked Montero would succeed in stopping, but with an abruptly executed hard right the camouflaged vehicle skidded to an unsteady halt and several armed men yelling in Spanish and what Ezra took to be an indigenous Guatemalan patois poured out of its doors. He risked a glance at Wilmington, not wanting to show any degree of concern for fear that it would be turned against him, and wondered briefly at the fate of Tanner of whom he had seen no sign since the bullet had ripped through the windscreen. Twisting his wrist, he wrapped his fingers around Lisa’s own small hand but avoided looking at her, knowing that if he did he would see the fear in her eyes and that he could neither offer reassurance, or make any promises, except that he would stay with her.

Connie yelled what sounded like a string of commands and strode towards the Southerner, her eyes

flashing.

“I should kill you right now, you bastard.” She grabbed the link of the handcuffs and held their joined hands up, then let go with a vicious downward thrust. “Or I could just cut off your hand.”

He lifted an expressive eyebrow, his confident smile mocking her. “But you won’t.”

The woman lashed out, the barrel of the Sig striking him across the face and snapping his head back.

“No, I won’t, but only because it would take too long. So, make the most of it, you’re on borrowed time.”

Ezra slowly straightened his head, and raised his free hand to his face, not sure if she had laid open his cheek or if it merely felt that way. He would have smiled but his face was not quite ready to co-operate. Time was all he needed and it was going to be his job to buy them as much of it as he could, so for the moment he would take whatever he could get and right now even borrowed time sounded just fine.

“I’ll take it.”

Connie shook her head, a puzzled expression on her face.

“You wager your life as if you have nothing to lose. Which is rare even in your line of work.” She turned first to Lisa, then to Buck, before looking back at the bodyguard. “Perhaps you are of that strange breed who feels more for others than for himself? Or is that an emotion which has to be bought?” She turned quickly and without seeming to aim she fired a second shot at Buck, the .357 slug tearing into his already wounded leg just above the knee, then smiled in satisfaction as Ezra paled. “So, maybe you are not the heartless and unfeeling professional after all.”

At a signal from the woman, they were roughly shoved towards the back of the truck and manhandled aboard with three armed guards. Almost as an afterthought, she gestured for Buck to be included and the injured bodyguard was dumped with great haste and without ceremony on the filthy floor just seconds before the doors slammed shut and the vehicle accelerated noisily away.

Something was wrong. Something...very wrong. There were some positions the human body was never meant to achieve; that is, unless you were a circus acrobat or possibly a twelve year old Ukrainian gymnast. As he was neither he rapidly came to the conclusion that something in him must surely be broken, otherwise how could he possibly manage the unlikely but remarkable feat of having the upper and lower parts of his body twisted in two different directions at the same time. Stranger still, he was experiencing the uncomfortable sensation that he was dangling upside down.

In a sudden rush of disconnected images, he remembered the thunderous explosion of earth that

had showered the Montero with debris and blocked the road scant inches in front of the parked SUV, moments before the windscreen had splintered before his eyes. He clearly recalled Ezra yelling “Down!” and then he had shouldered open the door, reaching for his gun as he dived for the road...after that he remembered nothing.

Now, there were voices-shouting-and the sound of people running, the volume increasing as footsteps came closer and finally stopped close by his head. He could hear the crunch of the dirt beneath their feet magnified a thousand times and at last he felt someone touching his shoulder.

“Is he alright?”

Fuck no!

“Vin? Jesus! Hold on, pard. Don’t move.”

The Texan almost laughed, only he knew it would hurt. Sometimes Chris just didn’t know how funny he was.

“Ain’t goin’...nowhere,” he gasped, almost surprised that he had managed to even speak, although the arguably simpler task of opening his eyes still defeated him.

“Nathan! Josiah! Gimme a hand here.”

The irresistible urge to laugh insanely bubbled up inside him. A hand? Sure. How about a foot? There must be one lying around somewhere. He certainly felt as if he wasn’t quite in one piece. The urge was promptly stifled as a red hot lance of pain shot first through his ankle, then his knee, all the way up his thigh and into his back. “Aaaaaghhhh!”

“Wait! No! Easy there...Josiah watch his leg. Foot’s caught under the gas pedal.” Thanks Nathan.

“Okay, I’ve got him now.”

“Steady. Let’s just do this by the numbers, okay. Ready...go”

The pressure on his spine eased marginally as he was finally lifted, turned and awkwardly manipulated until he was lying on his back and, he believed, reassuringly horizontal. Pain, biting sharply, flared and just as quickly subsided in his shoulder and ribs, and suddenly he found himself staring vacantly at the blue sky overhead and trying to remember how to breathe.

“Vin Tanner, you’ve got to be the luckiest son-of-a-bitch alive.”

He moaned then, not feeling in the least bit lucky, as a new catalogue of hurts transmitted themselves to his waking brain but, as the enormity of what had happened filtered through the white noise of pain and confusion, he closed his eyes again and heaved a weary sigh. “Ah, shit!”

“Chris? Take a look at this.”

Larabee darted a rapid glance at Jackson, seeking reassurance that the Texan was in no immediate danger before moving, quickly getting to his feet, and jogging across to where Josiah was standing with Hengst behind the Montero. The former marine opened his hand and showed two spent cartridges.

“Three-five-sevens,” he said matter of factly, “But the question is who was doing the shooting.”

JD joined the three men, after completing a wide sweep of the area, shaking his head, his youthful face flushed.

“Nothing. They’re gone. All of them.”

“They have my daughter,” muttered Hengst numbly, “They have taken Lisa.”

Chris dropped to a crouch at the back of the SUV and touched two fingers to a red-brown streak on the bumper and rubbed his thumb over the sticky residue.

“Someone’s bleeding,” he offered flatly, then looked down at the dusty road and briefly touched the moist surface of a large but irregularly shaped stain before standing again and wiping the clinging earth from his hands on his handkerchief, “Badly.”

“Mr. Larabee!” Hengst wheeled and grabbed Chris’ arm. “I said they have kidnapped Lisa! Taken Connie. You are responsible for her-their-safety, yet you stand here and talk about...”

“...the possibility that one of my men is injured!” snapped Chris impatiently, shaking his arm free of the German’s grip. “Look, Manfred, as long as Ezra and Buck are still with Lisa, she’s in good hands-the best in fact-and they’ll do everything they can to keep her, and Connie, safe. I guarantee it.”

“Very good in theory, Mr. Larabee, but you have already said yourself that one of them is possibly injured. What is to stop these people just killing your men?”

“Nothing. But the fact that there aren’t already two bodies lying right here is enough for the moment and the less time we spend here arguing the toss, the more chance we have of catching up with them.” He turned quickly away, effectively dismissing the businessman. “Josiah, get this vehicle going any which way you can. Manfred, see if Nathan needs any help with Vin, and keep your phone switched on in just in case someone tries to make contact. We don’t even know who or what we’re dealing with yet. JD, I want you to raise some help. Get onto the police in both Cobán and Guatemala City, contact the American and German embassies then get onto Boston. Travis has a few irons in the fire down here; maybe he can pull some strings and get things moving.”

“Sure thing Chris,” he started to turn away, then looked back. “What about you? Where will you be?”

Chris gave a crooked grin. “Me? I’m going to do some good old fashioned tracking.”

If Buck had been pale before, his face was now blanched white, pain and shock having taken their toll in the twenty or so minutes since he had been shot. Ezra, wary of showing the concern he truly felt, kept his expression in a carefully controlled mask of professional detachment as he allowed himself the occasional surreptitious glance at the man beside him. On his left, Lisa pressed close

up against him and at intervals he would briefly squeeze her hand, the most reassurance he could manage under the circumstances. To say anything, to give any false promises, would be nothing more than platitudes and he would not lie to her. So the three of them sat, together in a row, in virtual isolation from each other although their bodies were physically touching.

Ezra looked with some resignation at the dried blood on his right hand. Buck's blood. The bleeding from his wounds had finally slowed and then stopped but it had taken the combined pressure from both men to bring it under control and Wilmington had probably already lost more than he could afford. The Southerner glanced again at the older bodyguard, this time making eye contact, as Buck chose the same moment to look up. Wilmington managed a grim smile.

"Hey, pard," he whispered, "We're in deep shit now."

Ezra was forced to smile although he kept his head down and his expression hidden from the unwavering scrutiny of the three, armed men who had been charged with guarding them.

"You don't say."

Buck shifted, easing his weight from one buttock to the other, and closed his eyes. "Got a real bad feeling about this, Ezra."

One of the guards lazily struck out with a foot and kicked Buck's injured leg. Not much more than a nudge but enough to elicit a hissed curse from the bodyguard and a tightening of the fine muscles around his mouth.

"*Cállate.*"

Standish ignored the directive with casual disdain, his voice pitched low. "Well, as much as I hate to admit it, Buck, this is one occasion when I would have to agree with you."

"*No conversando.*"

Buck shot a tired glance at the guard then back to Ezra. "What'd he say?"

"Doesn't want any talking."

Wilmington sighed and held onto the upper part of his thigh where the first bullet had entered.

"Usual drill. Better not piss them off."

One of the younger men, his high cheekbones and tobacco-coloured skin suggesting an infusion of indigenous blood, stood up and gestured with his weapon, an evilly truncated sawn-off Winchester shotgun, at the injured man.

"You. Move."

Buck would have laughed, the demand was so ludicrous, but Ezra beat him to it, slowly shaking his head and chuckling in what seemed like genuine amusement, whispering in apparent disbelief: "Goddamn neanderthals."

The guard brought his foot back to kick at Wilmington, the American's injured leg again being the target, but the Southerner uncoiled like a striking cobra and even hindered by being handcuffed to

Lisa, managed to gain his feet and double-tap the youth with fist and elbow before neatly snatching the shotgun from his hands and holding it loosely in his own fist.

Stand-off. The two 9mm Glocks trained on him were not odds he would care to challenge but the open-mouthed shock on the faces of the three guards was almost worth the inevitable consequence of his action, and that his act of defiance would reap its own rewards he was in no doubt. With a chilling smile, he tossed the shotgun back to the boy. As soon as the weapon left his hand the oldest of the trio, a battle-scarred veteran that Ezra would bet had seen the inside of a jail cell more than once, launched himself across the truck, hurling insults and threats in rapid-fire Spanish as he shoved the youth out of the way.

“El hijo de puta!” The man’s fist smashed into Ezra’s mouth, forcing him to take a staggered step back as he rode the blow to reduce the impact, and beside him he heard Lisa’s quick intake of breath. No stars this time, just an explosion of concentrated pain and the taste of copper in his mouth. He shook his head, spitting blood, and slowly wiped his free hand across an already swelling lip. Waiting. The man, breathing heavily, gathered the front of Ezra’s shirt in his hand and jerked the Southerner forward. “You don’t fuck with me, you hear! You want see who has biggest *cojones*, hombre, you fuck with someone else, not Julio. *Comprender?*” He released the slightly shorter bodyguard with a rough push, then looked slyly at Lisa showing broken and decayed teeth as he grinned. “Like your meat rare, American? Young, tender and just bleeding, huh?” He stepped back chuckling, highly amused at his own joke, nodding slowly. “*Si*, long time since we had fresh meat at the compound. You will all be....most welcome.”

Ezra’s green eyes glittered coldly as he held the Hispanic’s gaze, his left hand tightly clasping Lisa’s in his own, wondering if she had fully understood the implication in the man’s heavily accented words. Fucking animal. He drew her closer to him and continued to stare at the kidnapper, before finally speaking. “*Besa mi culo.*”

With a quick gesture to the teenager to follow his lead, he slowly lowered himself back onto the floor of the truck, taking up position once again beside Buck. Status quo. Wilmington, shook his head, leaning a little towards the Southerner, his voice pitched low: “I seem to remember my last words were, better not piss them off.” He gave a quick grin. “I think you pissed them off.”

Ezra tried to smile, then pressed the back of his hand against his mouth, his own response no more than a sarcastic murmur.

“You think so?”

“Christ, Ezra, you sure like to go looking for trouble. Wonder they didn’t blow your head off for that little stunt.” He stopped suddenly, and sighed. “Thanks.”

The Southerner gave a slight nod before closing his eyes and thinking about the dull ache that was building in his head. The day just wasn’t getting any better. He felt Buck nudge him gently with his

elbow but he kept his eyes closed. “What the hell did you say to him, Ezra? Whatever it was, looks like he’s backed off.”

Standish gently touched the cut in his lip with his tongue and winced before reluctantly and wearily answering.

“I told him to kiss my ass.”

Ezra found it more than a little disconcerting that Buck should choose that moment to start laughing quietly beside him. He sighed. Sometimes he thought Wilmington might be just a little crazy.

Buck rested his head against the side of the truck and blinked the sweat out of his eyes, not sure how much of it was due to the oppressive heat building inside the poorly ventilated vehicle or the fact that he had lost a lot more blood than was good for him; he just knew he was beginning to feel uncomfortably light-headed. He closed his eyes and tried to focus on something other than the unrelenting pain in his leg. He knew one thing with absolute certainty. He owed Ezra. The crazy son-of-a-bitch had taken a real chance in challenging the three guards and had wound up with a punch in the mouth for his trouble. Still, he mused, they could just as easily have put a bullet in him and with these guys that was a real possibility. After all, it didn’t take a genius to figure out that two bodyguards were hardly likely to feature highly in a ransom demand. They were expendable but still Ezra had managed buy them some time and however little that might turn out to be, he was grateful for the temporary stay of execution.

Whatever his motives Standish seemed determined to test his limits, although he was beginning to wonder if Ezra even had any limits. He had considered the Southerner to be the conservative type, one who would carefully assess and weigh all the options before making a move and above all keep looking out for number one, but now he was being forced to reconsider his original perceptions. First there had been the handcuffs, which although a stroke of genius had also been a huge risk. Standish had taken a gamble that Connie and Co. would not have any time to waste, assuring that he would not be separated from Lisa at least in the short term, and he had won. Then he had pulled that stunt in taking the shotgun from the kid and he had to admit the guy was not only fast but gutsy. It could have ended for him right there but he had pulled it off. The entirely unexpected manoeuvre had also been a reminder of just how accomplished Ezra was in unarmed combat but whether that would prove to be an asset or a liability for the former Fed, only time would tell. One thing was certain though; no one would be taking Ezra Standish for granted from this point forward. He just hoped the Southerner hadn’t played his cards too soon.

Lisa had held up surprisingly well given the fact that she had been so suddenly thrust into a

frightening and violent situation. He wondered what was going through her mind at being so easily separated from her father and left in the company of two paid goons, one of which had already managed to get himself shot and the other of which seemed intent on drawing attention to himself in the worst possible way. He had not had a lot of direct contact with the girl, that had been Ezra's domain, but she seemed a quiet enough kid, who had certainly taken a shine to her bodyguard. In fact Standish had fallen quite comfortably into the role, and Buck had not wholly been able to reconcile this strongly empathetic side of Standish with the urbane and solitary Southerner that had been on display in Boston. He really thought he had this one pegged for sure but in the space of a few hours Ezra's behaviour had him questioning that judgement.

"Buck?"

Wilmington opened his eyes with a start. The voice had been no more than a quiet murmur in his ear but it had been enough to rouse him. Damn! He had been drifting. Not good. Not good. He sat up, wiping the sweat from his face with the back of his hand and licked his lips, acutely aware of his growing thirst. A bad sign. He nodded once at Standish, a signal that he was okay, although he was not sure how much longer that would hold true and whichever way he chose to look at it, his future seemed predictably short.

He braced as the truck swerved sharply and plunged down a steep incline, only prevented from sliding unchecked across the metal floor by Ezra's hand fastening onto the front of his shirt and restraining him. It was a rough ride. He had thought the roads they had already travelled penance enough, but the new surface felt like they were driving across a ploughed field, and he could almost feel the blood drain from his face as the raw nerves in his leg screamed in protest. A curse formed on his lips but he quickly bit back the profanity. It might feel like two hot skewers were being forced through his leg but he had no intention of giving the three stooges the satisfaction of seeing him show any sign of weakness. Hell, if Ezra was going to act the hero, he should at least make an effort to show some solidarity. Even if it killed him. He tried not to dwell on the fact that it just might.

The truck slewed to an erratic stop, juddering sideways over what sounded like gravel, and Buck found himself musing that in his professional opinion the driver could do with a few pointers in basic vehicle handling but there was no further opportunity for such idle thoughts as the rear doors were jerked open and the moment disintegrated into a confusing montage of urgent action and meaningless sound.

Ezra and Lisa scrambled out first, dragged from the front and harried from the rear and Buck winced as the stock of a rifle butt connected solidly with the small of the Southerner's back. It had started. Pay back. Shoved off balance Ezra tumbled from the back of the truck, landing awkwardly but recovering quickly to avoid dragging Lisa down with him. Wilmington needed no invitation to

move, preferring falling on his ass under his own steam to being pushed. And fall he did, as soon as he attempted to take any weight on his leg, dropping painfully to one knee the moment his feet touched the ground. Amazingly no one touched him. He had expected a barrage of blows but the circle of armed men, rather than closing in had drawn back and fallen silent.

“Get him up.”

He looked up. Connie. In fact Connie and a new face; a man dressed in fatigues looking uncannily like a young Che Guevara. A look Buck suspected the man deliberately cultivated.

“I said get him up!”

It was then he realised the woman was talking to Ezra. Silently Standish walked forward, turning to talk to Lisa in German as he came around in front of Buck, before quickly dropping into a crouch on his right.

“Okay?”

“Down but not out,” he whispered, with a strained grin.

He had wondered how Ezra was going to be of any help tethered as he was to Lisa but the two of them flanked him, their linked wrists looped behind him and their fingers hooked under his belt. Once on his feet he leaned heavily on the slightly smaller man and curved his left arm around the much smaller teenager, not shifting any of his weight onto her but rather hugging her small frame to him. “Definitely not out.”

“What about here?”

“Goddamn it, yes!” Vin drew sharply away from Nathan as the medic’s sure fingers found a tender spot at the small of his back and he snarled in irritation: “Do you have to do that?”

Jackson sighed, having a difficult time trying to keep the Texan still long enough to check him out.

“No, I just really like pissing you off.”

Vin, already out of sorts, scowled fiercely. “Yeah well, you’re doing a really great job!”

Nathan merely grinned at the bad tempered response and continued moving his fingers across Tanner’s badly bruised back. “Glad to hear it.”

Tanner was sitting in the shade of the open tailgate, his shirt crumpled in one hand as he impatiently waited for Jackson to finish, his other hand holding an ice pack to his right knee.

“Look, Nathan. Can we speed this up a little. I keep telling you I’m okay!”

“Yeah, yeah. Maybe it would quicker if I just asked you if there’s anywhere left that doesn’t hurt.”

“Short answer, Nathan. No! Can I go now?”

“Am I going to be able to stop you?”

“No.”

“Then I guess you can go. Just take it easy on that knee, it’s gonna swell whatever you do but try not to aggravate it too much.” He sounded as if he didn’t give much hope for that ever happening. “Can’t do anything about the ribs, can’t even be sure you haven’t cracked a couple without an x-ray, but they’ll let you know soon enough when you’re doin’ too much. If you start to get dizzy or your vision gets blurry...”

“Yeah, I know the drill, Coach,” Vin grinned finally, “Now gimme a couple of those pain-killers and quit fussin’.”

Nathan knew it would be a waste of time to argue and as Vin limped away, he glanced down the road with a faraway look. Time was something that was in short supply right now, for all of them. Vin hastily dry-swallowed the two pain-killers that Nathan had given him, and moved slowly round to the front of the Montero, testing the integrity of his knee and finding it painful but reasonably sound. His ankle was equally sore but it seemed to be holding up okay. He sighed and experimentally rolled his shoulder. So, he felt like he’d been ridden over by a stampede of Texas longhorns, as long as everything was still attached and functional he could get by. This was no time to be sidelined by a little pain. Well, maybe not so little but he had no intention of giving in. Hellfire, he’d managed to look like a jerk since he had first set foot on the plane at Logan. If he was ever going to prove his worth to Larabee he was going to have stop falling on his goddamn ass. As the Texan approached, Josiah lifted his head from under the hood with a triumphant grin and a wink as he banged on the fender and shouted: “Try it now!”

The engine coughed hesitantly, then fired and roared into life, settling into a rough idle and Tanner realised then that it was Hengst who was sitting in the driver’s seat gunning the engine. For some reason the fact that the businessman was in shirtsleeves and as grease-smearred as Sanchez did not surprise him as much as it probably should. While he had still been trying to get his brain and body to operate in unison again, and Nathan was making sure that all the important bits were working satisfactorily, Sanchez and Hengst had been performing battlefield surgery on the Montero. Whatever they had done, had obviously worked and now Josiah slammed the hood shut and hastily wiped his hands on what had once been a white handkerchief.

“You okay, son?” His concern was genuine, not merely a polite inquiry.

Vin leaned on the fender, thinking absently that Nathan may have been right about the ribs as he took as deep a breath as he could manage. “Not even close, Josiah, but I reckon I’ll live.”

Sanchez nodded and dropped a large hand onto the Texan’s shoulder. “Glad to hear it. Now how about we get this show on the road. We’ve already lost too much time and the bastards could be halfway to the Belize border by now.”

“You think that’s where they’re headed?”

“Fuck knows,” grunted the big ex-Marine, “but the longer we sit here, the more clear air they’re

putting between them and us.” He abruptly wheeled away. “JD! Get your gear and move your ass! We’re leaving!”

Vin straightened. “Hey, Josiah. Any luck getting the locals involved?”

Sanchez looked quickly back over his shoulder, his face hard. “Ask JD, but don’t hold your breath.”

At that moment Dunne jogged across to the Mitsubishi, his laptop under his arm, a satellite phone in one hand and a two-way radio in the other. He extended the Motorola two-way to the Texan.

“Vin. It’s Chris.”

Tanner took the compact unit with a look that said: Why me? but with a shrug he thumbed the talk button.

“Tanner.”

“You okay, pard?”

“I’m talking to you aren’t I?”

“That don’t mean squat but I’ll take your word for it.”

“So, what you got, Chris?” He knew Larabee was not calling to shoot the breeze.

“You mean apart from a shit load of trouble? We got a big vehicle, well loaded in back and moving fast. Right now headed east but they got a good head start on us and if they’re smart they’ll switch both vehicle and direction.”

“Well, pard, we’re in business again but it looks like we’ll be starting on our own anyways. We wait for the authorities and I reckon we’ll have really lost ‘em.”

“Start? This is fucking personal, Vin, I don’t just plan on starting this one, I aim to finish it. So how about haulin’ some ass-I could use a ride here!”

Vin smiled as Chris quickly summed up by giving his location before signing off, and handed the two-way back to Dunne. “He’s pissed.”

JD frowned at Tanner’s obvious good humour. “Is that good or bad?”

Vin’s smile broadened. “Well, I guess that just depends, JD.”

“On what?”

“On which side you’re on.”

The smell was one of moist earth, mildew and the suggestion of rotting vegetation that Ezra always associated with tropical places. Granted he was not usually in the thick of it, generally preferring to look upon nature from a distance, but here there was no escaping it. The shed and, in spite of its generous dimensions, a shed it most certainly was, boasted a rammed earth floor and corrugated iron walls over a steel girder frame. There were some odds and ends of machinery among pallets and mounds of burlap sacking and the Southerner came to the conclusion that they

were being held in some part of a coffee processing plant. Hardly surprising given their location, coupled with the simple fact that Guatemala's number one export happened to be coffee and that they were currently in the heart of the coffee-growing highlands of the country. The smell he could tolerate. He could even disregard the spartan crudity of their accommodations. The temperature was far harder to ignore.

Beside him, Wilmington lay with his eyes closed. They had at least allowed him to do what he could to make the bodyguard comfortable but that was the extent of their charity. The Southerner absently waved away the myriad of flies drawn by the blood from Buck's wounds, in a cycle that had become as routine as his own breathing. It made no difference, they still came back, the attraction was too great, but it went against the grain for him to do nothing and allow the insects to settle. On his left an enervated Lisa sat in cocoon of stunned silence. She had been warned against speaking, and threatened with the prospect of physical punishment - not to herself but to him, her personal bodyguard-she had chosen silence. Now isolated from him, she refused to even make eye contact for fear of retribution. Occasionally though he would feel the gentle squeeze of her hand through their interlocked fingers, as if she needed to reassure herself that he was still there.

Ezra wiped the sweat from his forehead with the back of his hand, blinking as the same flies that were desperately trying to feast on Wilmington's leg, settled with the same persistence at the corners of his eyes. With a sigh he leaned his free arm across his raised knees and hung his head. He had no real idea how long they had been sitting in the shed. His watch had been taken when they had been searched, along with his wallet and his gold signet ring. He mustered a smile wondering if they'd be offended when they realised that the Rolex they had liberated from his wrist was a cheap Indonesian copy he had picked up on a trip to South-east Asia that had cost him precisely ten American dollars. He had been around the traps long enough to know when it was prudent to leave the genuine article at home. He was sorry to lose the signet ring. After all it had been a twenty-first birthday gift from his mother, but when push came to shove he would rather lose the ring than lose the finger. He raised his head again and looked at the two guards, and at the automatic weapons they carried. No contest. This was a waiting game and no mistake, but he was tired of waiting and he was thirsty.

"Hey, how about some water here."

One of the guards looked slowly up, his dark eyes expressionless. Ezra tried again, keeping his Spanish simple; an uncultured American exercising his vocabulary. No point in playing a trump card any sooner than necessary. "*Agua. Déme agua.*"

The guard shrugged and smilingly gave him the finger. Ezra sighed. Fine. He didn't need to be fluent in any language to understand that particular response. He tried a third time.

“At least let the girl drink.”

He heard a gentle groan from Wilmington and quickly looked down beside him. “Tell me you’re not going to piss them off again, Ezra.”

Standish gave the moustached bodyguard a regretful look that said he could make no promises and turned his attention back to the guards, raising his voice to shout: “She’s no good to you if you don’t look after her!” Adding in an undertone, “*Cabron.*”

The guard rose slowly from his place. “*Cuál?*”

Wilmington sighed softly without opening his eyes. “You just had to do it, didn’t you? Goddamn it, Ezra! Don’t you ever learn?”

“Fear not, Mr. Wilmington. Just think of this as a game of chess, and that was my opening gambit.”

“You know what, Ezra? You’re nuts.”

The Southerner gave a self-deprecating laugh and his tongue darted out to wet his bottom lip. “Looking at this living example of humanity’s missing link, I think you might have a valid point there.”

There was a brief exchange between the guards before the one Ezra had quietly but intentionally insulted and in the worst possible way came within striking distance. The Southerner calculated the distance in those terms as a convenience and because that was most likely to be the eventual result of his goading. He feigned ignorance of the stream of Spanish invective that the guard unleashed but was quietly impressed by his virtuosity. Beside him, Buck stirred, interpreting the vocal outburst as a possible forerunner to violence and preparing for that eventuality.

“I think he said something bad about your mother,” offered Buck, muttering under his breath as he pushed himself back against the wall and moved to protect his injured leg.

“Yes,” drawled Ezra drily, not rising to the bait by betraying his knowledge of the language “He’s obviously met her.”

The wiry kidnapper ended his tirade, paused to let his eyes rove deliberately and suggestively over Lisa’s slim form before switching his attention back to the man at her side. Sneering, he hawked and spat aiming for, but narrowly missing, the Southerner as Ezra deftly averted his head. Slowly, he turned back to the man, barely missing a beat.

“I guess that’s a no to the water?”

The blow never landed. Something Ezra was secretly grateful for, having no immediate desire to add facial reconstruction to his catalogue of experiences. But his luck was in and the rifle butt failed to make contact as the guard rapidly snapped to attention in response to the sudden and, in Ezra’s opinion, timely appearance of van der Schoor and her boyfriend. He had still to decide if the Dutch woman was one of the prime movers in the kidnap or just another cog in a much larger mechanism but whatever her status in the hierarchy she seemed to wield considerable clout. The

guard wheeled away with a malevolent glare and Ezra was under no illusions that sometime in the near future there would be a settling of accounts.

Larabee was quietly simmering, his anger unable to find a particular focus as he tried to come to terms with the disagreeable fact that events had just blown one very highly paid assignment, and possibly his entire future, right out of the water. Not only had he lost two of the principles he was contracted to protect but two of his bodyguards as well. Whichever way he looked at it, Hengst had every right to be livid and, more to the point, as a big wheel in the business fraternity he also had the capacity to ensure InterSept never handled a decent contract again. This was not a man to get offside, yet his only daughter had been kidnapped while under their protection and it was a sure fire bet that he was going to be more than a little ticked off. Chris still held out a slim hope that Buck and Ezra might be in a position to tip the balance but it was equally possible that they might both wind up dead in a ditch somewhere along the way. Excess baggage. Dead wood.

The blond American crouched by the roadside, listening to the natural sounds of the jungle all around him, unfazed as a snake slithered by not twelve inches from his boot but unsettled by the feeling that he was missing something. Some clue that was right in front of him but that he wasn't seeing. Chris had no rational basis for what amounted to nothing more than a hunch but his instincts were warning him that he should pay attention. He had been mulling it over as he followed the signs that gave him at least part of the story, but he had still not been able to come up with any good reason why the kidnapers should have taken the two bodyguards along with them. He already suspected one of them had been shot but again, it was only a guess, the blood could just as easily have been from one of the kidnapers or, God forbid, Lisa or Connie. The question that was nagging him was that if one of them was wounded, why would the kidnapers weigh themselves down with the liability of an injured man when the logical thing to do would be to leave him behind? Slow down the pursuit. In the same position he would have dispatched the bodyguards with no compunction and taken only the hostages that were worth the time and effort. To keep two trained bodyguards as hostages made no sense at all.

He considered again the blood that had soaked into the dust by the Montero, a lot of blood, and thought back to the sequence of events that had led to him now squatting by the roadside, in the moist jungle heat, waiting for a lift and trying to ignore the myriad of insect life which seemed to be attracted to his sweat. Vin had stopped the second Montero, pulling off the road moments before the embankment exploded and blocked the road with tons of earth and rock. His gut told him that it was no co-incidence that Vin had stopped at that particular point but there was nothing concrete on which he could base his suspicions. Why stop right at that spot? Who would or could have known their itinerary? All he knew was that the attack had not simply been an opportunistic

attempt by bandits to liberate wealthy westerners of their cash and valuables, this had been a carefully planned and executed kidnapping and suddenly the assault on Ezra at the plaza and the feint attack on Hengst in the city, seemed more likely to be a part of a much bigger picture. He now cursed himself for not having insisted that they fly to Flores. Ezra had been right and he should have listened. Instead he was now facing a worst case scenario and there was not a damned thing he could do about it except join the game of hide and seek. Larabee sighed and stood up as the sound of a vehicle approaching reached him. Whatever it was he was missing, there wasn't much time to figure out before their own window of opportunity closed forever and there was no way he was going to either lose a client or sacrifice any of his men. There was an answer somewhere - a key - and he was going to find it. If hide and seek was the name of the game then like it or not, that was the one he was going to have to play.

Ezra Standish had a death wish. At least that was the only plausible excuse Buck had been able to come up with to explain the Southerner's openly confrontational behaviour. The fact that they were hostages seemed to have made no impression at all on Ezra and it sent a chill of fear through Wilmington when, at every opportunity, he insisted on getting right in their faces. Maybe it was something to do with his FBI roots but the way he was going it was only a matter of time before he pushed one of them right over the edge and then...well, it wasn't something he wanted to dwell on, but if it was a death wish driving Standish, then he was pretty close to getting his private audience with the grim reaper.

Wilmington licked his lips and tried not to think about the aching dryness of his parched throat or the throbbing agony of his injured thigh. It didn't matter where he positioned his leg any more, the pain was constant and getting worse, and to round off the whole sorry mess, he had never felt so ill in his life. He had lost a lot of blood and he was suffering from the inevitable consequences of shock; even now his heart was racing and in spite of the ambient heat his skin felt unpleasantly clammy. His leg was swelling against the constriction of his pants and he was starting to wonder how long it took for an infection to develop.

It had already occurred to him that he would have been much better off if they had left him bleeding at the side of the road. In fact from their captors' point of view it would have been the smartest thing to do. He had been in the army long enough to know that it was better to wound and maim an enemy than kill them; the more casualties you could inflict, the bigger drain on your opponent. Dead was dead, but a wounded man tied up resources and manpower. He would have said it made no sense, but he knew exactly why he was there. Ezra had made one big mistake. He had reacted to him being needlessly shot and van der Schoor had immediately interpreted that as a

weakness to be exploited. He was to be the lever, the tool to apply pressure to Ezra and through him to Lisa which in turn could be used against Hengst, but the bottom line was that he was expendable. No intrinsic value. A disposable asset. Now the bitch who had shot him was back in the picture and he had no doubt whatsoever that his already bad day was about to get much worse but his real worry was that Ezra would do something reckless. He wanted to tell him to ignore anything that the kidnapers might do to him, not to play their game, that he would understand, but he couldn't and something told him that Ezra wouldn't listen to him anyway.

Wilmington blinked the sweat out of his eyes and focused on the shapes that had materialised in front of them. Connie had changed into some mismatched paramilitary outfit of indeterminate origin and he wanted to laugh at the absurdity of it but the fact that the psycho bitch would probably off him without a second thought persuaded him to keep his opinions to himself. Ezra seemed to be able to be perfectly capable of fuelling their anger without him adding his dime's worth.

"You know, I think I made a mistake in not killing you when I had the chance."

The words were directed at Ezra and Buck waited for the inevitable response. "Oh, I can guarantee it," he drawled, calmly, "Having second thoughts?"

"Not yet, though I still might." Connie laughed, an unpleasant sound completely devoid of humour.

"But for the moment you're more useful to us alive. Besides she seems quite attached to you, even without the handcuffs, and having a captive baby-sitter is better than having to deal with a hysterical brat."

Ezra shook his head with a curl of his lip that made it perfectly clear what he thought of van der Schoor's rationale. "You're a cold-hearted bitch."

Connie pretended to be offended. "And I thought you were the gentleman."

The Southerner smiled coldly. "Believe me, I am being a gentleman."

"Then I'll take it as a compliment."

"Don't."

"Oh, please don't sound so bitter."

"It's just that I'd hate anyone to misinterpret my opinion of you, Miss van der Schoor."

She laughed. "I really don't think there's any possibility of that, do you?" She moved closer to Buck and dropped into a crouch beside him, a move that sent a ripple of unease through his gut. This was not a woman he wanted to get close to him.

He swallowed convulsively although his mouth was as dry as dust as her hand touched his leg. He flinched and cursed himself for reacting so predictably, knowing she was a predator who would happily feed on someone else's pain. He steeled himself as she carefully unwrapped the rough bandage above his right knee and briefly inspected the wound before repeating the action with the

second bandage higher up on his thigh.

“Nasty,” she commented, as if the fact that he had two bullets in his leg had nothing to do with her.

Wilmington was not sure if he was supposed to say anything so he kept his teeth clenched firmly together, tensing in anticipation of pain, and kept silent. He controlled himself as she reached for the knife in her belt although the sound of it leaving the sheath seemed to fill his senses, and as the gleaming steel blade touched his leg he almost lost it. The scream he wanted to let go emerged as a barely articulated whimper and he closed his eyes, his breath coming in short, sharp bursts as the cutting edge slid through the fabric of his pants, the blade kissing his skin as it glided easily with the barest pressure from knee to groin.

His eyes flew open as he felt her hand come to rest lightly on his leg, hissing as the pressure steadily increased and almost certain he would pass out if she continued. He felt Ezra stir beside him and shot him a warning glance. That was what she wanted and he was not about to give her any satisfaction. The pressure suddenly eased and with a gentle laugh she patted his face.

“I’m so sorry. Did that hurt?”

“Fuck you,” he breathed, so low he doubted anyone but Connie heard, his eyes hardening, “You sick bitch.”

She stood up and absently wiped the blood that had smeared her hand down her fatigues and snapped out a rapid-fire string of instructions to her companions before turning back to Wilmington, suddenly all business. “I’ll have someone take a look at that leg. If you die I want it to be when I say, not because of an infected wound.” She wheeled and glared at her lieutenants. “Now where’s that goddamn phone?”

He heard a quiet voice beside him murmur sarcastically: “Well, that’s some comfort to you I dare say.”

Buck let his head fall back, and took a deep breath, his response equally quiet. “Can’t make up my mind if that’s a reprieve or a death sentence.”

“I’m sure you’ll be given due notice, but at least you have one thing in your favour.”

Buck turned his head just enough to bring Ezra into his peripheral vision, frowning slightly. “Yeah? And what’s that?”

“She likes you.”

Buck stifled the urge to laugh but the brief moment of humour quickly dissipated as Connie strode towards Lisa and roughly dragged the girl to her feet which in turn forced Ezra to awkwardly follow. Assured of no resistance by virtue of the weapons trained on them, Connie slapped Lisa across the face, and thrust a bulky satellite phone - one that Buck suspected was the InterSept unit from the Montero - into the teenager’s hands.

“Time to talk to Daddy.”

“Ezra?” Lisa’s voice wavered uncertainly as she gripped the handset and looked to the Southerner for direction.

He quickly glanced at the Dutch woman and then back to the teenager whose fear was now beginning to show. “It’s okay, Lisa, just do and say exactly what you’re told. No one’s going to hurt you.”

“Smart boy,” snapped Connie, sarcastically approving his instructions to the obviously apprehensive girl. “Now show her how to use the phone and then shut the fuck up.”

Standish hesitated, decided there was nothing to be gained by being obstructive, and reached across with his right hand to dial up the second InterSept phone. As he thumbed the keys and waited for the service to register, Connie coached Lisa in what to say.

“All I want you to say is that you’re safe, and that you’ve not been hurt in any way. No more. Understand? Then you will read these demands. You will not answer any questions; you will only read the prepared statement.”

The girl nodded quickly and awkwardly lifted her right hand to take the sheet of paper, a move Ezra was obliged to imitate by virtue of the handcuffs linking their wrists. As the green light winked on the unit signalling a connection, the Southerner keyed in the number that would link them to Hengst and, more importantly as far as he was concerned, to Chris. As if she had picked up some subtle signal, Connie snatched at the phone and glared at the teenager beside him.

“You try to be clever,” she hissed threateningly, “and it is your watchdog here who will suffer. So do exactly as I have told you and no more!” Van der Schoor raised the phone to her ear and listened to the ring tone as she made eye contact with one of the guards and casually jerked her head towards Ezra.

Standish found himself quickly and roughly restrained by a man who had a good three inches and an extra fifty pounds of muscle on him, not bothering to put up any show of resistance as his right wrist was gripped in iron-hard fingers and thrust sharply up between his shoulder blades. Under any other circumstances he would not have hesitated to take the man on, mano y mano, and it gave him some satisfaction in knowing that not only could he take him on but easily defeat him. For now he would have to take whatever they dished out and if it kept the heat off Lisa and Buck he would even take it without protest, but he would remember.

“Darlin’,” he said gently, “It’s alright. Just ask to talk to your father.”

Connie handed the phone back to the teenager. “Remember. No tricks.”

Lisa started out breathlessly, her words tumbling over one another in her haste to speak, but she quickly seemed to gain control and Ezra wondered who had taken the call. One thing he knew for certain and that was that they would try to keep her talking. He listened to the responses and

imagined how the other end of the conversation was being orchestrated but he watched Connie.

“Ja, Buck.”

Ezra saw the change come over van der Schoor’s face and he found himself holding his breath. It didn’t take a towering intellect to conclude that Lisa had been asked if anyone was hurt. Already frightened, the teenager had, in all innocence, answered the question. The information was nothing. If anything, the fact that Buck was injured only reinforced that the kidnappers meant business, but it was outside the parameters Connie had set. Lisa, in her first words, had already crossed the line.

“Eight.”

The Southerner briefly closed his eyes. Dear Lord. Although he had to admit that he could not have done better himself. Other than revealing their exact location that was possibly the most valuable piece of information she could have offered. He guessed there were more than the eight kidnappers they had seen but Lisa was calling it as she saw it. Someone was asking the right questions. Or the wrong ones if van der Schoor’s reaction was anything to go by.

The increase in pressure on his shoulder as his arm was pushed higher up his back was not unexpected and he twisted slightly as the joint strained painfully. What he wasn’t prepared for was the knuckle jab that drove sharply into his left kidney, a vicious blow that sent shockwaves all the way to his groin. Christ! The bastard had a fist of stone. He arched his spine, grunting softly in response to the bruising jab, before being pushed roughly forward to land heavily on his knees, a move which almost dislocated his shoulder. Breathing hard and recognising the inevitability of what was about to happen, he turned quickly to the girl beside him, raising his voice enough for whoever was at the other end to hear.

“Go for it, kid. Might as well make this worth it.”

The next few seconds exploded into a kaleidoscopic burst of sound and colour, as he was rocked by a savage punch delivered to the side of his head that set his ears ringing and momentarily blurred his vision. Through it he could hear Connie shrieking and Lisa sobbing, and somewhere in the clamour he was certain he recognised a bellow of protest from Buck. Stunned, he blinked rapidly, instinctively resisting as a second man grabbed his outstretched arm, the one linked to Lisa, and immobilising it by clamping it under his arm and against his body, started to bend back his little finger. Gasping, Ezra pulled back, for a moment succeeding in eluding the man’s grip, but an arm snaked around his throat, tightening against his windpipe and, powerless to protect himself, he felt the pressure on his finger increase once more.

On his knees, struggling against these men, the blood roaring in his ears as he fought for air, he wanted to scream: No! Not this! Not again! This was not happening to him. Not here. Not now. He squeezed his eyes shut, driving back unwanted memories, as his finger was forced back against the

joint, his mind grasping at those two words like a drowning man grabs for a lifeline. Not again...not again...not again...Mother of God, not again...

The Southerner's vision whited-out and, as he broke into a cold sweat, he thought he was going to vomit. If he had not already been on his knees there was no doubt in his mind that he would have fallen. He had heard the sickening snap of breaking bone, felt the shooting agony all the way along his forearm. Jesus! The bastards had broken his finger. He lost the battle against rising nausea, gagging and heaving, as he was finally released and shoved roughly forward to lie in the dirt, one arm still twisted up behind him and the other stretched out in a parody of supplication to a tearful, sobbing girl, that he had not even the power to comfort.

Get up! Come on, get up, you sorry Fed bastard. Or maybe you like being on your knees, huh? That how you like it?...How 'bout we see how much of a man you are now, pretty boy!..You fucked us over good, Feebie, and this is pay back time. Hey, cocksucker, you might even like it!

"Get up. Ezra? Ezra, please get up." He blinked, coughed and spat, then slowly brought his arm from behind his back and levered himself up from the floor, dazed and ashen faced; still reeling from the intrusion of the past that had sprung into his mind so readily. "They have gone."

Impulsively he drew the teenager towards him and hugged her to him, the only reassurance he could offer at that moment that he was alright. His left hand was on fire, a savage pulsing throb radiating outwards from his little finger. Goddamn it! They had really broken his finger. He felt suddenly cold and clammy, and for a moment he thought he was going to be sick again, then he glanced up and made eye contact with Wilmington.

"Ezra? You with us now, pard?"

The Southerner nodded, touched by the naked concern displayed by the moustached man and cradling his injured hand, he managed to get unsteadily to his feet.

"I think..." He grimaced as he carefully manipulated his damaged finger back into alignment, then firmly held it in place, "I missed something."

"You mean Connie screaming at Lisa, snatching the phone and ending the call mid-sentence? Christ, whoever was on the other end should be pretty rattled by now wondering what the fu..." he stopped himself, abruptly shifting gear with an apologetic glance at Lisa, "...devil's going on."

"I'm sorry..." began the teenager, miserably, "I did not mean..."

"No. No, you did the right thing," interrupted Ezra quickly, "There's nothing to be sorry about, darlin'." He closed his eyes, taking a deep breath, as the realisation dawned that he was close to passing out again. "You did great, kid."

"Come on, man. Sit down. Lemme take a look at that hand."

"Buck, it's okay. I'm alright."

"Ezra," he sighed patiently, "I got shot in the leg. I might not be firing on all cylinders but I ain't

brain damaged and I sure as hell ain't blind. Now give me a look. Let's see if between us, me and Lisa can't fix you up somehow."

Standish allowed himself a faint smile and leaned back against the wall, wondering what in hell he had let himself in for. Buck had a surprisingly gentle touch and he murmured barely veiled threats of retribution against the kidnappers as he checked out the bruised and rapidly swelling joint.

"You know," he grizzled as once again Lisa's hand was dragged forward by the cuffs linking her and the Southerner together, "This may have been a great idea when you did it, Ezra, but these cuffs are freakin' liability now."

Ezra slowly raised his head. "The key's in my belt."

Wilmington's expression was a picture of confused indignation and under any other circumstances Ezra was sure he would have laughed. "In your belt," he repeated flatly, "Now that's just fine, Ezra. So why the hell are you still cuffed?"

"Time wasn't right," he sighed, "I needed to be sure."

"Sure of what?"

"Sure that we would be kept together."

Buck gave a short laugh. "Well, reckon that's pretty much a given now, don't you?"

"Maybe. Can't call this one, Buck." He let his head fall back against the wall, dizzy from the pain.

"She's insane."

"Yeah, tell me somethin' I don't know, pard. Now where's that key?" In reply Ezra flipped open the clasp on his belt and from behind the solid plate of the brushed steel buckle, awkwardly worked a slim universal handcuff key. "Well, I'll be...Full of surprises ain't you? That a Feebie trick?"

The Southerner held out the little key. "No, it's an Ezra Standish trick."

"Well, it's a good one, I'll give you that." With a quick twist he unlocked the cuff around Ezra's wrist, gently easing off the bracelet then handing the key to Lisa. "There you go, Sweetheart."

Wilmington rested for a moment. It was obvious that although he was not quite running on empty he was into the red zone. "You know Ezra," he said quietly, "Connie isn't gonna be any too happy when she realises that you pulled a fast one with the cuffs."

"No."

"That girl's already on a hair trigger, Ezra, and you haven't exactly hit it off with her."

Standish gave a humourless laugh. "Look at it this way, Buck. I've only got ten fingers." He stopped and looked down at his left hand. "Well, nine..."

Wilmington shook his head. "Don't want to rain on your parade, pard, but she's directing this here show and I've got a bad feeling about the way it's going."

Ezra closed his eyes again and thrust aside the images that were already crowding into his head; memories that he had spent so long walling up and blocking out; suppressed emotions that were

now starting to rise to the surface and burst open like bubbles of rotten swamp gas. He tried to close the trapdoor again, but he knew it was already much too late for that. The evil spectre of his past was back to haunt him, and this time he was not only remembering it, he was reliving it.

“Please don’t concern yourself, Mr. Wilmington. I believe I have seen this particular movie before and I already know how it ends.”

Chris threw down the satellite handset in frustration, his simmering anger a tangible thing in the close confines of the Montero. Beside him, in the passenger seat, Vin wordlessly reached out, deftly fielding the Motorola unit as it skittered across the vehicle and before it could bounce from the seat to the floor, while the three men wedged almost shoulder to shoulder in the middle row waited expectantly, and in the rearmost seat with his IT hardware, JD spared a moment to look up from his lap-top.

“Goddamn it!”

Hengst leaned forward, calm and controlled but starting to show definite signs of anxiety. “You spoke with Lisa. What did she say? She is alright?”

Larabee closed his eyes and rubbed the bridge of his nose. What did she say? Hell, he wished he knew.

“Chris?” A gentle prompt from Josiah reminded him that he had a responsibility to his client and no time to indulge himself in recrimination however justifiable.

“We didn’t have much time. She did say that she was alright and that she’s not been harmed in any way but...” he paused, choosing his next words carefully, “something went down while she was talking and then someone nixed the call. We were cut off. No demands, no anything. She managed to tell me that she had marked eight kidnapers and she did say Buck had been hurt. It’s my guess that it’s his blood we found on the road...”

“Jesus!” Nathan’s softly expressive voice spoke for them all.

“Just before the phone went dead,” continued Chris evenly, “I thought I heard Buck shouting but...” he shrugged, not prepared to commit to anything definite, “it might have been nothing; there was a lot of background noise.”

“And Ezra?” interrupted Vin quickly, “What about Ezra?”

“He was there alright. No mistaking that voice.” A ghost of a smile crossed Larabee’s lips before he continued. “Seemed to be much closer to the phone and he said something like ‘Go for it, kid. Make it worth it, or make this worth it’; whatever that meant.”

“Anything else? Did he seem okay?”

“He was alive and he was talking, Vin, that’s all I can say. I did hear a woman’s voice.”

“Connie?” suggested Josiah, “It would make sense.”

“Yeah,” agreed Chris but with some obvious reluctance, “I think it was.”

Hengst sighed. “So, they are all well. That is something to be thankful for. Now if only we knew what it was they wanted.” He paused and his face twisted wryly. “Or rather how much.”

Larabee stared thoughtfully out of the window for several seconds, his expression hard and at odds with the heartening information that at least all four of the hostages were still alive. Finally he turned back to the German.

“Mannfred, just how well do you know Connie van der Schoor?”

Hengst looked warily at the American. “She has been for the past twelve months with my family.”

“And you trust her?”

“She came with the best references, engaged through a reputable agency.”

“That’s not what I asked.”

Hengst drew back, giving the American a frosty look. “My daughter has been in her care for almost one year,” he answered indignantly, “Of course I trust her. What are you suggesting, Mr. Larabee?”

Chris did not miss the rapid exchange of looks between Vin and Nathan, and knowing Tanner’s feelings about the Dutch au pair, he guessed it would take very little for him to believe in that van der Schoor might be implicated in some way. He was not quite as ready to jump to the same conclusions but his gut was warning him to look outside the frame. To think wide.

“Nothing,” he hedged, “I’m just doing some free association here. Trying to get two and two to make four. You know, look for some common links. I know there’s something missing from this whole picture; all I’m trying to do is find that piece.”

Hengst looked decidedly uneasy as his eyes travelled from one to the other of the five bodyguards.

“You have reason to believe...?”

“I don’t know, it’s nothing more than a hunch,” interrupted Chris, more sharply than he intended, “It’s just something I thought I heard but it could have been nothing at all—you have to remember the call was so short and there was a lot going on...”

Josiah rested one hand on Larabee’s shoulder. “So tell us what is it you think you heard, Chris.”

Chris took a little time to form his response, getting his thoughts and impressions clear in his own mind first before putting them into words that, once spoken, could never be retrieved. “There was a scuffle, sounded like someone maybe took a hit—it definitely wasn’t Lisa so probably Ezra or Buck—then a woman yelling at Lisa to give her the phone. That’s when I thought I could hear Buck shouting and suddenly it went dead. The woman yelling? I think it was Connie.”

“But you could be mistaken, yes?”

Chris sighed. “Yes. Look, I already said I wasn’t one hundred percent certain, but as the call ended Lisa sounded frightened and began to cry and say that she was sorry. I’m sure it was Connie’s name she was starting to say.”

“But that’s nothing,” countered Nathan, “It’s only natural she’d be scared and Connie would be the first one she’d turn to.”

“No,” interrupted Hengst tonelessly, “Lisa would not. She and Connie have had a difficult relationship at times this past year. I think it would be more correct to say that Connie would probably be the last person she would turn to.”

Jackson’s eyes widened slightly at the unexpected revelation. “Ok-ay.” He stretched the word out and looked back to Chris with a questioning tilt of one eyebrow.

“It was different,” Larabee confirmed. “More as if she was apologising to Connie for doing something wrong. Why would she do that?”

The six men inside the Montero traded helpless glances as an uneasy silence descended over them. None of them had any answers.

Ezra had no idea as to why they had suddenly been left alone, or for how long it might last, but he intended to take every advantage of the welcome privacy however temporary it might prove to be. He looked down at his hand; swollen and bruised to a dark shade of purple but nowhere near as bad as it could have been. Luckily, it seemed to be a clean break. He had been a little surprised by Buck who had proved surprisingly adept at immobilising the fracture; splinting his finger to its neighbour with, of all things, a length of the broad lacings from Lisa’s sneakers which the enterprising teenager had managed to cut with nail clippers from her purse. The Southerner had not uttered a word of complaint, allowing the two of them to do what they would with him, feeling not only sick to his stomach but also struggling to keep a tight rein on the flood of memories that the sudden and violent assault had triggered. So much for the therapy.

Now he paced, trying to ignore both the physical discomfort of his injuries and the dryness in his mouth. The small of his back ached dully and he guessed he’d be sporting a bruise there soon enough and his right shoulder protested every movement with a twinge of overstrained muscle. None of them had taken a drink since the stop in Cobán and he could feel a headache building as he steadily dehydrated. They would be allowed to drink in due time of course, of that he had no real doubt. For now it was an opportunity for the kidnappers to flex their muscles, and the delay in giving them water was little more than an attempt to force compliance through a primitive system of reward and punishment. He wheeled, having reached the physical boundary of the shed, and returned along the same invisible path he had just trodden. He shot a quick glance at the other two and tried to imagine how Lisa must be feeling. So far she had held up through the ordeal better than he would have expected for a girl her age but he knew Connie’s verbal attack on her and the assault on him had taken their toll, and once in a while he would recognise a look of pure panic in her eyes.

“Ezra, goddamn it, you’re making me tired.” Buck sounded it; his voice weary but without any suggestion of irritation.

Ezra slowed and glanced apologetically at the older bodyguard. Wilmington had finally been persuaded to lie down and now, face grey with shock and pain, he rested with his head on Ezra’s jacket and his injured leg supported on a mound of burlap sacks. Lisa sat close to him and intermittently waved the flies away, just as Ezra had done earlier. “Sorry. Just thinking.”

“Don’t let me stop you doin’ that, pard.” Buck sighed deeply, but it seemed to Ezra that the sound was more a result of the need for more oxygen than a sign of exasperation. “Only I’d appreciate it if you could stay in one place to do it.”

The Southerner moved back to Wilmington and dropped into a crouch, using his uninjured hand to lift the edge of the ruin of Buck’s own jacket that he had used to cover his leg. No longer bleeding, a pale pink fluid seeped instead from the two neatly punched holes and Ezra, although appalled by the decidedly unhealthy appearance of the leg, succeeded in maintaining a neutral expression as he let the fabric drop again.

“Your wearin’ your poker face, Ezra,” murmured Buck, with an astuteness Standish had not expected, “So I’m guessing it’s not good news.”

“You need a doctor, Buck,” he answered evenly, “What would I know?”

“Connie said that someone would take care of Buck,” whispered Lisa, hesitantly, “But it has been already a long time...”

Aiming a quick warning glance at Standish, Wilmington reached up with a wry smile to grasp the girl’s hand and gave it a reassuring squeeze. “Don’t hold your breath, kid. Reckon Connie’s not too big on keeping promises.”

“No,” agreed Lisa, quietly, “This is so.” She leaned forward so a veil of thick, dark hair hid her face and her next words were little more than a whisper: “At least not the ones that matter.”

It took a moment for Ezra to realise that the narrow shoulders had begun to shake and that she was crying. Struggling with a sudden inexplicable rush of emotion that threatened to swamp him with its intensity, he moved to quickly gather the teenager into his arms, annoyed with himself for not having been more in tune with her feelings. He had guessed that eventually the dam would burst but, preoccupied, he had missed the signs.

“Ah, darlin’,” he breathed, “Come on, now, hush yourself. It’s alright.” He kept his voice a low murmur, gentle words uttered more for their soothing cadence than their meaning, feeling keenly the teenager’s misery as she held onto him with a quiet desperation and softly sobbed. He avoided looking directly at Wilmington although he knew the other man was watching him closely, and instead bent his head over the girl, his Georgia accent suddenly thickening as he kept up a reassuring monologue. “Trust me, honey, nothing’s going to happen to you. I’m here. Buck’s here.

And you know, these things have a way of working themselves out. You'll see." Trust me.

He felt no guilt that he was being less than truthful; Lisa was only thirteen, she had no need to know that while her own safety was not really an issue, Buck and himself were on less stable ground. Hengst would pay whatever was demanded of him; that was not in any doubt, and he would, in due course, be reunited with his daughter. Right now Lisa was valuable merchandise and it was in their best interests to look after her but, looking at the flip side of the coin, he and Buck had never been part of the plan. He rested his cheek against Lisa's hair and felt her sobs gradually subsiding into wet sniffles, wondering what the next move in this particular game was going to be. Finally, with a sigh he lifted his head and this time looked directly at Wilmington.

"Tell me something, Buck. What's Chris doing right now?"

Buck looked surprised, caught off guard by the question, then he ventured a slow smile. "Chris? Why, he'll be madder than a cornered rattler and probably doing what he does best."

"Which is?"

"Kicking ass." Buck managed a short laugh, thinking of his friend's reaction to one of his charges being snatched. "Making things happen."

Ezra suddenly drew back a little from the girl who still clung tightly to him, loathe to lose contact.

"Lisa, who was it you talked to on the phone?"

She sniffed. "It was Chris. He was the one who asked me the questions."

"He asked you if anyone was hurt and how many kidnappers there were, yes?"

"Ja." She ducked her head again and the rest of her words were muffled as she pressed her face against his chest. "I should not have said anything. Connie said...and then...then they broke...it was my fault." The crying began again and Ezra felt his anger spark from a slow burning ember into a flickering flame.

"No, no, no!" Protested the Southerner softly, his voice barely more than a whisper. "You did just fine, darlin', just fine." He switched easily to German, murmuring reassurances to the teenager but his face had taken on a hard expression as he silently made a promise to himself to pay back to Connie van der Schoor every moment of misery she had caused the young girl who clung to him now as if he too might abandon her.

He looked up as Buck's voice crept syllable by syllable into his awareness and he wondered how long he had been in that state of disconnection that he sometimes found himself drifting into. A particular talent that he had discovered during and, even moreso, after he had come so close to losing his life but instead had lost the trust of his peers, his career and with it his self-respect. His therapist had labelled it a coping mechanism; he had been inclined to think of it as a coping-out mechanism. Either way he had found a place where no one else could reach him-unless he let them. The world came abruptly back into focus and he realised that Lisa was looking up at him

with concern and Buck was raised up on one elbow, his expression mirroring that of the teenager. “Ezra? Jesus, man! What’s up with you?” His expression softened and he wiped the sweat from his forehead with the back of his hand. “Feel like I’d get more sense out of a fence post!”

Standish took no offence and gave instead a wry smile. “You could be right,” he agreed amiably, “but a fence post wouldn’t be able to save your ass when the time comes.”

Wilmington laughed and lay down again. “And you are?”

Ezra gave a quiet sigh and unconsciously drew Lisa closer to him again. “Just watch me, Buck. Just watch me.”

It had been said almost casually but with the quiet intensity and firm conviction that Buck was gradually coming to understand meant the Southerner was more than a little ticked off. He had seen Ezra react similarly several times in the preceding weeks and he suddenly knew that it was not just an idle boast; clearly he had no intention of just sitting back and passively letting events unfold but was committing himself to a particular course of action. Buck knew he would feel better if he just had some idea of what it might be. Standish did not exactly come with a history of being a team player and Buck hated surprises. Wilmington lowered himself back to the ground and closed his eyes. It bothered him in some ways that Ezra had not once followed the stereotypical role that Buck had mapped out in his own mind for him, and the label he had so neatly attached to the former federal agent just wouldn’t stick. Now, he was beginning to think that Ezra Standish was not someone who could be quite so easily pigeonholed, and that the man he presented for the world to see was nothing more than an elaborately staged illusion.

It seemed a long time since he had been shot but he knew it could be no more than a few hours. Not that he felt any better now than he had then. At first the pain had been acute as first one, then another, bullet tore into his leg but shock and the physical trauma of the injuries had quickly numbed his appreciation of it. Now it had become constant, like a nagging toothache and it was just as impossible to ignore. He had seen his fair share of gunshots but had still been amazed at how much blood could pour from such small wounds; then he reasoned that maybe it just looked worse when it was your own. One thing he did know beyond any doubt was that he’d lost more than enough for him to be feeling all the classic symptoms of shock and that, to put it mildly, he wasn’t holding up quite as well as he’d like.

“Ezra?”

“Right here.” And he was. His nearness startled Wilmington and he wondered with a sudden stab of fear if he had lost consciousness for a few seconds. Calmly, in spite of his galloping heart-rate, he reaching out and closed his hand around the Southerner’s wrist.

“Ezra...sorry...can’t back you up in this.” He took a deep breath, neither wanting to admit or utter the next words. “You’re on your own, pard.”

Standish smiled at him then; a lopsided half-smile that suggested he had just heard a joke that wasn't quite funny. "As always. Mr. Wilmington."

Buck looked for a long moment into veiled eyes that revealed nothing at all of the man and with a sudden chill that he wanted to believe was merely a by-product of shock, decided that if it were true that the eyes were the window to the soul then Ezra Standish didn't have one. The smile was irony itself and Buck felt, for the first time since they had met, the cold reality of the Southerner's isolation. He truly believed that he was on his own.

"Chris won't be sitting on his ass, you know," he said softly, not letting go of Ezra's wrist, "but he'll be needing all the time you can give him."

After a moment's hesitation, Standish nodded but anything he might have been going to say was lost as his head swung up, eyes narrowing, in response to the abrupt and forceful opening of the shed's door. Instead he freed himself from Wilmington's grip with a deft twist of his hand and slowly stood up. Buck turned his head, suddenly apprehensive in his vulnerability, as he watched first the brawn, then the brains of the operation move into the confines of the shed. This time a surprisingly subdued Connie brought up the rear while the man he thought of as the Guevara-clone seemed to be taking charge and although the man was an unknown quantity his instincts warned him that the development was not likely to be for the better. The Dutch woman was playing games; this man had the lean and hungry look of someone who knew his business. The only thing that puzzled Buck was why he had so far been content to stay in the background and give Connie van der Schoor the reins.

He became conscious of Ezra standing over him and although he disliked the feeling of surrender that being on the floor gave him, he knew had no choice in the matter; he could not have made it to his feet to save his life. The fact that it may well come to that did nothing at all to ease his mind. The Southerner had an almost bored expression on his face as he stood with his hands held loosely at his sides and kept a steady eye on the two main players. For someone who had just had just had a taste of what they had to offer and come out of it with a broken finger, Buck had to admit the guy had balls. Although, he mused, judging from the way van der Schoor was looking at him, he might not have them for much longer.

"No handcuffs?"

Ezra shrugged. "I'm practicing for a career in escapology."

"You're a bastard."

The Southerner smiled engagingly and inclined his head in amused agreement. "So I've been told."

"I will not be made to look like a fool..."

"That's not exactly a challenge, darlin'."

She started forward, her eyes glittering with anger, but the man beside her waved her back with a

sharp command. “*Suficiente!*” If Buck had any doubts before as to who might be calling the shots, the speed of Connie’s response as she held fast made it quite clear. The man studied the three hostages for several moments without speaking, his eyes flat and expressionless as they passed over each one of them, finally coming to rest on Ezra.

“So, I have three hostages instead of one. What are you worth, American?”

“Me? Well, that depends on just who you talk to. Mother may be a little put out if anything should happen to me and she is married to an Italian Count, not that a title means a great deal these days; after all he could be penniless...”

“I’ll tell you what you’re worth,” snapped the younger man, impatient with not only the Southerner’s long drawn out reply but his obvious lack of respect. “No more than the price of a bullet.”

“That much? Well, I’m flattered.”

Wilmington remembered thinking earlier that Standish had a death wish. Now he was sure of it. Not enough that they were in the lion’s den, now Ezra insisted on prodding the lion with a stick just for the hell of it. He was just fortunate that this time the lion didn’t bite, instead the reptilian eyes slid away from the Southerner and his gaze focused on Lisa. He hefted the satellite phone in one hand and smiled, showing even white teeth in a feral grin.

“Come, *querida*. Your father is waiting to hear from you. And this time you will say only what you are told. No more, no less.” He glanced pointedly at Standish. “I would hate to have to break another finger...”

Lisa glanced anxiously at her bodyguard but Ezra took her by the shoulder and moved forward with her. “Don’t worry. Just take your time, honey,” he murmured, stretching out the words, “and do exactly as they say. You hear me?”

The teenager gave him a long look then nodded. She had not only heard but had understood.

Not unexpectedly, Ezra found himself being shoved away from Lisa and roughly held by two of the kidnappers; a show of force for Lisa’s benefit rather than any attempt to intimidate him but which nonetheless sent his pulse bounding and his thoughts racing. He took a deep, calming, breath and pushed down his rising sense of panic as he forced himself to relax, controlling his first, urgent, instinct to try and break free. It was only by a huge effort of will that he succeeded in conquering the suddenly overwhelming dread of being physically restrained, channelling his wayward thoughts to focus sharply on the here and now rather than on a past that was rushing back, uninvited, to fill every corner of his mind. Breaking out in a sweat that had nothing to do with the oppressively moist heat in the shed, he reminded himself that this was different. This was not New Orleans. Yet he could not forget the casual indifference with which the goon on his left had earlier broken his finger, or the callous disregard with which Buck had been shot, and in the pit of his stomach he felt

the rippling visceral thrill that he recognised, only too well, as fear.

The leaden clouds that had been massing overhead, building steadily since midday, had finally loosed a torrential downpour that, within minutes, had turned the unpaved roads into snaking rivers of glutinous mud. The Montero skidded and twitched in spite of its all terrain tyres, losing traction on the slick surface and taking all Tanner's skill to keep the heavy vehicle moving forward instead of following a natural inclination to obey the laws of physics and drift sideways. The Texan was keeping the SUV on the limits of adhesion, cursing the badly cracked and starred windshield that distorted his forward vision but at the same time relieved that it was still intact. The wipers were barely coping with the deluge and he had been forced on more than one occasion to resort to leaning out of the side window to safely navigate the treacherous roads. Soaked by the driving rain he could only imagine what it would have been like if the windscreen had shattered completely, leaving them fully exposed to the elements, and decided that he was about as wet as he wanted to be. His knee was hurting badly now, tested to its limits as he was forced to perform a finely choreographed dance across the pedals, tapping brake and accelerator, stabbing at the clutch as he deftly worked through the gears with the studied, self-assurance of a man who knew exactly what he was doing.

Initially he had been able to follow the deep tyre treads left by the truck, the trail leading south and back towards Cobán, but then the rain had come and with the roads turning rapidly into muddy rivers, it was impossible to tell which direction the vehicle might have taken, the evidence washed away and the opportunity to follow lost with frustrating ease. With no realistic alternative left open to them, Chris had made the decision to continue on to the town, finally facing the hard reality that they were powerless to do anything more than wait to be contacted again by the kidnappers. Since then, Larabee's mood had been subdued and there had been little conversation in the vehicle. Vin had noticed that Chris, silent and brooding, had not taken his eyes off the phone, which was now slotted into its bracket in the dash, as if willing it to ring.

Braking hard for a corner, the Texan winced and swore under his breath as he felt a stab of pain in his knee, flicking a glance first to his right and then in the rear view mirror, but no one seemed to have noticed. Nathan had been less than enthusiastic about him driving in the first place but he felt obliged to get them back to Cobán in the shortest possible time. He knew that he was going to suffer once he stopped driving and that it was adrenaline more than analgesia that was dulling the pain but for now, he was the one at the wheel. At the back of his mind, he blamed himself for the ease with which the kidnapping had gone down. Goddamn it! He had driven straight into a trap. What the hell had he been thinking? He should never have stopped. Not even for Connie. Especially not for Connie, he amended bitterly.

“You doin’ okay, Vin?”

Tanner quickly turned, before swinging his full attention back to the road, caught off guard by Larabee’s quiet questioning. “Yeah. No problem.” From the corner of his eye he could see Chris studying him and he let part of his mind consider what was coming next.

“It’s no one’s fault, Vin.”

Tanner negotiated a double bend, changing down the gears and letting the Montero drift before accelerating and kicking up a spray of mud as the tyres fought for purchase. That was the last thing he had expected.

“I know,” he answered truthfully, after a pause to think over his reply, “but I can’t help thinking that if I hadn’t been dumb enough to get myself knocked out, that maybe I could’ve made a difference.”

“Maybe,” agreed Chris, still thoughtful, “But you could’ve made yourself dead too and it doesn’t matter how many times you think about it, ain’t gonna change nothin’.”

“Nope, guess not.” He spun the steering wheel to counter another skid and kept staring straight ahead. “Should’ve known better than to stop.”

“So why did you?”

Vin’s mind raced at light speed. He was sure he had reported his unscheduled halt, then remembered that he had never got to make the call to Josiah and in the confusion afterwards it had not occurred to him to offer the information—something he blamed on his lapse into unconsciousness -- and no one had asked. He cast a guilty glance at Chris and felt a sinking in his stomach. “Shit.”

“Vin?” A quiet prod.

“I stopped because Connie said she was gonna barf; I hit the anchors and she was out almost before the wheels stopped turning.” The admission pained him as the implications sank in. He had been well and truly suckered. “Buck went to check on her.”

Larabee rubbed his temples as if he was getting a headache. “Jesus.”

Tanner struck the wheel with the heel of his hand. “Damn! How could I forget that?”

A firm brown hand rested on his shoulder, and Nathan leaned forward between the two men. “It’s called concussion, Vin,” he murmured quietly, “Which is another reason you shouldn’t be driving.”

The Texan threw back an irritable: “Yeah, yeah,” and focused on the road ahead. The medic had been on his case since he had taken the wheel, refusing to accept Vin’s assurances that he was fine. So, his knee was a problem and he had a headache that seemed to start somewhere behind his eyes and travel the length of his spine, but he had no intention of surrendering the drive to Josiah. At least not yet.

Jackson turned to Larabee with a slight frown creasing his forehead. “Looks like our pretty little

Dutch-girl is in this good and deep, huh?"

"Yeah," sighed Chris, almost reluctantly, "Looks like it."

"So what do we do now?" asked Nathan, "We lost 'em."

Vin knew Nathan didn't mean anything by the offhand comment, although the words stung the Texan's pride. They hadn't lost them, because they had never found them. Pursuit of the kidnappers had never realistically been an option, Vin had merely followed in their wake in the scant hope that luck would be on their side and, if nothing else, grant them a few clues as to the truck's direction. Trailing by a good twenty-five minutes, they had known the chance of learning anything useful was remote and in spite of Vin's best efforts to close the gap between the fleeing truck and the 4WD, they had not sighted another vehicle in the last hour.

Chris made a face that suggested he was unhappy about what he was about to say next. "We wait. We wait for them to make contact again. We negotiate and buy ourselves some time, but we do whatever they want, give 'em anything they ask for, because in the end they call the shots. They call the shots because they've got us by the balls."

"So, we go to the police in Cobán, right?"

"For what it's worth, yes."

"And we let them deal with it?"

Larabee frowned and gave Jackson a hard look. "Not a chance."

"You don't think we're gonna be treading on a few toes here if we get involved? I mean this is not our turf."

Chris rounded on the medic, anger breaking through at last. "Involved? Fuck it, Nathan! Who's side are you on!"

Unoffended, Nathan held up a placatory hand. "Whoa, Chris. Just playing devil's advocate here. This is not Boston. Reckon we ain't gonna be too welcome if we try to interfere in what should be a local investigation."

"Mr. Jackson is correct."

Vin didn't think he was the only one surprised to hear Hengst's voice butt into the conversation and he glanced quickly at the German through the rearview mirror. So far, he had said very little, and Tanner had not figured out if it was cold fury because he was holding them all responsible for the ease of Lisa's kidnapping or because he was hiding his own shock and grief behind a wall of Teutonic stoicism.

"This could become very..." He paused for a moment before continuing. "...political."

"All the more reason to do this our way, Mannfred," interrupted Josiah, firmly, "Wheels have a way of turning very slowly here. Kidnapping in Guatemala is not unusual and even with a foreign national involved I don't think there are the resources to spare. If we don't do something, there's a

good chance that no-one else will. Or at least, not until it's too late."

Hengst seemed to slowly collapse in on himself, his rigid posture suddenly relaxing and his shoulders slumping in despair, and when he spoke his voice held a note of quiet desperation. "But this is my daughter." For a moment the German's pain was a tangible thing felt by every man present, his grief rolling off him in waves, then he sobered and gathered his dignity around him like a cloak before looking straight at Larabee. "Understand this, I will pay any amount to have Lisa returned to me safely, " he drew a deep breath, "but I will also pay to have these people brought to justice."

Vin almost missed a gear. Jesus! Hengst was expecting them to be frigging bounty hunters now. He stole a glance at Chris, wondering what the blond man's response would be, as he steered the big SUV onto the asphalt of the Cobán highway and felt the relief of having the tyres grip onto a soiled surface at last.

"We're bodyguards, Manfred, we're not hired guns." Larabee's voice was quiet but the rebuke was unmistakable.

Hengst inclined his head slightly, the merest gesture of acknowledgement. "Forgive me, I have insulted you."

Chris raised his eyebrows and the hint of what might have been a smile played at the corners of his mouth. "Only by offering me money."

The businessman leaned back with a curt nod and an oddly satisfied expression and Vin, studying the man's reflection in his mirror, guessed that Hengst was a man used to getting exactly what he wanted, but it crossed the Texan's mind that perhaps this time he had found something-or someone-that no amount of money could buy.

"There's no doubt in my mind that Lisa will be returned unharmed, provided the ransom demands are met," sighed Chris, "Kidnapping is a particular talent of the Central Americans and the motive is never complicated - it's money. They look upon it as a financial transaction."

Nathan leaned forward. "But?"

Chris glanced quickly at the medic. "But I doubt Ezra and Buck were ever part of the equation."

"Not likely," agreed Josiah, "I've been thinking myself what could be the reasoning behind that? Bad move if you ask me."

"Very bad. In fact I think someone screwed up big time. My worry is how long they'll be prepared to keep them around."

"You think they will be killed?" Hengst sounded alarmed at the prospect.

"It's a possibility. Or maybe just dumped somewhere. No telling what they might do."

Vin focused on his driving, trying not to think about either scenario and suddenly wondering if he had made the right career choice. Beside him, Chris stared straight ahead through the water-

beaded windshield, his lean face reflecting some of his unease. "I just know that if we don't look after our own, no one else is going to."

There was a subdued silence for a minute or two, his words weighing heavily on each man, then Hengst leaned forward and put his hand on Larabee's shoulder. "I understand. And I give you not only my word but all the resources at my disposal to see this is done." He smiled although his heart was obviously not in it. "Also I think Lisa would never forgive me if I permitted any harm to come to Mr. Standish."

With a jolt, Tanner remembered that the German had offered Ezra a lucrative contract to stay on after this assignment as a personal bodyguard to the Hengst family. It was exactly the type of job many bodyguards dreamed of and rarely found but the Southerner had said little to anyone about it except that he would keep his options open. One thing was for sure, he did have a great rapport with the kid, she obviously idolised him and Vin could easily see the Southerner fitting in perfectly with the German family. Hell, he even spoke the language. Fact was, it was probably too good an opportunity for anyone to pass up, yet he found himself hoping that Ezra would.

"Someone wanna give me that phone?"

Vin looked in the rear-view mirror and gave a smile. "Hell, JD. Forgot you were back there."

"Yeah, well some of us are working 'stead of talking," came the good natured, if abrupt, response.

"But I need to hook up the phone to the computer."

Chris reached for the handset, then hesitated and turned to look at JD. "What's wrong with your unit?"

"That is my unit."

Vin did a double take. "No, that's mine."

Dunne shook his head. "I know that's the one I had. Look at the serial number, Chris. It ends in six-seven-three, right?"

Larabee checked. "That's the one." He surrendered the phone to Josiah, who relayed it to Dunne in the rearmost seat. "So where's the second unit?"

Vin struggled to remember. He had started to call Josiah, and that had been just before the landslide blocked the road and the bullet had punched a hole in the windscreen. He had no idea whether he had dropped it or not. Another one of those frustrating gaps in his memory.

"I think I had it in my hand when I dived out of the door. I was trying to make the call to you and Josiah..." He stopped, no longer sure of anything. "Maybe I dropped it. I don't remember."

A quick but thorough search of the SUV turned up nothing and Chris finally conceded that there was but one other possibility. "Or maybe it was taken."

"It could be still back at the landslide," suggested Jackson, "Vin could've dropped it when he took that fall."

Larabee shook his head, and thoughtfully gnawed at his lip. “We went over that area with a fine tooth comb, Nathan. One of us would’ve found it.”

“You think they have it?”

“That’s my guess. Probably took it from Vin when he was out cold.” He gave a short, bitter laugh.

“Now that’s real cute. They call us using our own phone and we get the bill!”

Tanner’s stomach lurched and he felt for a moment as if he might be sick. “I’m sorry, Chris. I didn’t...”

Chris gestured impatiently at the driver, his voice sharp as he interrupted. “Christ, Vin, listen to yourself will ya? You’ll be apologising for fucking breathing next! Cut yourself a little slack, huh?” Vin’s mouth snapped shut in surprise and he felt himself flush in sudden embarrassment but no one seemed to be paying him any attention as Larabee continued. “These bastards may just have given us a break. JD? These phones can be tracked right?”

“Sure, they work on GPS and are also fitted with a tracking chip. Beam goes up to the satellite and is relayed from there, we pick it up on the screen here. The software’s the same as we use for the vehicle tracking.”

“So, you can do it?”

“I can do it,” affirmed Dunne, barely able to conceal his excitement, “but I don’t have the maps for this region. The system is only set up for Guatemala city.”

“How long?”

“I’m on it now, Chris.”

Larabee nodded, not doubting Dunne’s ability to get the job done for a moment.

Josiah laughed softly. “So if they are using the sat phone to make the calls...”

“And there’s no reason to believe they’re not...”

“Then the next call they make, they’ll be broadcasting their position.” Sanchez was positively beaming. “It’s beautiful.”

Hengst looked eagerly at Larabee. “This is good. They have made their first mistake.”

Chris smiled coldly. “Their second mistake.”

The German frowned. “And their first, Mr. Larabee?”

“Fucking with me.”

Cobán. Chris had not thought to revisit this place but circumstances had dictated otherwise and now, as he considered his next move, the modest town seemed somehow less picturesque and decidedly less friendly. That they were Americans would not carry any weight here; in fact, if anything, it could make things more difficult. He doubted there would be any sympathy for them from the authorities whatever official stance they might take, and US government policy left no

room for interpretation; no negotiation with kidnapers. They were on their own and the right of negotiation lay with them as did the decision to pay any ransom. Hengst already carried insurance for just that eventuality, as did any sane company conducting business in Central and South America, but his own men were outside the terms of that policy. So they would go through the motions of dealing with the Police Nacional Civil, perhaps the Servicio de Investigacion Criminal would get involved, as would the German and American embassies, but when it came down to it the kidnapers would make their demands and they would negotiate a settlement. However, money was the least of their worries; Larabee's only concern was getting both Lisa and his men back alive and he would not, could not, allow himself to consider any other other outcome.

Lodgings in Cobán were modest, the biggest of the hotels boasting something like 15 rooms but they needed somewhere to base themselves and as long as the place had running water, indoor plumbing and took credit, Chris was not going to waste time checking star ratings. Their basic needs included power and a phone line for JD's computer hardware, nothing else was of any importance and, after a very long hour spent with the national police, being subject to aggressive questioning and making statements made complicated by the differences in language, it was a question of any port in a storm. They had been interrogated both collectively and individually, and the fact that they were armed created its own unique set of problems. Hengst spoke reasonable Spanish but Chris' own mastery of the language was restricted to a few choice phrases that he had been sorely tempted to use on several occasions but which he hardly thought would be appreciated by the police. Their details had been duly noted, permits checked and double checked, calls made to Guatemala City and they were eventually allowed to leave but Chris knew they had done nothing to win themselves any allies in the tense exchange. The incident would be duly investigated but the implication was that they would be lucky if they ever saw the abandoned Montero again and it would be a miracle if any of their possessions were recovered. He didn't think it was wise to tell them he didn't give a damn about either.

The inn was at clean, comfortable and air conditioned but it was obvious that no one gave a good goddamn about the quality of the accommodation. The host had given them adjoining rooms yet the six of them had gathered in one as if it was an unspoken agreement that they should remain together but the atmosphere was charged with tension and talk was confined strictly to business. Chris had to admit that he was impressed with the remaining four bodyguards, struck by their quiet professionalism and the acceptance that they still had a job to do although they were all clearly stunned by events. That they took the kidnapping as a personal affront was obvious, and Chris was going to put that to the best use he possibly could. Looking at Vin, he could see the signs of strain in the younger man. The Texan was not only carrying injuries, he was also shouldering far more of the burden for the kidnapping than any one man should. There was not much he could do about the

guilt, Vin would have to work through that on his own, just as he would have to, but right now there was no room for indulging in either regrets or remorse. They still had a job to do and recriminations would have to wait. For now his interest in Tanner was strictly concerned with his physical state. He was aware that Jackson shared his concern, but where his gentle badgering had failed to sway the stubborn Texan, Chris had issued him a non-negotiable directive and Vin had grudgingly peeled off his damp shirt before stretching out his lean frame on the bed. In less than five minutes he was asleep and Larabee wondered then if it was Vin's nature to try and keep the motor running way after the needle had passed empty.

JD had set up his computer hardware in one corner, commandeering the phone line for the modem, and Chris could hear the soft, rapid clicks as his fingers struck the keys, knowing the youngest member of the team had his own particular burden to carry. A hell of a lot was riding on his expertise and Chris knew he had just turned up the pressure another notch. He just hoped the kid would come through. Oddly enough, Buck had been the one to push for him to take Dunne on and he had done it, against his own misgivings that JD's youth and inexperience in the field was going to be a big hurdle to overcome, but without doubt the kid was an IT savant and now it occurred to him that it was the height of irony that it might be JD's technical wizardry that saved Buck's ass. Not only Buck. Ezra and Lisa were in that equation too. He thought of the blood soaking into the Guatemalan dirt and rubbed his temples, suddenly aware of the headache that was steadily pounding behind his eyes.

"Mr. Larabee."

Chris looked up. Hengst. Shit. What did you say to a man who had just watched as his only daughter was snatched from a team of highly paid bodyguards who had failed to protect her? His team. His failure.

He was surprised when the German put a cup of steaming coffee in his hand and gave a tired smile.

"You look as though you might need this."

"Thanks." Chris sipped the strong brew and looked at the German, who could easily be a darker reflection of himself. "You know I wouldn't blame you if you wanted to take a swing at me."

Hengst tilted his head and, after looking critically at the blond man for a moment, shrugged. "To what purpose? It is true I feel anger, but not towards you. It is a measure of your team's skill and dedication that Lisa still has two of your men with her."

Chris did not like to admit that he still had no idea how Ezra and Buck had come to be a part of the kidnapping or if they had been given a choice. He did not know Ezra well enough to second-guess his actions but by some means both the Southerner and Buck had avoided being summarily killed at the scene of the abduction and instead had become, either willingly or unwillingly, hostages. Now, every minute that passed, he wondered if they were even still alive. This was a country where life

was cheap and kidnapping, torture and execution were commonplace. He doubted very much if the lives of two American bodyguards would be considered very valuable at all.

“I know that Buck and Ezra will do all they can to ensure her safety.” He knew it sounded like some line from a sleazy politician at a press conference but he had no more to offer.

Hengst locked his gaze with Larabee’s. “Why do they not call? It has been hours since the last one.”

“I don’t know,” answered Chris, truthfully, “but believe me, they will call. It’s a game; they want to make you sweat.”

The German ran a trembling hand distractedly through his hair; the first real indication of stress that Chris had seen in the man. “They won’t hurt her will they?”

Jesus! The sixty-four thousand dollar question. He took the easy way out. “I don’t know, Manfred, and that’s no lie. But let’s not start going down that road just yet. There’s no reason for them to do her any harm if you do as they say and right now that’s going to be the plan.” He set his cup down and rubbed the back of his neck. Back to business. “You’ve talked to your insurer?”

“Yes. They recommend getting in a negotiator.”

“I hope we won’t need one. Not if we can move fast enough.”

Hengst looked pointedly around the room, a slight twitch of his eyebrow eliminating the need for him to say anything. In response Larabee started to move away his expression darkening. He hardly needed reminding of the currently static situation. “I take your point, but we can’t move until we have something to go on.” He crossed to Dunne in a few strides. “So what’s happening?”

JD flicked an errant strand of lank hair out of his eyes and looked up. “I need the maps, Chris. Without them we’re fucked.” He kept his voice low, his tone at odds with his expression which remained hopeful.

“So what’s the problem?” Chris rested one arm on the back of the chair, the other on the small table and peered at the laptop’s flat screen.

“The download. I keep losing the goddamn connection.”

“How long?”

JD pointed to a box on the taskbar reading 67% and as Chris watched an icon in the system tray suddenly started flashing and Dunne swore. Larabee didn’t need a degree in computer science to know what it meant and he gave the younger man’s shoulder a reassuring squeeze. “Just keep trying, kid.”

Chris felt an uneasy flutter in his gut and forced himself to accept the reality that they were going to run out of time and if they lost even one opportunity to fix on the phone, then they had lost one of the few advantage they were ever likely to have. He told himself it was a long shot anyway. Would anyone be stupid enough to make a call from a stolen satellite phone which could so easily

be traced and whose calling location could be pinpointed to within 16 metres? He ran a hand over his face and took a deep breath. He sincerely hoped so.

They had waited so long that the sound, when it came, was greeted with a moment of stunned disbelief in which no one moved, although every eye had immediately fixed on the black handset as its intrusive ring-tone demanded instant acknowledgement. By the third ring Chris had swung into action, cueing Hengst to be ready and nodding to Dunne as he picked up the phone and thumbed the TALK button.

“Larabee.”

“I must speak with my father.”

“Lisa? Are you okay?”

There was a slight hesitation. “I can only speak with my father.”

Chris sighed and surrendered the phone to the German, careful to avoid snagging the wire now connecting the unit to the laptop sound recorder. They may not be able to trace the origin of the signal this time but it was still worth recording the call, if not for the remote chance of a clue presenting itself, then for evidence. That Lisa was on a tight rein was already obvious from her stilted exchange with him. The kid was scared and he wondered with a lurch of his stomach what the repercussions had been for her earlier indiscretions. He felt a deep sense of guilt for having put Lisa at risk with his questions, which he knew would be outside the parameters of what the kidnapers’ expected, but he had taken a gamble that the girl was too valuable for them to harm and he had needed to know if Buck and Ezra were still in the picture.

Hengst was talking. Short bursts of German that seemed to be going nowhere. Chris did not know anything of the language but he knew when someone was being continually interrupted and he guessed Manfred had not yet managed to complete a sentence. He turned as JD nudged his elbow; flashing Dunne a quick smile as the young bodyguard offered him the headphones. Smart kid. As the tech controller he had the right to monitor the call but was deferring to Chris, more than likely because he was notoriously bad at keeping his frustration under wraps in any situation where he felt as if he was out of the loop. No wonder Buck accused him of being a control freak. He quickly pushed aside any thoughts of his friend and, cupping one half of the headphones over his right ear, he immediately felt some of the tension dissipate as he heard Lisa’s voice, woodenly reciting in English what was obviously a prepared statement. Tight rein indeed. They were leaving no room for anyone to run interference this time round.

“...one million American dollars in cash. There will be no negotiation. You will deliver the money in person to La Aurora airport in two suitcases which you will check in as unaccompanied baggage

under your own name en route to LAX. We will be in contact again with details. Once the money has been secured, you will be supplied with the information necessary to locate your daughter. Come alone. You have forty-eight hours to comply.”

Chris signalled Hengst, and quickly scrawled: Ezra and Buck, on a piece of paper.

“What about the other hostages?”

There was a moment of silence then a whispered exchange before Lisa spoke again, her voice wavering. “There will be no negotiation. We will contact you.”

“Lisa...”

A click and silence.

Chris threw the headphones down and swore. “Shit!”

Hengst sighed and hung his head. “I’m so very sorry, Mr. Larabee.”

Nathan rose slowly from where he had been sitting at the foot of one of the beds and took a few steps forward. The biggest of his team, Jackson suddenly seemed to be taking up more than his fair share of space. “Something tells me I’m not going to like what you’re gonna say next, Chris.”

Larabee wheeled and walked to the window, turning his back on the room as he stared out at a setting sun. “No, you’re not but it doesn’t alter what we have to do, or the way in which we do it.”

He didn’t have to look to know what impact his words were going to have on the four bodyguards in the room. “It seems Buck and Ezra...are expendable. They are not going to be part of the deal.”

“Chris. We can’t just...”

“Can’t just what?” Larabee snapped, not needing to hear what they all feared; that they might be forced into sacrificing their own to save a client. He spun to face Nathan. “We have less than forty-eight hours to get our shit together. I can do whatever the fuck needs to be done to finish this job. What I need to know is, can you?”

“I’ll do anything you ask of me, Chris,” replied Jackson evenly, although the dark eyes reflected a cold anger Larabee had not seen in the medic before. “Except walk away from a buddy.”

Chris sighed deeply, struggling to keep his expression from betraying his own feelings. “I’m not asking you to, Nathan, but there are priorities to remember here. We’re not free agents anymore, we’re here to do a job and neither you, nor I, can afford to indulge in sentimentality.” He looked away, not prepared to meet the challenge in Jackson’s gaze. “And when you’re playing by someone else’s rules, a bad compromise might be the best you can hope for. And in this game, you sometimes lose!”

“Then we won’t play by their rules!”

Larabee gave a tired smile, privately gratified by Jackson’s stubborn loyalty to the team. In truth he would have been worried if no one had challenged him, but he had not missed the icy blast of collective condemnation aimed at him from around the room. A good team. They would look after

their own. “Well, let’s see if we can’t at least bend ‘em a little, huh?” He squared his shoulders and moved up behind Dunne at the computer, an aura of purpose replacing his momentary enervation. “JD, get to work on that sound byte, see if you can’t lift something useful. Oh, and try and get that download finished will you, we’re on a tight schedule here, kid. Josiah, I want you to keep trying IntelSat and get them onto doing something about this goddamn phone trace. Christ, we pay ‘em enough for the service! Nathan, I want you to start running a check on Connie van der Schoor, through any criminal and terrorist database you can get access to; call in a few favours from that CIA buddy of yours if you have to. Use the other laptop and hook it up to one of the cell phones.” He stopped abruptly, reading the unspoken question on Jackson’s face. “I don’t give a shit how much it’s gonna cost, Nathan, just do it! Vin, you’re with me. We’re going to do a bit of old fashioned leg-work.” He paused and looked at the Texan, who still had a cold pack held to his knee. “That’s if you’re up to it.” Tanner responded with a cursory nod and a slow grin, and Larabee moved on. “Mannfred, I guess you know what to do. The money’s not going to be a problem?”

Hengst shook his head. “No. No problem.”

“Good.” He scanned the room with a critical eye. No one had moved, caught off-guard by his sudden about-face. “Well, what are you waiting for? A goddamned engraved invitation?”

oooOOooo

Ezra slowly stirred the unappetising selection of food on his plate with a disposable plastic fork, reluctant to analyse its makeup too closely, and found his hunger was not nearly enough to convince him that he should eat. In fact the sight of the fatty meat, from God only knew what source, and unidentifiable sundries floating in semi-congealed gravy was enough to kill any hunger pangs he might have had. He decided that it would take more than a couple of skipped meals to induce him to eat what was on the plate in front of him. With a sigh he set it down on the floor and forced himself instead to bite into the still-warm flour tortilla. Lisa, he noticed, was carefully picking from her plate the pieces which seemed to be edible but most of the meal remained untouched and, like him, she finally gave up and settled for the tortilla as the safest option. Buck was not eating at all and, although Ezra could hardly blame him, he knew the reason for his loss of appetite had nothing to do with the appeal of the food.

As night had fallen they had finally been escorted outside and given the opportunity to relieve themselves. Connie had accompanied Lisa and the Southerner had silently agonised over every minute that she was gone, but the girl had smiled hesitantly when she came back and it was obvious she had been allowed some time to at least comb her hair and freshen up. A few minutes

later, following a brief discussion between van der Schoor and two of the guards, Ezra found himself obliged not only to help Buck to his feet but to take most of his weight as he found it impossible to put any pressure on his injured leg. Although barely able to stand, let alone walk any distance, it was obvious that no one was about to offer any assistance and Wilmington was not going anywhere independently; not even for toilet privileges. Buck had grinned at him.

“Looks like we get to do this together, pard.”

“Not exactly the way I would choose to demonstrate solidarity,” he had responded, wryly, as he shouldered more of the taller man’s weight and the two of them had moved awkwardly outside under armed guard.

The night had been alive with the sounds of the rainforest and the moist, tropical smell was heavy in the cooler evening air, its unique aromas as abundant as the myriad of insects that within seconds had found their unprotected skin. Ezra sighed, resigning himself to spending an unpleasant five minutes outdoors as he tried to ignore the mosquito bites, and moved to the place indicated by one of the guards with a casual wave of a torch beam; a primitive open latrine that the guards had evidently been using throughout the day. “Remind me to complain to the management regarding the quality of the facilities.”

Beside him, Buck had laughed. “Yeah, and you know, Ezra, we’ve gotta stop meeting like this. Ain’t quite a rest room in Luciano’s but wasn’t I the one holding you up last time?” He looked down at the shallow trench. “Reckon this place might be a bit cleaner if you passed out here though!” He started laughing again, barely able to get his next words out. “The floor in this establishment is disgusting and this is an Armani suit’. Geez, Ezra, I still can’t believe you said that.” Wilmington’s reminder of that particular event only seemed to emphasise the preposterousness of their current situation and Ezra felt his own laughter bubbling to the surface. The torch beams were an unwelcome distraction, allowing them no privacy as the two guards took a malicious delight in deliberately exposing the two men in a blatant attempt at humiliation as they urged them on with broad grins, crude gestures and catcalls. Buck had sighed heavily. “Kinda puts you off your stride, don’t it?” It was at that moment that the two of them had looked at each other and, recognising the utter absurdity of the scene, had finally lost it altogether. It had taken them a full five minutes to stop laughing.

That had been half an hour ago and the brief excursion, while very necessary, had cost Wilmington dearly. There was no mistaking that he was in a great deal of pain and although he had covered it well, Ezra recognised the moments when Buck retreated into strained silence that he was going through a bad time. The Southerner knew all about those bad times, and he knew everything there was to know about retreating. He also knew the limits to which the human body could be pushed before it could tolerate no more and by his estimation Buck had a long way to go yet. Shaking free

of a memory that had started to creep into his consciousness, he slid over to sit beside Buck and nudged him gently with an elbow.

“Not hungry?”

Wilmington opened his eyes and his gaze travelled from his own untouched plate to the one Ezra had pushed aside. “No more’n you.”

“Yes, well, I have a more refined palate, Buck, but I’ve never known you to pass on food.”

Buck gave a short laugh. “Even I draw the line somewhere.” He shifted restlessly, trying to get comfortable. “And now seems as good a time as any.”

“Wise decision.” Ezra uncapped a bottle of water and offered it to Wilmington. “Now drink.”

Without argument Buck took a long swallow and leaned his head back against the wall, staring up at the roof. When he spoke his voice was low. “We’re dead aren’t we?”

Ezra glanced quickly at Lisa before turning back to Wilmington, his own voice no more than a murmur. “Literally or figuratively speaking, Mr. Wilmington?”

Buck drank again. “D’you always have to be so frigging pedantic, Ezra?” It was said without heat and the Southerner’s lips twitched in a fleeting smile.

“So what is it you want from me? Confirmation?”

“Shit, I don’t know! Isn’t this where you’re supposed to contradict me or something?”

Ezra gently massaged his splinted fingers and stared dully at the makeshift bandage. “All right,” he sighed, “if that’s all it takes, consider yourself contradicted.”

“Well, thank-you, Mr. Silver-tongue Standish, I reckon after that I can now rest easy. No problemo.” Wilmington passed the water bottle back and for a brief instant the two men exchanged a look of understanding that transcended all differences between them. No pretence now; only the absolute certainty that they were both going to die.

The moment stretched, snapped back on itself, then passed, and Ezra experienced a curious sense of detachment, barely noticing that Lisa had quietly crept back to his side again and was leaning against him. His mind elsewhere, he mechanically slipped his arm around the teenager’s slight shoulders and found himself uttering softly in German the very reassurances he had been so quick to deny Buck.

They had wanted to him to beg for his life but some obstinate part of him had rebelled and his answer had been to spit at them instead. He had known then that the defiant gesture would cost him and he had paid for it. They had held him. He had rolled with that first punch, unable to defend himself with his arms restrained, but the explosion of raw pain had still ripped through his skull, and shaking his head after the blow he had been surprised when blood had sprayed in a wide arc from his nose and mouth. Through unfocused eyes he had seen the glint of brass across fisted knuckles and understood that there was no going back.

“Ezra?”

The Southerner’s heart leaped as Buck’s voice tore through the very fabric of his thoughts, startling him with its quiet urgency and, turning to Wilmington, he cursed his loss of concentration as he had been led unwillingly along the paths that wound so intricately through the darker recesses of his mind.

“Something wrong, Mr. Wilmington?”

“Just gonna ask you the same thing, man. You looked like you were gonna throw up.”

Ezra gave a tight smile. “Must have been something I didn’t eat.”

Buck gave him a long look and shook his head, not bothering to conceal his scepticism, but recognising this was not the time to push. Instead he adjusted the remains of his jacket more firmly under his knee, his face reflecting the strain of his show of independence. For a few minutes an awkward silence hung between them, Ezra having closed the other man out as effectively as if he had raised a drawbridge, then Buck gave a tired sigh and started picking at the dried blood under his fingernails.

“You know, Ezra, I told Chris he would be making a big mistake to take a chance on you.”

Ezra met the unexpectedly candid confession with a subtly cocked eyebrow. “Really?” It was hardly news to him. Buck had never bothered to hide his distrust. “I’d never have guessed.”

Buck ignored the sarcasm. “See, I heard a lot about you. Still know a couple Feds, and the word was that you were trouble with a capital T. No one better undercover but not a team player.” He hesitated. “I didn’t think you belonged in this kinda work. Didn’t belong with us.”

He paused but Ezra remained silent, his gaze fixed straight ahead, and after a few seconds Wilmington pressed on. “I did some checking around when it looked like Chris was gonna go all out to get you on board. Didn’t much care for what I was hearing and I thought, there’s gotta be something in this, I mean, there’s no smoke without fire...”

The Southerner gave a bitter laugh. “Fire and smoke? That would have been the Bureau flaming my ass.”

“But Chris looked right past all that. Didn’t wanna know any of it. You know what he said?”

“I’m sure you’re going to tell me.”

“He said you’d been shafted by your own and left with your ass hanging in the breeze, for doing a job that no one else wanted to touch. He couldn’t see the justice in that.”

Ezra knew Buck was telling the truth. Chris had said the same thing to his face.

“The thing is he didn’t know for sure either, but he followed his gut feeling, he trusted...”

“Buck,” interrupted Ezra, quietly, uncomfortable with the direction the conversation was taking.

“Why are you telling me all this?”

Wilmington finally made eye contact and gave a wry smile. “Damned if I know. I guess what I’m

trying to say is that...well, what I mean is...goddamn it! I was the one who made a mistake, not Chris. Never bothered to look any further than I wanted to see.”

“So what are you asking for, Buck? Absolution? Because that’s really not my area...”

“I’m not asking for anything, Ezra. Christ! I’m just saying I’m sorry. You might have your head up your ass sometimes...” He hesitated again. “... but I just want you to know that, however this turns out, you’re an okay guy.”

Ezra quickly schooled his expression to cover an unguarded instant of surprise. Whatever he had been expecting from Buck it had not been approval. He ducked his head for a moment, not even sure why the backhanded compliment should mean anything to him, but the truth was that it did and what was worse, he felt totally unequipped to deal with it. His only rational thought was that under other circumstances a bottle of bourbon and a couple of shot glasses would be welcome about now. With a sigh he rested his elbows on his raised knees and turned his head back towards Wilmington, a lopsided smile just curving his mouth.

“An apology, Mr. Wilmington? Maybe you’ve lost more blood than we thought. Perhaps you should lie down before you say something you truly regret.”

Buck grinned, although his skin looked waxy in the unforgiving light of the single low wattage globe burning overhead. “I think I already did.”

The Southerner laughed softly then, before his expression subtly shifted and his eyes took on a mischievous sparkle. “I guess if we’re tying up loose ends then I owe you one for that night at Luciano’s.”

The response was a puzzled frown. “The night you almost passed out in the men’s room? The one where you threw up over my best pants? What the hell for?”

Ezra flicked the collar of his crumpled and sweaty shirt with a casually elegant gesture and winked, his smile suddenly broadening. “For at least saving the Armani.”

The temperature was dropping quickly now the sun was long gone and Ezra shifted away from the steel panels at his back as the chill started to seep through the thin fabric of his shirt, resting instead against a wooden crate that dug uncomfortably into his shoulder blades. He wasn’t sure which was worse. His jacket was at that moment covering Buck, which seemed a bit of a paradox to the Southerner considering that Wilmington was in the grip of fever moving restlessly as he slept, his face shiny with sweat. Ezra’s left side at least was warm as Lisa rested against him, utterly exhausted by the day’s events. The closeness to him, as she nestled into his side, seemed to offer at least an illusion of safety for the teenager. His own eyes felt gritty and he rubbed at them, slowly becoming aware of the deep, dull ache in his legs. He had been able to put the physical discomfort out of his mind for a long time, the natural buzz of adrenaline keeping the edge off any

pain but now, tired and with his body at its lowest ebb, he seemed to be feeling every abuse to which he had ever been subject, both past and present.

“Ezra?” She had been so still and quiet that he thought she had drifted off to sleep. “Daddy will give them the money won’t he?”

The Southerner tightened his arm and gave her a quick hug. “Course, darlin’. What makes you think he wouldn’t?”

“It’s a lot of money.”

Ezra felt a sudden tightening in his throat and a surge of affection for the girl, saddened that she should doubt her value against mere money. “Make no mistake, honey, your father would pay any amount to get you back.”

She wriggled slightly, one arm stealing around the Southerner’s waist as she pressed her cheek against his chest. “And once they have the money? They will let us go, won’t they?”

“You’ll be fine, Lisa,” he sighed, not lying but not directly answering her question either. “These people are just interested in getting the million dollars. They don’t want to hurt you.”

“No,” she whispered, “but they hurt you.”

“Lisa...” He hesitated, not sure what to say.

She turned her small face up to look at him, her expression serious. “And you know that Connie never keeps promises. If she says one thing she will do another.”

“Listen, honey. This is my promise; that in two days time you’ll be safely back with your Dad.”

The teenager rested her head against him again, her voice suddenly small and frightened. “I want to go home, Ezra.”

“I know, sweetheart, I know.” His hand absently stroked her fine, silky hair and he closed his eyes for a moment. I know just how you feel, kid.

He must have slept. It might have been thirty seconds or it might have been an hour but he came to with a feeling of disorientation and the sense that something was different; that something was not right. It was darker. The overhead light had been turned off and only a single hurricane lamp burned in one far corner throwing long and distorted shadows across the shed. Instantly alert, Ezra gently eased away from Lisa and, trying not to disturb the sleeping girl, lowered her head and shoulders carefully to the floor. She stirred and sighed but the movement was not enough to rouse her. He had no idea what he proposed to do, he just knew he wanted a little space around him. The metallic click of a rifle bolt sliding a round into the breech stopped any further movement and the hair on the back of his neck bristled as he calculated the weapon was no more than a few feet away from him on the right. That one of the guards had managed to get that close disturbed him; the possible purpose behind the action sent a chill down his spine.

“Thinking of going somewhere, hombre?” The voice was soft, oily and heavily accented.

Ezra made himself breathe again, keeping his voice even. “And where, exactly, would I be going?” A laugh. “Who knows these things? Maybe you have the itch you cannot scratch, no? The little girl, perhaps she stirs your manhood too? Too much the temptation right there in your lap.”

Ezra glanced quickly at Lisa and back to the voice, his stomach performing an intricate series of somersaults as, both offended and outraged, he tried to keep his natural inclination to beat the man to a bloody pulp in check. At this moment that particular course of action would serve no purpose except to get himself shot and, in so doing, leave Lisa totally unprotected, and that was the last thing he wanted to do. What the man was suggesting made him feel sick; his mind screaming in protest. She’s thirteen for God’s sake. The man moved, circling around in front of Ezra and allowing the light to illuminate him, the rifle steadied in the crook of his left arm with his finger still curled around the trigger. His gaze travelled to the sleeping teenager and he ran his tongue over his lips, his voice a whisper. “Sweet.” He made a crude gesture with his right fist and Ezra barely succeeded in restraining himself. As if sensing the Southerner’s intent he moved quickly round to the left, levelling the gun barrel to point at Ezra’s chest. At that distance even if he was no marksman he could hardly miss. “Forget it, man, or you be one dead Americano. No worry for you, I just want to borrow her. A few minutes is all...”

“You touch her, you son of a bitch, and I promise I’ll kill you.”

The guard laughed unpleasantly. “Empty words, señor. You will do nothing. You can do nothing.”

He nudged the girl with his foot. “Up!”

Lisa groggily pushed herself up onto her elbow, and the man roughly dragged her to her feet, never once taking his eyes, or the rifle, off Ezra. Confused and frightened, the girl started to struggle but he let go of her just long enough to slap her, the solid blow snapping her head back and, stunned, she sagged bonelessly against him. With a gap toothed smile, the man moved back, Lisa’s slight form like a rag doll in his grip.

She whimpered, a small, hurt sound that somehow circumvented the Southerner’s finely-honed instinct for self-preservation that for his whole life had served him so well and, with an inarticulate roar, he blindly launched himself at the guard. In the same moment, he registered the open-mouthed shock of his target and the deafening blast of the rifle discharging but it meant nothing to him as his shoulder connected with the man’s hip, and a second later he felt the solid impact of the landing. Grappling with the heavier built man, he shoved Lisa aside, snarling: “Go! Go!”, ignoring the sound of her crying as a knee connected viciously with his groin and he was forced to roll aside to protect himself. This close he cared nothing for the fact that the man was armed; the rifle would be almost impossible to bring to bear and Ezra had no intention of letting the man get far enough away from him to use it. He was going to kill him.

He had been dreaming. He knew that now, although for a while he had been able to escape the unpleasant reality of pain, fever and the corrupt smell of old blood that lingered in his nose. But now it all flooded back to him in full measure as he was jerked roughly out of a pleasantly erotic fantasy and into a living nightmare, by the unmistakable bark of a gunshot. Heart pounding from the abruptness of his waking and his body's natural response to danger, it took him a moment to adjust to the scene. One frantic moment of trying to interpret the sounds and violent movements that had erupted around him, knowing that it could only mean bad news. Cursing his delayed reflexes, he finally pushed himself up on one elbow, his head spinning as the sudden shift in position sent his blood pressure plummeting. His confusion was no less when a sobbing Lisa crawled to him out of the semi-darkness, making no sense as German and English tumbled out of her in a mangled torrent of words that not only reflected, but underscored, her terror. Twisting awkwardly because of his leg, he pulled her quickly to him and felt her trembling in his arms as he, at last, began to understand.

Two men grappled on the floor in a desperate contest of strength and will in which neither could afford to yield. It was a fight that Ezra could never win; whatever the outcome of this particular battle, the Southerner had already lost the war. There was no question though that, for now, Ezra had the upper hand. The potential that Buck had already seen, so many weeks ago on the practice mat, was evidently only a fraction of the violent power that the man was capable of unleashing. Whatever had triggered the fight, it had been enough to make Standish throw all caution to the wind, and that worried Buck. Ezra losing control was not something he could easily associate with the urbane and pragmatic Southerner but the evidence was right there before him, being played out in a vicious brawl. Buck absently murmured meaningless sounds in an effort to calm the teenager, but his eyes were fixed on the almost silent struggle unfolding a few feet away. Ezra was making every hit count, using every part of his body as a weapon, but his opponent fought with a frenetic energy driven by the instinct for self-preservation and even in the subdued light of the single lantern Buck could see that the Southerner had not escaped unbloodied.

The next moment the shed was flooded with blinding brightness and Buck shielded his eyes, squinting as his pupils shrank painfully in response to the sudden intense light, a split second before total chaos erupted. Ezra didn't stand a chance, but even with the odds stacked at six to one it didn't stop him from taking on all comers, and Buck found his own voice joining the confused and strident babble, urging Standish to quit. He felt no betrayal of the Southerner, only the force of his own fears that in a single, rash, act Ezra had stepped so far over the mark that he would pay for the infraction with his life. He came to his knees, ignoring the agony that exploded in his right leg, knowing that he was powerless to intervene but unable to remain as a mute witness on the

sidelines.

It took four of the kidnapers to subdue the bodyguard, but even with arms pinned and in a choke hold, he struggled against his captors with an insane ferocity that only invited a more violent response to his own unguarded aggression. Buck was no stranger to violence but he was disgusted by the casual brutality that finally brought the Southerner down, bloodied but still not beaten. Wilmington found himself willing Ezra to give in as his struggles weakened, wondering what was driving the man to keep fighting a lost battle. Christ, Ezra! Let it go. That Connie should be the one to finish it came as no real surprise to Buck. Stepping forward, her face a twisted mask of anger, she brought her arm back and delivered a savage blow to Ezra's face with such force that his head snapped sideways with a resounding crack.

"That's enough! One more move and I'll break both your fucking legs!"

The surrender was instantaneous. Glassy-eyed and open-mouthed, breathing heavily through blood-caked nostrils, he sagged bonelessly, no fight left in him. The Dutchwoman had, unknowingly, managed hit on the key that was guaranteed to bring out a reaction in the bodyguard, and Wilmington's own emotions tumbled in confused disarray as he imagined the backwash of the recent past coming back to swamp the Southerner. Buck found that his own chest was heaving and he felt a terrible combination of relief and dread as Ezra's head finally fell forward and he was still.

An uneasy hush descended, the sudden calm punctuated only by sounds of men recovering from intense exertion, and the quiet sobbing of a frightened teenager. Gradually, a murmur swelled to a hum and then to rapid-fire speech that quickly erupted into a verbal barrage with Connie at the hub. The victim of Ezra's assault was standing - just - and Buck thought from the odd angle of his right arm that it might be broken, a possibility that for a number of reasons delighted him; it would match his almost-certainly broken nose. In a perfect reproduction of the back-hander she had served to Ezra, she struck the already injured guard across the cheek, spitting out what Buck could only assume to be a reprimand. With a quick jerk of her head she dismissed him, and he shuffled away with the cowed expression of a condemned man.

Connie took a step forward and with a chilling gentleness lifted Ezra's chin. Buck had thought him unconscious but his eyes were open and he stared dully beyond the woman, his face slack as blood and mucus dribbled, unchecked, from his mouth. It was the face of a punch-drunk boxer who, having taken a king hit, is unaware that he should be out for the count. She let his head fall forward again, carefully stepping clear of the bloody spittle that had pooled on the floor as she slowly looked him up and down. His shirt was half open and untucked, its buttons missing, and his bared chest showed deep scratches in ragged furrows oozing bright drops of blood. She reached out to touch the welts, but if she had expected a response from the Southerner, she was disappointed.

“Let him go.”

The two men holding Ezra took a step back and hastily released him with a shove, one of them delivering a vicious knuckle-jab to the kidneys as a parting shot, as if half-afraid he would turn on them, but with a muted groan he sank slowly to the floor. On hands and knees he retched weakly, coughing and spitting to clear his mouth, one arm cradling his abdomen as the spasms tore through his body. With a smile that held no warmth, Connie raised one booted foot and resting the cleated sole against the Southerner’s ribcage, pushed the unresisting bodyguard to the floor. Apparently satisfied, she dismissed all but two of those remaining, then after taking a long, hard, look at the man at her feet, she turned smartly on her heel and strode away.

“Take care of him.”

Buck was suddenly aware of his own harsh breathing rasping in his ears and the soft, muffled sound of Lisa crying as she still clung to him with a quiet intensity. He felt dizzy and the shed greyed-out as he came dangerously close to passing out but, by sheer effort of will, he held on and the moment passed. Sucking in a long, deep breath he blinked the sweat out of his eyes. Jesus!

Ezra was a dead man. He had crossed the line and it was now no longer a matter of “if”, but rather a matter of “when” and worse perhaps, under the circumstances, “how”. At that precise moment Buck believed they would almost certainly finish the job they had already started and beat the Southerner to death without a second thought but as he looked on, it seemed that Connie’s instructions to take care of him didn’t include the coup de grace. At least not yet.

He managed to keep Lisa’s face averted, his hand gently cradling her head against his chest. She had seen enough already; she didn’t need to see anymore, but he couldn’t bring himself to look away. As he watched, he guessed the routine was not new to either of the men and they had about them an air of boredom as they roughly tightened plastic cable ties around the bodyguard’s wrists. No getting out of those with a spare key, pard, he thought grimly, recalling Ezra’s earlier trick, as they dragged a still unresponsive Ezra to his knees. If he was conscious he was going out of his way to make it hard work for them but Wilmington’s real concern was that the Southerner was already too far gone to care.

Buck had not paid any real attention to the length of doubled rope hanging from a massive pulley in the rafters. It had just been another piece of redundant equipment until one of the kidnappers tugged it free from where it was secured to a cleat on the wall and then suddenly it took on a significance that sent a chill through him. It was just a length of nylon rope but Wilmington’s heart missed a beat as his mind summoned an image that both frightened and sickened him. Oh, God, no. Not that.

He didn’t breathe again until, with jaded indifference, the older of the two men looped the rope through the cable ties binding Ezra’s hands before signalling his younger partner to take up the

slack. A hanging was obviously not on the morning's agenda. Instead Ezra was jerked to his feet like a poorly controlled puppet and as he was roughly pulled upright, arms above his head and toes just touching the earthen floor, Buck was beginning to wonder if anything of what was happening was even registering in Ezra's mind. The Southerner still showed no sign of resistance but one thing he knew for sure was that whatever Ezra was feeling now, it was nothing compared to what he would be feeling in another hour. By then it would be so much harder for him to breathe, his muscles in his legs and shoulders would be burning and cramping, and his arms would be beyond feeling. And Buck had no illusions that it was about to get any better, either for Ezra or for himself. With a great effort he turned his attention to Lisa and reminded himself that, come what may, the girl was his first priority.

She was obviously shaken but the tears had stopped and after a few moments she gently pushed herself away from his protective embrace. He watched as, red-eyed, Lisa shifted her gaze to stare sadly at Ezra and was acutely aware of the transformation in her young face as fear and uncertainty gave way to something hard and unforgiving. Something that not only suggested a strength of character but a formidable will as yet untapped. Her pale blue eyes slid back to him. "Someone will answer for this."

In that moment he understood that he had seen the last vestiges of her childhood evaporate before his eyes and suddenly he had no trouble in believing that this girl at his side was indeed Manfred Hengst's daughter.

Drained, Buck wearily lowered himself back to the ground. Without a doubt someone would answer for it, he just hoped that when the time came that he was still around to see it. Kidnapping in Guatemala automatically carried the death penalty; nothing the kidnappers could do, including murder, could make that sentence any harsher. Briefly closing his eyes, he slowly extended his injured leg, the action forcing him to breathe in short, sharp bursts at the savage intensity of the pain. The wound in his thigh was bleeding heavily again and he wondered what had happened to Connie's promise of attention. Irritation flared as he felt the terrible frustration of helplessness. Lying bitch! He quickly reined in his emotions, containing the rising flood of despair and anger, as he recognised the danger in surrendering to those feelings that would ultimately only wear his resistance down. It was all part of the game plan and he was damned if he was going to give in so easily. He drew another deep breath and let his eyes linger on the beaten and bloodied Ezra watching and waiting for any sign of movement; some indication at least that he was not as badly hurt as he looked. But the bodyguard's head was slumped forward on his chest, and the erratic rise and fall of his ribcage as he breathed was the only confirmation that he was even still alive. Finally, he looked away. Goddamn it, Chris! Where the hell are you?

He had retreated, drawing back further and further until he could detach himself from the physical being that was Ezra Standish then he had soared. No longer earthbound, his escape mirrored the same freedom he found so readily in flying. I have slipped the surly bonds of earth...It was so simple once you knew how. Empty the mind; push back the pain. Don't think. Don't feel. Retreat. A memory stabbed at his awareness and he recoiled, backing away from the evocative images that now streamed, unchecked, through his unfettered consciousness.

...It was cold yet he could feel the sweat trickling uncomfortably between his shoulder blades and from his armpits. He would admit to nothing; would say nothing. But whether he spoke up or remained silent was going to make no difference to the outcome. He had already been set up. Sold out. They knew who he was, why he was there, and neither his training or his accumulated experience in working undercover was going to be any preparation for a moment such as this. Whatever he said, or whatever he did, he knew now that he was as good as dead. The first blow when it came was almost a relief. Almost.

He couldn't breathe. Blood, warm and viscous, was filling his nose and mouth; choking him. Fighting for air, and struggling against the men who held him, he gagged as the brass-knuckled fist now connected solidly with his midsection and, eyes watering with pain and humiliation, he strained forward and retched violently. Mocking laughter rang in his ears as he was shoved roughly forward, his shoulder joints popping as he was forced down onto his knees, blood and mucus dribbling from his mouth and nose. A booted foot landed heavily in his left side and he felt something give but there was no time to consider if he might have broken a rib as he landed awkwardly on the floor and, realising his extreme vulnerability, tried to protect himself. A vicious kick aimed between his legs found its mark as another smashed into the base of his spine and with an inarticulate sound like a wounded animal, he drew up his knees and curled into a defensive ball. ...break your fucking legs.

He arched his back, his body lifting clear of the floor, every muscle drawn taut and his mouth open in a silent scream that ended in a short, sharp gasp of indrawn breath. Jesus Christ! The bastards had done it. Held him down and smashed his leg. Chest heaving as he sucked in desperately needed air, he knew that tears were leaking from the corners of his eyes; there was nothing he could do to stop that, but he would not give them the satisfaction of hearing him cry out. Sagging back to the floor, he swore raggedly between clenched teeth and struggled to regain some control over his irregular breathing. The numbing weight of a knee pinning his arm to the floor and crushing his bicep increased and he braced himself, recognising it as a signal that his ordeal was not yet over. He didn't scream.

Larabee was beyond sleep. His eyes felt gritty, and common sense told him that he should get some rest while he could but right now emotion was overruling intellect and sleep was the furthest thing from his mind. Shifting restlessly, he realigned the pillow with a irritable tug at its corner and, with a gusting sigh, turned to stare fixedly at the wall beside him. In less than an hour it would be daylight.

He couldn't remember when he had last felt so completely drained. Or so inadequate. Long hours of combined effort and energy had done nothing more than fill time and push them all to the brink of exhaustion. The few leads they had to follow had gone nowhere and, while the police had given assurances they were investigating the matter, the bottom line was that they had advised Hengst to pay up and go home. Unsurprisingly, the fate of the two bodyguards had drawn little interest. Chris's Spanish was basic but he hadn't needed an interpreter to figure that the apologetic Latin shrug with which his concerns had been dismissed, translated to a decidedly unsympathetic Central American version of: occupational hazard. While it was understandable that foreign bodyguards operating within traditional Guatemalan police jurisdiction created a certain level of resentment, he had found the casual indifference coupled with thinly veiled hostility hard to deal with and if not for Vin's tactfully worded intervention at that point he knew that he would, without any doubt, have blown a gasket.

After drawing a blank with the authorities, he and Vin had hit the streets. American dollars could buy almost anything and with frightening ease, from quality crack to two-bit whores, but more than once Chris found himself wishing he had Ezra's effortless facility with the language. He was looking for information and he needed it fast yet was constantly forced to struggle with any number of local dialects that bore little resemblance to the Spanish he had learned either in high school or picked up in the jungles of Nicaragua. Vin could barely get beyond *buenos noches* yet he had a streetwise savviness that Chris had quickly come to appreciate. But several hours and many dollars later they had still learned nothing. Except not to drink Gallo on an empty stomach.

A few feet away he could hear Vin, restive movements betraying the Texan's own state of wakefulness, and abandoning any further pretence that he was sleeping Chris rolled onto his back and swore. Just one word. A short, sharp, expletive that somehow managed to convey not only his frustration but also his growing fears.

"Yeah, just thinking that myself."

Vin's quiet response, touched as it was with a sardonic humour, triggered a brief smile and he reached out to flick on the bedside lamp, although he knew that the moment he made the simple gesture that there would be no going back. His day would have begun in earnest. He fixed his gaze on the younger man, who was already sitting up and reclining on stacked pillows against the

headboard, looking tired and drawn. "How's the knee?"

Tanner glanced up sharply. He had been quick to downplay his injury but Chris had already guessed that Vin was hurting a lot more than he wanted to admit. That he had quietly sought out Jackson within minutes of their return to the posada had been more than enough to fuel his concern, but now he had asked the question, he wasn't sure that he wanted to know the answer.

The response was a dismissive shrug. "Pretty much fucked. Nathan's guessing it's a torn ligament." He stuck a lean leg out of bed and scrutinised the offending joint with a frown. "Can't do much but strap it for now."

"Great." Chris hadn't intended to sound surly but confirmation of Vin's injury just added another burden to his already crippling load. One more worry he didn't need. One less able body in the team.

Vin swung his legs out of bed, immediately on the defensive. "Yeah, well it's not exactly party time for me!"

Larabee bit back the equally irritable response that he was about to hurl back at the Texan, guiltily aware that he was falling into the trap of punishing the victim, and all that he was going to achieve by continuing along that road would be to kick Vin when he was already down. Something, he reminded himself, that he seemed to have become an expert in over the last week. Tanner had been through a rough enough time without him piling more crap onto him. For a moment there was a strained silence, then Chris sat up and rubbed his eyes. "Aw, hell, Vin..."

Whatever he had been going to say in the way of apology died before thought could translate into words as Tanner abruptly got to his feet and turned his back. Larabee had no trouble reading the body language as the Texan walked stiffly towards the window with a finality that suggested that as far as he was concerned Chris had already said more than enough. Vin had a certain way of shutting down, of closing people out, that was both a defence and an attack in one, and right now his accusatory silence was as painful to Chris as a swift kick in the nuts. And he deserved it. Vin had done nothing.

Taking a deep breath, he distractedly toyed with his watch, twisting the bezel back and forth around the face, suddenly at a loss as to what he should say. When he finally spoke his voice was quiet. "You know, Vin, it's going to be a long day today, and one way or another I'm going to find those bastards. Take every last mother of 'em down if I have to. But..." He paused, searching for the right words. "...I can't do it on my own." He kept his head down, his gaze on the floor, feeling more tired than he could ever remember. "I know I've been on your case, Vin, and yeah, maybe I've been pushing too hard, but right now I need you with me, not against me. I got a situation here that's likely to go to shit in the next twenty-four hours..."

"You just figure that out?" Vin's voice had a brittle edge to it that would have cut glass.

Larabee stopped and took a deep breath, deliberately keeping his voice calm. “That I want you in my corner or that this whole goddamn operation is going down the tubes?”

“Either. Both. Hell, take your pick. Your call. You’re the boss!”

Chris had never known a man before Vin who could say so much by saying so little. He finally glanced up and addressed the former Ranger’s back, determined not to react to a barb he wasn’t sure he fully understood, but knowing it was more than just a careless remark that had touched a sensitive nerve in the Texan. That Vin was feeling put out was not in question; what concerned Larabee was the depth of his resentment. They were all starting to feel the pressure and he guessed that the cracks were bound to show sooner or later. The only thing he knew for sure was that he couldn’t afford to let those cracks widen into a rift.

“Did I just miss something here?”

Tanner’s shoulder’s tensed. “You tell me, cowboy. ‘Cause I reckon I missed the whole goddamned boat this time round.” He wheeled suddenly, his well-muscled body backlit by the first rays of the sun filtering through the window. “Anyone ever tell you what an asshole you are, Larabee?”

Chris let the words hang between them for several beats. He had two choices now; he could go head to head with Vin, or he could back off and let Tanner vent some of his obvious frustration. He sighed heavily, feeling the weight of his responsibilities even more keenly, but while he might be an asshole, he wasn’t stupid.

“Yeah, if you must know!” He barked, initially matching Vin’s tone, but his next words were more quietly spoken, almost reflective. “A guy called Buck Wilmington.” The unexpected surge of emotion he felt as his mind conjured an image of his friend, hit him like a physical blow, and at that moment any remaining acrimony he might have been tempted to feel towards Vin suddenly evaporated. After a thoughtful moment, he met Tanner’s cool gaze with an ironic smile. “Just about every week in fact. But Buck and me have been through a lot of shit together, so I guess you could say he earned that right. What’s your excuse?”

Vin’s eyes narrowed fractionally. “Excuse?” He gave a short, bemused, laugh as if he didn’t quite know how to take Larabee’s unexpected change in tack, and shook his head. “Jesus! You know, Larabee, you really are an arrogant prick...”

Chris raised a quizzical eyebrow. “Wanna go for strike three? Might as well get it out of your system now. I don’t need you to like me, Vin, I just need to know that I can count on you when the time comes.”

“That’s not fair...” Tanner stopped abruptly, hesitated, and quickly rubbed a hand over his face, “Hell, Chris, this ain’t doing either of us any good. Just forget it!”

“And let you loose carrying a chip on your shoulder the size of fucking Texas? Uh huh! We get this out in the open now, before the shit really hits the fan. You got any doubts? I want to know before

we're taking heat, and I kid you not, Vin, as sure as night follows day, we're gonna get our asses flamed on this one." He stood up and crossed to stand beside a silent and expressionless Tanner at the window, drawing back the curtain and looking out onto the unfamiliar street. "Look, Vin, I know things haven't gone well. Some of that's my fault, some of it...well, let's just say it's been a rough time for everyone, but I can't let things get in the way of the job."

Vin shifted his stance to lean against the windowsill. "Things? Like people you mean?"

The underlying criticism was there again, but Chris knew that he couldn't take offence at what was the absolute and undeniable truth. Instead he gave an embarrassed laugh. "I told you I couldn't do it on my own. Hell, that's why I have a partner! Without Buck always on my case, I..." His words trailed off into an awkward silence as he came face to face with a reality he didn't want to contemplate.

It was Vin's turn to sigh. "Guess we're all a little strung out, huh?"

Chris gave a self-conscious smile. "You might say that."

Neither man spoke for several minutes, both lost in their own thoughts as the sun came up on the world outside.

"All I'm asking is that you gimme a break, Chris. You gotta start trusting people. Sure we're all gonna screw up." He grinned suddenly. "Even you. But we're all in this together. A team. Or at least, I thought that's what we were."

Larabee chewed thoughtfully on his lip, then slowly spun to lean with his back to the window.

"How about we start over again?" He looked evenly at the younger man. "How's the knee?"

Tanner frowned before his face creased again into a smile. "Pretty much fucked."

"You gonna be okay?"

"Yeah. I'll be okay."

"Great." He gave a short laugh. "Arrogant prick, huh?"

Vin winced, his expression twisting briefly in a mock grimace. "I'm taking the fifth on that one."

"Smart move, Tanner."

"Hey, you said someone's gotta keep you in line..."

An urgent pounding on the door, both intrusive and insistent, put a halt to the exchange, their good humour fading as the two men exchanged a questioning glance, brought back to reality with a jolt by the unexpected sound that shattered the early morning silence in the posada. In a few strides Chris was at the door and he threw it open with a savage jerk.

JD drew back a step as Chris flung the door back, momentarily stunned by the force of the action but, almost manic in attitude, he darted forward.

"It's done!"

"JD?"

Dunne was dressed in a t-shirt and boxers, his hair sticking up at odd angles as if he'd just woken up but from the shadows rimming his eye sockets, Chris guessed he hadn't been to sleep at all. "The download! I got the grid." The words came out in a breathless burst. Then he grinned. "And I've got a signal."

Bruta, ciega, sordomuda, torpe, traste, testaruda...

Ezra groaned, a purely involuntary response, as his dormant senses slowly awakened, dragging him reluctantly from a grim and nightmarish world to an even harsher reality. Music, booming thunderously from a portable player somewhere close by, echoed through the shed.

...es todo lo que he sido por ti me he convertido...

The pulsing Latin beat drilled through his skull, a song he vaguely recognised even through the haze of nausea and dizziness that accompanied his return to full consciousness. He struggled to remember the singer; a Colombian diva that JD had been obsessing over for weeks. He fretted now that he couldn't recall her name. The sensory assault added to his disorientation and for a moment he wavered uncertainly between what was real and what was now no more than a memory of a time past.

He drew a laboured breath and the groan became a muted whimper as a sudden, sharp, pain in his chest provided an unpleasant wake-up call that quickly severed the last tenuous threads of unconsciousness. He became aware then of the burning agony in his upraised arms and the bite of unyielding plastic cable ties cutting into his wrists. Cautiously, he stretched his already painfully extended arms to their limit and experimentally clenched and unclenched his hands. With the easing of the pressure on his wrists came a sudden flow of blood into his numbed and swollen fingers and in seconds he was rewarded with the painful tingle of rapidly restored circulation.

Abruptly, the music gave way to a Latin DJ's cheerful voice which, completely oblivious to his suffering, interrupted the last bars of the song to energetically announce the station identifier and, with equally irrepressible enthusiasm, the fact that it was *las ocho* and *otro día*. Eight o'clock and another day. Wonderful. Another day in paradise. Fighting the overwhelming urge to throw up, he slowly raised his head.

"Oye chilito! Que hay de nuevo?"

His brain managed to distinguish that this was no longer the voice from the radio and, by concentrating hard, he was even able to salvage a few more bits and pieces of recent memory from his frustratingly disordered mind. Something in the man's voice warned him that he should play dumb and ignore the taunt than to react in any way. This time he followed his instincts. Not only because he was still struggling to co-ordinate the seemingly impossible task of breathing and

thinking at the same time, but also because he recognised that the insult, couched as it was in a mock friendly greeting, was just his perverse way of establishing control over the situation. It didn't actually matter to the guard whether Ezra understood the words or not; the purpose was more to boost the guard's own confidence than undermine his captive's. As in any hostage situation this was about domination. Keeping the upper hand. Humiliating and denigrating an adversary imparted a sense of unbridled power that was a stimulant in itself but, right at this moment, he was not about to do or say anything that would goad the man into any demonstration of that authority. He was already hurting enough.

He blinked several times trying to bring the blurred images swimming lazily before his eyes into focus but his stomach rippled queasily as he experienced an unpleasant attack of vertigo and, defeated, he allowed his head to slump forward onto his chest again. Taking a couple of measured breaths, convinced from the stabbing pain in his right side that at least some of his ribs were broken, he tried to relax and convince himself it wasn't really as hard as it seemed.

Threatened by yet another rippling wave of nausea, he focused on taking deep, slow breaths, struggling to overcome the increasingly uncomfortable compression of his diaphragm and ribcage. Adding to his misery, the maliciously throbbing pulse in his temples seemed to be keeping time with the beat of the music and making it impossible for him to maintain any consistency to his thoughts. It took several minutes before Ezra was able to discipline his mind enough to feel that he was at least partially in control of his faculties.

"Welcome back, pard."

The soft drawl, just loud enough to be heard, penetrating the fog of his brain like a shaft of sunlight through early morning mist and his head came up in response to the familiar voice. Like tumblers in a combination lock falling suddenly into place to open a secured vault, he remembered. And with lucidity came the sting of failure that hurt far more than the pain of his physical injuries. He had gambled and he had lost. Shifting his weight from one foot to the other, he awkwardly twisted his body. Just a slight movement, and one that he instantly regretted, but it was enough. His eyes immediately fixed on a slightly out-of-focus Wilmington and their gazes briefly locked as a flicker of understanding passed between them. Dear Lord, had he lost.

"You know," continued Wilmington quietly, with a tired grin, "I reckon some days it just don't pay to wake up in the morning."

Ezra finally conjured a faint smile and, after a moment or two, Buck's own guarded expression marginally relaxed. The thought crossed Ezra's mind that Buck was taking a risk by drawing unwelcome attention to himself but he appreciated the small gesture of solidarity, and he couldn't argue with the sentiment. Wilmington himself looked done in. Fatigue and pain had already etched deep lines in his face and his eyes now glittered feverishly from darkly shadowed sockets. A man

holding on but running out of time.

He shifted his glance to Lisa. She looked as if she hadn't slept but other than appearing tired and anxious, the teenager seemed to be coping well enough. She held one of Buck's hands in both of hers and as he watched her reach for the water bottle and urge him to drink, he suddenly realised that rather than Wilmington comforting Lisa, the roles had subtly been reversed. The irony of it was not lost on him and, with a deep sense of guilt, he wondered briefly what Manfred Hengst's reaction would be if he could see his daughter at that very moment. Then, on second thoughts, he decided he could probably make an educated guess.

She was frightened. She had been frightened since the first moment Ezra had shoved her unceremoniously down onto the floor of the car; the moment when suddenly her safe and privileged world had collapsed around her. At first she had been afraid for herself. Now she was more afraid for the two men who had committed their lives to protecting her. Having a personal bodyguard had always seemed like a game to her; an adventure. In truth, she had often fantasised about being rescued from harm by her own knight in shining armour but the brutal shock of reality had changed her day dreams into the stuff of nightmares. Now she was afraid that because of her Ezra and Buck were going to die.

Buck had been shot. Now he was sick, burning with fever and so weak that he had not spoken more than a handful words in the past few hours. She thought of the bullet wounds in his leg and felt slightly ill. The faint odour of old blood lingered in the still, oppressive air of the shed, and her stomach heaved uneasily as she was reminded again of the tainted smell of something long forgotten in the back of the refrigerator. Something gone rotten. She didn't know what to do, but she had given him water, reminding him to drink often just as Ezra had. Each time she had nudged his arm and offered him the water bottle he had smiled, and she kept telling herself that as long as he could still smile they would be alright.

She had cried when they had beaten Ezra. Buck had held her close then, talking softly to her in that funny way he had of speaking, and although she knew that he was as almost powerless as she, his comforting nearness and soothing words at least gave an illusion of safety. Then, over time, Buck had gradually become quiet and he seemed to drift into an uneasy sleep. She too had tried to rest but she had been unable to take her eyes off Ezra; patiently watching for any hint of movement, any sign of life. But apart from the slight, yet reassuringly regular, movement of his ribcage that told her he still breathed, there had been nothing. So, feeling completely alone and indescribably lonely, she kept vigil.

His face was partly in shadow, his head slumped forward onto his chest, but she could still see the dusky bruises that marred his features and was conscious of the dark splashes down the front of his

shirt that could only be blood. She was powerless to stop the small, hiccupping sob that suddenly escaped but she managed to hold back the tears that threatened at any given minute, to overflow. Edging a little closer to Buck, she leaned her head against his shoulder and gently, not wanting to disturb him, took his hand in hers. Although he did not move she felt the slightest increase in the pressure of his fingers as he responded with a brief squeeze. His skin felt cool and clammy yet she could feel the heat of his body against her arm and, in the growing light, she could see the beads of sweat on his forehead and the dryness of his lips. She wondered if she should give him some more water.

A younger man, that Lisa did not recall having seen before, came to relieve the guard who had been on watch for the last few hours but she was too tired and her emotions too anaesthetised for the change to raise even a spark of interest. The two men chatted for a while; so casual and confident with their weapons slung carelessly over their shoulders as they shared a joke and a cigarette, and occasionally glanced in her direction but, rather than any malice, she only saw bored indifference in their eyes. With a sinking heart she understood at that moment that the game was lost. The kidnappers' plan would follow its course to whatever end and she would perform her part like a mechanical wind-up toy. Ezra had promised her that once she had been ransomed, then she would be reunited with her father. She believed him then, and she still believed him now. She had been handled roughly, but she had not been hurt. She now understood that she was valuable to them; their ticket to wealth and freedom. When they had their money, she would be able to go home. Home to Frankfurt. With a deep sigh, she pressed her cheek against Buck's arm and let her gaze settle on Ezra again. Suddenly, in a shocking premonition that struck her like a physical blow she finally understood. For Ezra and Buck there would be no going home.

A sudden blast of overpowering sound filled the warehouse, reverberating off the corrugated metal walls with an intensity that startled her and left her heart racing. The guard had obviously brought along his own entertainment, but she had grown accustomed to the silence and suddenly the driving beat of Latin pop music that even a few days ago she would have happily immersed herself in, now seemed like nothing more than empty and irritating noise. Beside her Buck stirred, disturbed by the invasion of sound into his already uneasy sleep and, as he surfaced, he tensed and she winced as he tightened his grip on her hand. It was an involuntary reflex brought quickly under control once he opened his eyes, but it told her a lot about him; it told her that he was suffering. Although he hid it well, she had come to recognise the telltale tightening of the muscles, which meant he was going through a difficult time. This morning, it seemed, was particularly bad. Still, he smiled when he saw her and although his exhaustion was obvious, she took that as a good sign. She had to, for without that little spark of hope she knew that the fragile threads that were holding her together would finally come apart.

Buck had fixed his attention on Ezra, watching, just as she had been doing for several hours. She had tried to focus on other things but unless she closed her eyes seeing the Southerner was unavoidable. And wasn't that the whole point? To send the unmistakable message that resistance not only carried a high price tag but was also pointless. She wavered between being glad that Ezra had not stirred, hoping that he had found a safe place to hide under the shroud of unconsciousness, and worrying that he was so badly hurt that he might never wake up.

"Welcome back, pard."

At first Buck's apparent non sequitur puzzled her, then her breath caught in her throat as she came to the undeniable conclusion that he was talking to Ezra. Not just making some wry observation but really talking as if he expected some response. She deliberately kept her eyes down, suddenly overwhelmed by a torrent of mixed feelings and struggling with the unexpected backwash of emotions, some of which she could barely identify let alone understand. Wilmington spoke again but she wasn't listening to what he said, instead she reached for the water bottle and nudged his arm to gain his attention, taking comfort in the familiar task. He drank, swallowing quickly and she noticed that he no longer looked at Ezra but had guiltily dropped his gaze as he thrust the bottle back into her hands. It took a few moments for her to put the pieces together and make sense of Buck's odd behaviour: he was self-conscious about drinking in front of Ezra. Then she looked up.

Lisa had dreaded the moment, remembering the blank, dull-eyed, stare and distant look when they had finished beating him that had told her that Ezra was far away and out of reach. It was a look that had frightened her, even more than the blood and the bruises, and her greatest fear was that he would still be in that remote place; somewhere that she couldn't go. But, wherever he had been, it seemed he had been able to make his way back and now he met her hesitant first glance with a clear and steady gaze that showed no trace of the dazed confusion that she had seen earlier. And he was smiling. A weary, lopsided, excuse for a smile but in it was the message that he might be down but he was not yet out.

"Ezra!" His name fought its way past the tightness in her throat, bursting out on a small sob that was instantly swallowed by the noise of the radio that was still pumping out of the portable stereo at maximum volume.

She was already up and taking her first step when Buck's urgent whisper beside her made her pause uncertainly. "Lisa, no!" He reached out, intending to physically restrain her if need be, but he lacked both the speed and strength to follow the action through and, cursing under his breath, he let his hand fall to his side as she moved just out of range. She hesitated then, just for a moment, hearing the warning in his voice but with a quick, almost defiant, shake of her head, she kept going.

Her motive was simple: to make sure that Ezra did not go thirsty. The certainty that no one else

was going to concern themselves with Ezra's well-being had compelled her to act but she had given no real thought to the wisdom of blindly following an impulse, until Buck had moved to stop her. For an instant she had been filled with uncertainty, but her misgivings had lasted only a fraction of a second, and one glance at the guard convinced her that she had time to give Ezra a drink of water before anyone could do anything to stop her. If she could manage that then she didn't care about anything else. The young guard was still preoccupied with the controls of the stereo, adjusting the sliders of the graphic equaliser with a studied intensity and he seemed oblivious to the real reason for his presence there. In fact Lisa was almost sure that she could walk out of the door and he would never notice. The unit that had so captured the man's attention looked new and very expensive and Lisa found herself wondering, quite inconsequentially, if it was stolen.

A dozen steps later and she had done it. It had been so easy that she felt a bubble of relief swell inside her and she resisted the almost hysterical urge to laugh but the fearful look that suddenly clouded Ezra's expression quickly dampened her sense of adventure as the gravity of her actions finally hit home: whatever happened, there would be consequences. Quickly uncapping the water bottle, she reached up but found the angle awkward and, hand trembling, she spilled as much of the liquid down his chin as went into his mouth, leaving a pink trail of diluted blood across his shirt front. Taking a deep lungful of air she steadied both her breathing and her hand, this time succeeding in delivering a steady stream of cool water to the parched bodyguard. Finally, after several long swallows, he turned his head aside and Lisa lowered the container. He kept his face averted for a moment, his ribcage heaving.

"You shouldn't have done that, darlin'."

His voice was a hoarse whisper, his words forced, and it was only then that Lisa realised just how difficult it was for him to breathe let alone speak.

"Ezra, I..."

"*Caray!*"

Lisa jumped back, her small body jerking visibly as the guard's voice cracked like a whip. She had no idea what he had said but she understood too well the panic and anger that he managed to inject into that single word. A torrent of staccato Spanish flowed from him as he took several rapid steps forward, his rifle sliding smoothly off his shoulder and into his hands, waving the gun threateningly in an unmistakable gesture that she should move back.

Instinctively she took a step closer to Ezra as her earlier courage deserted her, and then mentally berated herself for being so stupid. There could be no help from Ezra this time.

Buck swore softly. There was only one possible way that this was going to end, and that was badly. Lisa, acting with the best of intentions, had innocently set the wheels in motion once again and

now he fretted that all he could do was sit by and wait. Out of the loop. A victim. Some god-damned bodyguard he was turning out to be; maybe when he got back stateside he should just pack it all in and retire. Getting too old for this kind of thing. Or maybe Chris would just cut his losses and show him the door. He'd known Larabee for a lot of years and while he sometimes forgave, he never forgot.

Hell, the way things were going, he'd be lucky if he ever got out of this stinking hole anyway. Jesus! What a way for it all to end. Distractedly, he wiped the sweat from his face once again. Surprised at the effort it took just to raise his arm, he found the sensation of disengagement from events going on around him becoming gradually more intense. He sighed deeply as his body tried to compensate for the shortage of oxygen in his blood, but the air felt thin and somehow lacking in vitality. For the first time, struggling for another breath and still hungry for air, he felt real fear. *Where the hell are you, Chris? Never let me down before...* He refocused with a jolt. He had drifted. Not good.

He forced himself to concentrate. Lisa was standing her ground, and Buck was not certain if she was doing it out of fear or stubbornness but, either way, he knew it was only going to mean more trouble. The guard having realised, too late, that he had lost control of the most valuable of his charges was not wasting any time in remedying the situation and Buck's first instinct was to call out. To try and get Lisa to back off, leave Ezra and come back to him, but something about the young *mestizo* made him hesitate; no denying he was losing it in a big way, and Wilmington didn't want to be the one responsible for pushing him into doing something they might all regret. He sank back and briefly closed his eyes. Goddamn it! A panicky kid with a loaded gun was a complication he didn't need and, looking at Ezra, he guessed that he was having similar thoughts. In fact, considering that the unsecured weapon kept swinging wildly in the Southerner's direction while he was about as helpless as a Carolina hog strung up on a gutting pole, he would be prepared to lay money on it

The unmistakable sound of an open-handed slap ripped through his dulled senses and triggered an adrenaline surge in him that demanded some kind of physical response, and for an instant he considered making a move as instinct overrode common sense. But the bitter truth was that he was just as helpless as Ezra and the only physical response he managed was to generate a new wave of pain and nausea that pushed him another step closer to the brink of unconsciousness. Pale, sweating and gasping for breath he could only watch.

The slap seemed to have stunned Lisa into submission. She stood transfixed, eyes wide with shock and humiliation as colour bloomed on her cheek from the impression of the youth's hand, like some wild creature caught suddenly in the beam of a spotlight. Then Buck realised that a new and dangerous emotion was quickly taking hold of the young German girl: anger. It took him a split-

second longer to process the fact that her reaction was being mirrored almost identically by the bound Southerner and he felt a sinking in his gut as Ezra's head came up with deceptive slowness and he read the cold fury in his eyes. If he had thought the other man helpless, he now quickly revised that opinion, for in that moment he knew beyond any doubt that Ezra was prepared to throw his life away in some insane gesture of defiance.

This time he did move, launching himself awkwardly forward with a shout of protest, ignoring the agonising pain that ripped through his leg although he reeled from the shock of it. He wasn't sure himself what he was hoping to achieve, but he did know that he had an obligation to act. The obligation to protect and shield that he had so far failed to keep. Now, faced with the stark reality that he might well be living the last few moments of his life he made a conscious decision that if he was going to go down, he was going to go down fighting.

The semi-automatic chattered noisily in the confined space, creating a percussive wave that assaulted the eardrums, quickly followed by the distinctive whine of bullets ricocheting off the steel girders that made Buck cringe as he followed an ingrained instinct to duck. Aided by a timely burst of adrenaline he quickly jinked to one side and managed to cover a respectable distance in a commando crawl that brought him close enough to Lisa for him to reach up and grab her by the wrist, just as the Southerner made his move. It happened fast, just as Buck jerked the girl down to floor level and rolled clear, using his body to shield the surprised teenager as they huddled together well clear of Ezra and the gunman.

Wilmington had seriously underestimated Ezra. He would have laid money on the certainty that the Southerner was a spent force. Apparently the guard had made that same mistake but he was already paying for his complacency. Buck could only surmise that a combination of desperation and anger had lent Ezra the strength and agility he needed to swing his legs up into a powerhouse kick that dropped the young guard like a stone. Buck was not sure if it was imagination but he fancied he had heard the unfortunate youth's neck crack, and as he looked at the curiously misshapen figure huddled motionless on the floor he had no difficulty believing that he was dead. The grim satisfaction he felt at the possibility was quickly countered by the realisation that retribution was likely to be swift and merciless. He glanced briefly at the Southerner, feeling the need to say something but knowing there was nothing he could say.

Suspended from the pulley, Ezra rotated slowly, blood running freely from his wrists and down his arms where the cable ties had bitten deeply into flesh. The strain of taking his entire weight as he jack-knifed his body to kick the guard having driven the plastic strips through his already abused and fragile skin. His gaze was fixed on the body on the floor, but his expression was unreadable, giving nothing away.

Buck eased himself up with a barely suppressed groan, acutely aware that the gunfire would soon

bring unwelcome company and, slightly breathless, turned to face the Southerner. "So, make my day and tell me he's not dead, Ezra." Without uttering a word Standish slowly shook his head and Wilmington slumped back with a weary sigh, his voice almost a whisper, loaded with understated emotion. "Then, my friend, I reckon that we just might be."

With a small cry Lisa struggled from Wilmington's grasp and in the few seconds it took Buck to realise just what she had in mind, she had already scrambled away and was clawing desperately at the knotted nylon rope that anchored the pulley. Buck's best guess was that they had less than thirty seconds before all hell broke loose and the shed would be overrun by the remaining kidnapers, none of which were going to be listening to explanations, least of all Connie van der Schoor and her Latin lover. He spared a nanosecond considering the temptation of the semi-automatic lying beside the dead guard before discounting it as suicidal; perhaps if it had been just him and Ezra then it might have been worth taking the risk but not this time. Instead he did a fair imitation of a wounded crab and, dragging his injured leg, scuttled awkwardly to join the girl just as he became aware of the unmistakable clamour of raised voices and running feet moving rapidly and getting dangerously close.

"Buck..."

"Shut up, Ezra."

"Buck..."

"I know!"

Wilmington swore softly; to release the tension on the rope he was going to have to take up some slack. Bracing himself, he tried not to dwell on the additional strain it was going to put on Ezra's already mangled wrists and murmured under his breath: "Sorry, pard. No time for anything fancy." In a quick movement he jerked down on the rope, felt the resistance of a hundred and seventy pounds dead weight and willed Lisa to work fast, not certain that he could sustain the effort and for one, brief, despairing moment wondering why he was even trying. One glance at the exhausted Southerner quickly reminded him and, driven by will rather than physical strength, he leaned one last time into the rope, ignoring the sharp intake of breath from Ezra as again he swung free of the floor.

Heart racing and feeling light headed, he resisted the urge to tell Lisa to hurry, feeling the first warning signs of diminishing consciousness as his vision blurred, fading to grey, as blood roared noisily in his ears. Unable to keep a grip on the braided nylon, he felt the rope slipping through his hands as Lisa's voice penetrated the thickening fog of his brain. He let go then, more because he couldn't hold on any longer than a conscious response to the teenager's urging, and the unmistakable sound of the rope running freely through the pulley mechanism gave him a sense of satisfaction that the imminent appearance of a half dozen gun-toting and openly vindictive men

did nothing to erase.

Ezra tensed and sucked in a sharp, involuntary, breath through clenched teeth, feeling a threatening surge of nausea as bitter, burning, acid rose in the back of his throat. The savage bite of the cable ties into already raw nerve endings paled into insignificance beside the sharp, searing, pain in his chest as his shoulders were again jerked into hyper-extension. Then with equal abruptness the law of gravity was directing his movement and he experienced the unnerving sensation of no longer being in control of his own body as tortured leg muscles failed to react to the sudden demand to support his weight. Instinct dictated that he should try to break his fall but, constrained by the crude handcuffs, he could only collapse untidily to the floor, landing heavily on his right hip and shoulder as a violent eruption of sound announced that long expected company had finally arrived.

He twisted awkwardly struggling up onto one elbow, very much aware of the vulnerability of his position and reluctant to present himself as a fresh target for any or all of the armed men now fanning out around him. He didn't expect any quarter but he wasn't going to give in without a fight either. His ungainly attempt to right himself with his wrists still bound in front of him was all at once made easy as willing hands, too delicate to be Buck's, first pushed and then held him upright. Beside him Lisa kneeled with one arm around his shoulders, her young face showing a mix of concern and apprehension as she steadied him and he was struck by the undeniable irony of the role reversal.

He glanced quickly over his shoulder. Buck was down, not moving, but the rapid rise and fall of his chest was enough to reassure Ezra that he was at least still in the game. He swept his gaze back to the second motionless figure on the dusty floor but there was no disputing that this one was dead. The youth, dressed in a mismatched assortment of cast off clothing none of which seemed to quite fit, lay with one skinny arm out flung, fingers still tightly clutching the rifle and might have been asleep if not for the impossible angle of his neck. The biggest irony of it all was that it had never been his intention to kill the youth; the most he had hoped for was a momentary distraction, and his actions had been those of a desperate man running out of options. Yet right here in front of him was proof that fate was fickle indeed and that desperation sometimes netted a result that went beyond the bounds of all probability. It shouldn't have been that easy. It should never be that easy, but the kid had set events in motion as soon as he had put himself within range. He had been an amateur; a boy pitched against a man who had made a living out of deceit and violence, and he had paid the price for that momentary indiscretion. Just as Ezra fully expected to pay for his.

He sucked in a deep lungful of air and leaned forward, shoulders hunched, trying not to focus too much on the pain now radiating through his chest but, Jesus!, it felt like he was about to have a coronary. Wincing, he pressed his bound hands to his sternum and took several shallow breaths,

only able to relax again once the tightness eased.

“Bastard!”

Connie's shrill scream was more than enough to subdue the hum of agitated voices that had steadily swelled with the number of men crowding into the shed but it was the sharp crack of an open-handed slap connecting solidly with Ezra's cheek that brought the unruly gathering to full and silent attention.

Ezra resisted the urge to raise his hand to his face, feeling the tingling imprint of her palm now burning hotly into his skin. The slap had caught him by surprise, although in hindsight he could not imagine why it should have. In truth, the sting of it barely registered, fading into insignificance beside the greater hurts already inflicted on him over the past 24 hours, but what it represented fanned the tiniest spark of resentment into a fiercely glowing ember of white hot anger.

Ezra had never in his life hit a woman, but he was beginning to believe that he had finally met one who could just push him far enough to overcome any reservations he might have and at that moment he felt little more than the urge to close his hands around that delicately arched neck and throttle the blonde bitch.

She glanced down at the dead youth for a few moments, her expression giving nothing away, before slowly turning her attention to Wilmington, still lying motionless a few feet away. As she started to move Ezra felt a sinking in the pit of his stomach, suddenly afraid for the wounded bodyguard but feigning indifference, although every muscle in his body was tensed with the effort; the last time he had made the mistake of allowing even a shred of emotion to show, it had gotten Buck shot. Bracing her right foot against the downed bodyguard, she roughly shoved him over onto his back and seemed disappointed when he grunted softly.

“Ach, *Godverdomme*, man! This *neukstier* just doesn't know when to quit.” She wheeled abruptly and in three quick strides crossed back to Ezra, reaching behind her and pulling a Sig - his Sig - from the waistband of her fatigues, then dropping to a crouch in front of him. As off-putting as it was to have her suddenly so close, violating his personal space while her clear blue eyes bored aggressively into his, he coolly met her gaze without any hint of the trepidation that he was feeling, but it took every shred of self control for him not to pull back as she reached out to stroke his face. “How about you, *geliefde*? Do you?”

He was debating whether he was expected to answer, trying to gauge her mood, when she abruptly brought the barrel of the gun up and shoved the blued steel into the soft flesh under his chin. He tensed but was unable to prevent the natural inclination to yield as his head was slowly forced back by degrees under the steadily increasing pressure of the gun. Swallowing, he worked some saliva into his parched mouth, not taking his eyes off the woman in spite of the uncomfortable attitude at which he was now obliged to hold his neck. “Would now be a good time?”

The blue eyes narrowed briefly and he found himself holding his breath in anticipation of a reaction, hoping that blowing his brains out didn't rank first on her list of possible options. Instead she laughed. The sound made his scalp tighten and his skin crawl but he understood that he had gained a reprieve as the muzzle of the gun slid down his neck in a motion that was almost a caress. "You're one crazy fucker, you know that?"

Ezra assumed it was a rhetorical question and remained silent as his mind sifted through a dozen equally scathing responses, none of which he had any intention of uttering. It came to him then that he had spent a good part of the last year in self-destruct mode, and now the opportunity was here for him to grab with both hands, he didn't want it. He didn't want out any more. He could appreciate the irony of it, realising with a pang of regret that the very real and frightening truth was that perhaps he no longer had any choice in the matter.

A gentle squeeze around his shoulders reminded him that Lisa was still hugging him and felt a rush of affection for the girl he was supposed to be protecting that only emphasised his own vulnerability. Another irony; that she should be trying to shield him. Connie's gaze slid with reptilian coldness to fix on Lisa, as if his thoughts had somehow influenced hers and drawn her attention back to her former charge. Again he focused on keeping his expression neutral.

"Now isn't this just so sweet?" She leaned closer to the teenager, but the Sig remained resting, almost casually, at the base of Ezra's throat; a clear warning. "But don't think for one minute that he cares anything about you. He's a hired gun and a few hundred dollars a day is all it takes to buy this one's loyalty. Offer him enough and he'll roll over for anyone. Isn't that so, *hoer*?" Her eyes flicked back to Ezra as her lips pulled back in a feral smile. "Sell out to the highest bidder? Just ask his friend, Buck. "

The merest emphasis on the word friend was just enough to suggest that Wilmington was anything but and although Buck's low opinion of him hardly constituted a secret, Ezra couldn't help but feel the all-too-familiar pain of betrayal. Connie knew something; enough to throw some of his recent past back at him now. Once again parts of his former life were open for scrutiny. He could deal with that, in the months since the inquiry he'd become an expert at it, but what cut to the bone was that Buck had at some point seen fit to share his views even with someone like Connie Van der Schoor. The sweat already drenching his body suddenly cooled, turning to ice on his skin, and he felt a surge of uncontrolled anger: Well, fuck you, Buck Wilmington. Connie's eyes glittered triumphantly and in that moment his anger dissolved as quickly as it had flared. Goddamn it! He had walked into that one with his eyes wide open, letting his insecurities get the better of him and that little chink in his armour had given her the opening she needed to work the thin end of the wedge into place. For the first time he broke eye contact and dropped his gaze to stare for a moment at the bracelets of abraded flesh that circled both wrists in bloody tatters, needing a

moment to bring his emotions under control again.

“So tell me, *geliefde*...” She lowered her voice to an intimate and seductive croon, and leaned close enough for him to feel her breath on his face. “What’s your thirty pieces of silver? How about a share of a million dollars? Is that enough to buy you?” The gun moved again, slowly gliding over his skin to settle in the groove just behind his earlobe. “What would it take for you to roll over for me?”

Ezra slowly brought his head up and, in spite of the pistol grinding into his mastoid, pulled back in a vain attempt to escape the claustrophobic nearness of her. She really thought she had him. A rolling wave of bitterness rose up in him, swamping all other emotions and transforming his expression into a hard mask of contempt as he levelled a cold, challenging, stare at the confidently smiling woman.

“A bullet.”

The smile wavered, then slowly oozed off Connie’s face as her lips became a thin, pale, line in an even paler face. Finally, after what seemed to Ezra like an eternity as he waited for the inevitable axe to fall, she breathed again and forced a shaky laugh. “You come even cheaper than I thought.” Then she pulled the trigger.

The hundred and forty decibel blast of a semi-automatic discharging inches from his ear left him stunned and deafened as the percussive wave painfully punched against his eardrum. He jerked away in a reflex action, shaking his head as the brief moment of absolute silence was replaced by a piercing, high pitched hum that seemed to laser through to the very core of his skull and a part of his reeling brain rallied enough to wonder if his eardrum was still intact; the pain was certainly enough for him to think otherwise. His peripheral vision picked up a movement to his left but this time his reflexes betrayed him and he was too slow to avoid contact as the enraged woman swung the Sig in a short, powerful arc through the air to connect solidly with the side of his head.

oooOOooo

Chris hovered at the laptop waiting with thinly disguised impatience as Dunne manoeuvred awkwardly around him and slid into the chair in which he’d already spent countless muscle-cramping hours. As he rapidly tapped out the keystrokes that would bypass the inbuilt security screens he became acutely aware of Larabee’s controlled breathing a few inches from his ear, which seemed to contrast directly with his own slightly uneven efforts. It had been a long and frustrating night for all of them but now, feeling the tension radiating from the man at his side, he suddenly began to appreciate the additional strain that Larabee was under. That control, he realised, came at a price and JD wondered now at the toll it was exacting on the older man.

“There.” JD increased the resolution and zoomed in on a solitary flashing dot in a mass of green and brown shading. “That’s the location of the phone, accurate to within 16 metres...”

Chris narrowed his eyes and focused on the screen with a keen intensity. “That’s less than a hundred kays from here.”

“Uh, yeah,” agreed JD warily, “but remember that’s only confirmation that we’ve locked in on the handset.” He left unsaid the fact that there was no guarantee of the phone still being in the same place as the hostages. Technology had allowed him to home in on a GPS chip in the missing satellite phone; no more, no less. By now the unit itself could be far away from the actual location of both kidnapers and their captives. He didn’t think he needed to spell it out.

Chris turned his head slowly and for many long seconds his cool gaze lingered on an increasingly nervous JD then, after a tense interlude in which JD wished he could be anywhere else but on the receiving end of a Larabee stare, Chris grinned wolfishly and slapped him energetically on the shoulder. “Hell, that’s enough for me, kid!”

Dunne turned quickly as another hand gripped and briefly squeezed his opposite shoulder, but it was Vin who quietly murmured an encouraging: “He means you did good, JD.”

Larabee’s grin mellowed into a gentler smile as he threw a brief but knowing glance at Tanner then vanished completely as he turned to meet the questioning gazes of the remaining three men who had been silently waiting in a variety of attitudes and degrees of expectation around the small hotel room.

“Okay, folks, here’s the drill. This is most likely going to be our one and only chance at getting close to these bastards, so we can’t afford to waste any more time. Could be that we’ll just be pissing into the wind but my gut tells me that we’re not dealing with a sophisticated outfit here, and my guess is that they still have the satellite unit with them...”

“Your guess?” Hengst took a step forward, his already drawn expression a confused mix of concern and disbelief. “You would take this action on a guess? This is my daughter, Mr. Larabee...”

“I haven’t forgotten that,” snapped Chris, “but this is our only lead and you’d better understand that even your million dollars in ransom is no guarantee that Lisa will be returned safely. So, what do you want me to do, Mannfred? Wait until they make contact again? Sit on our asses and let the local police deal with it? In case you haven’t noticed, they’re not exactly busting their balls to take action here!”

“Chris.”

Larabee stopped abruptly as Josiah’s voice, infusing his name with a quiet note of censure, interrupted his increasingly heated dialogue. Rubbing a hand quickly over his face, he closed his eyes for a moment, angry with himself for taking his frustrations out on a client. Unprofessional. Unforgivable. Regaining his composure he sighed deeply and lifted his eyes again to meet Hengst’s

surprisingly understanding stare. "It's a risk, and we could still end up with nothing to show at the end of it, but it's a risk we have to take. If my men are going to die, it's not going to be because I wasn't prepared to take a goddamned chance." He paused and glanced one by one at each man in the room before shaking his head in a gesture of sad resignation and dropping his gaze to stare at the floor. "It's the only way I know."

There was an uncomfortable silence then after a few moments of studied deliberation the tall German straightened and took a deep breath before giving a quick and decisive nod. "Then, Mr. Larabee, we must do it your way." Keenly making a sweep of the five motionless bodyguards he suddenly gave a tight smile. "Perhaps Mr. Larabee you wait for the 'engraved invitation?'"

A flicker of amusement passed across Chris's face at having his own, earlier, words thrown back at him. For a man who had just had his only daughter snatched from under the collective care of the very bodyguards who were now proposing a decidedly maverick approach to finding her again, Hengst was alright.

"Let's move it then! JD, how long before you can have this sucker..." He indicated the heavy-duty military laptop computer. "...up and running in the ORV?"

"Twenty minutes."

"Make it ten." No negotiation. "Everyone else, tool up and be ready to roll out in fifteen minutes. If you're not there when I'm ready to hit the gas - you walk!" He spun round on one heel and crossed to the door, pausing briefly as his fingers closed around the handle to look back over his shoulder. "Time to kick some ass, boys!"

"Going somewhere, Señor?"

Chris tried to place the voice that now addressed his back as he rearranged the gear in the rear of the 4WD with the concentrated diligence of a load master, but drew a blank. He made no immediate effort to answer the question or even acknowledge that he had heard; he was on a tight enough schedule with no provision for time out to observe social ritual. In his own time and without any sign of haste he finally stepped back, shooting an irritable glance at his unwelcome questioner as he slammed the rear door shut.

"Looks that way."

"A moment of your time, perhaps...?"

Larabee started to wheel away, his mind already elsewhere. "Don't have a moment." He checked his watch wondering if JD would, in fact, meet the ten minute deadline only to find his forward progress blocked by the man, who had moved with surprising speed to put himself between Chris and the hotel entrance.

"A moment, Señor," he repeated firmly in a tone that, while polite, had a hard edge to it that

suggested he was unlikely to take no for an answer a second time.

Chris bristled, in no mood for games, until he found himself staring at the ID of one Teniente Estéban Velasco of the Servicio de Investigacion Criminal. His eyes travelled slowly from the photo to the man; a black-haired, athletic-looking, thirty-something Hispanic with startlingly blue eyes that, to Larabee, seemed to be at odds with his dark colouring.

"Okay, now you've got my attention. I figure that gets you just about five minutes of my time."

Velasco flipped the wallet closed with a snap and tucked it into the inner breast pocket of his well-cut suit. "You are too generous, Señor Larabee."

Something in the casual and understated elegance of the man, coupled with the almost smug half-smile and the ironic tone suddenly reminded him so much of Ezra that he reined in an overwhelming inclination to butt heads with Velasco; after all the SIC was supposed to be on his side, although privately he had his doubts.

"So what do you want?"

"A few questions..."

"The police already have my statement."

Velasco sighed and slowly shook his head. "Señor, I understand your position and appreciate that you have had a difficult time but I, too, have a job to do. Now, perhaps you would prefer to continue this conversation in a more formal setting...?"

The veiled threat was tempered by a sly smile that suggested even more strongly to Chris that he might well be talking to the Latin version of Ezra Standish. He pushed the image of the Southerner to the back of his mind and focused instead on Velasco. After a few seconds Larabee forced a smile and raised a conciliatory hand; he didn't need any more enemies.

"How about we wind it back a few frames, lieutenant? It's been a long night..." he paused, waiting to see if the Guatemalan was going to cut him some slack, or if he was going to have to work a little harder before the detective would let him off the hook.

"Of course." Velasco conceded with a gracious nod but, although the smile remained in place, Chris had the feeling that rather than being off the hook, he was just being played out a little more line. At that moment JD emerged from the hotel, his suspicion evident as he zeroed in on the well-dressed *Ladino* and only relaxing his guard a fraction as Chris gave him the safe signal. Velasco may prove to be dangerous but as yet he was no threat.

"So how can I help you?" prompted Chris.

Velasco's eyes swivelled reluctantly away from Dunne and focused again on Larabee. "You are returning to Guatemala City?" He gestured with a jerk of his head to the Montero.

"My client is expected to deliver the ransom in person," replied Chris smoothly, avoiding an outright lie with an offering of truth that neither confirmed nor denied the lieutenant's assumption.

"Ah, yes, the million dollars," murmured Velasco, "I have already organised airport surveillance."

Although he said nothing, Larabee's expression betrayed surprise and scepticism, prompting the Guatemalan to laugh softly. "Do I detect a lack of confidence in our police methods, Señor Larabee?"

"Let's just say that my experience so far with the PNC has led me to believe that any investigation will be purely superficial."

"You must remember that things are done a little differently in Guatemala, but rest assured that although the mechanisms of police bureaucracy move slowly they do, in fact, move." Velasco's smile hinted that he was well aware of the shortcomings of the Guatemalan judiciary. "Eventually." Chris found himself warming to the lieutenant. In a few minutes he had managed to completely overturn Larabee's stereotypical image of the Latin American police officer; something about a total absence of pretention and an easy-going charm that was difficult to dismiss. "Look, Lieutenant, I'm not here to make judgements about your police department or its methods, my only interest is in getting my client's daughter, and my men, back and make no mistake I'll do anything I have to, to make that happen."

Velasco sucked in an audible breath and, digging his hands into his pockets, fixed his gaze on the ground, as if by that action he could disassociate himself from the American bodyguard. "I did not hear that, Señor." When he looked up again his expression was neutral, but the blue eyes reflected a sincerity and passion that were impossible to deny. "But I urge you to exercise caution. You are a civilian and you are a guest in my country. The fact that you have a permit to carry arms does not give you any special privileges, and many of my colleagues would not appreciate any interference, either real or imagined, in a police investigation from foreign nationals on Guatemalan soil. Do you understand what I am saying?"

Chris locked his gaze with the SIC detective, picking up on the subtle emphasis of his final words and highly conscious of the fact that he needed to understand even more what Velasco was not saying. This was a man who was not quite what he seemed. "I think you've made your point, Lieutenant."

Impossibly blue eyes continued to hold his own; challenging. "And you would tell me, would you not, if you had any information which may assist with this investigation?"

"All I have right now is a whole lot of questions and no answers," replied Chris evenly, "which I guess takes us right back to where we started."

"Touché." The smile was back and, although Chris had not noticed the detective reach into his pocket he was now, by some sleight of hand, holding out a business card. "My cell phone and my private line. In case you should recall some detail that may be of assistance." With a casually sketched mock salute and a slyly confident grin that suggested he knew some secret that he was

not about to share, Velasco abruptly turned and walked across the street to where an Audi all-road wagon was parked.

Larabee was still staring after the SIC detective trying to figure out if there was any significance in the fact that Velasco had come to the posada alone, when a soft Texan drawl brought him solidly back to earth as Vin came to join him. "What was that all about?"

Chris glanced thoughtfully down at the business card in his hand then watched as the late model Quattro pulled away from the kerb and followed its progress until it moved slowly out of sight.

"Chris?"

Turning at last in response to Tanner's question, Larabee frowned, the creases lining his brow an indication of his own confusion. "I don't know." With a slight shake of his head he looked back at the now empty street. "And you know something, Vin? I'm not sure I want to."

"SIC?"

Chris dropped one hand from the wheel to shift gears, slowing to a crawl as he manoeuvred to avoid a curiously apathetic, thumb-sucking toddler, flanked by an equally lethargic dog of indeterminate breed, standing in the middle of the road. He resisted the urge to accelerate until they were well past the oddly-matched pair, and even then kept the speed of the SUV well below the prevailing speed limit. It wasn't unheard of in Cobán for the police to shoot first and bypass the questions altogether; he wasn't about to do anything that might attract unwelcome attention. Right now he didn't need any more complications. What he needed was a break.

They had not yet cleared the town limits and the exchange with Velasco was, for any number of reasons, making him cautious. His eyes darted to the rear vision mirror again. Nothing but the kid and the mutt. Christ, he was moving beyond cautious and into the realms of paranoia but, as much as he hated to admit it, the SIC lieutenant's early morning visit had unsettled him. Had Velasco been warning him? Threatening him? Or maybe just trying to do him a favour. Dragging his thoughts back from the bizarre exchange with the enigmatic Guatemalan he remembered that Nathan was still waiting for a response from him.

"Straight up. A Lieutenant Velasco." He fished in his breast pocket for the business card and, drawing it out between index and middle finger, held it up for Jackson. "And I think he was telling me they don't want us playing in their backyard.""

"You think?"

He allowed himself a smile at the exaggerated sarcasm in Vin's voice while his gaze drifted to the rear vision mirror again. "Just call it a hunch."

"I'm guessing he had nothing new to offer," mused Nathan, as he scanned the card, "so why's this SIC squirrel hitting the street at daybreak to make a house call?"

"Maybe he just likes to see the sunrise."

Chris flicked a glance at Tanner. The Texan sounded bored and already he was slouched indolently in the passenger seat, staring out of the window as the last structures that marked the outskirts of Cobán became increasingly sparse and human habitation finally surrendered to the encroaching forest altogether. It crossed Larabee's mind that Vin might still be stewing over their earlier confrontation, until he realised that Vin's distraction was a result of him focusing his attention on the SUV's side mirror. His gut did an abrupt backflip and his eyes darted back to the rear vision mirror.

Nothing.

Jesus! What was he expecting? Angry at himself for being more strung out than he could remember being in years he turned his attention back to Nathan.

"Said he had more questions, which would've been an okay cover if he'd ever gotten round to asking any." Chris hit the start of a good stretch of blacktop and gave the 4WD some gas. "Seemed real anxious for us to leave Cobán and get back to the city."

"You told him we were heading back to Guatemala City?"

"I didn't tell him anything. Lieutenant Velasco made an assumption."

"And you didn't bother to enlighten him."

Larabee shrugged dismissively. "Didn't see any point in complicating things."

"Mr. Larabee," interrupted Hengst, "Was it perhaps unwise not to tell this man, a police officer, of your true intentions?"

"Maybe," agreed Chris, guardedly, "but the one thing we don't have is time. And if the SIC got involved I can almost guarantee we'd be still be back in Cobán wrapped up in so much goddamned red tape that about the only thing we'd be able to do for Buck and Ezra is write their obituaries!"

"And Lisa?" Hengst's voice was tight. "What about my daughter?"

"Trust me, Lisa's safe, at least until the ransom deadline. Then if all goes according to their plans, you front up with the cash and you get Lisa back."

Hengst nodded slowly. "And this is what the police also believe, so they fail to take any positive action?"

"You got it. Then the only one who gets stung is you and the insurance company. Less manpower, time, effort and paperwork to let the kidnapping run its course."

"You sound cynical, Mr. Larabee."

"Chris will tell you he's a pragmatist," supplied Josiah, smoothly, pre-empting any answer Chris might be about to give. "Truth is he's just a mean son-of-bitch who looks for the worst in everybody."

Taking no offence, Chris simply grinned. "Fewer surprises that way, Josiah. And you know how

much I hate surprises."

"Well, pard," drawled Vin, without looking away from the window, "don't like to ruin your day, but I think you got yourself one. And it's about a mile behind us."

Chris instinctively looked in the mirror but the fact that he failed to see anything but a ribbon of asphalt unwinding behind them changed nothing; they had a tail.

"Reckon he's been keeping us company pretty much since we left the hotel," continued the Texan, "He's been keeping it real casual but he's stickin' with us like gum to your shoe."

At gut level Chris found the news came as no real surprise.

"Black Audi?"

"None other. Guess our friend from the SIC doesn't trust us a whole lot."

"Guess not."

"So, Mr. Larabee, what is to happen now?" Hengst sounded anxious, and Chris studied him for a moment in the rear view mirror. The German was floundering; out of his depth. This was a respected businessman, used to manipulating millions of dollars with the aim of making more millions and his experience lay in corporate raiding and keeping ahead of the inland revenue, who knew little of the sordid and violent world into which he had been unwittingly drawn.

But it was a world that Chris knew too well. Maybe Josiah was right. Maybe he did see the worst in people, the inevitable result of seeing, and dealing with, the very worst of which people were capable for most of his adult life. And if it had made him hard and unforgiving, then it had also kept him sane - and alive.

"Nothing."

"*Bitte?*" There was no mistaking the surprise in Hengst's voice.

"Nothing," repeated Chris, "We keep going and if Velasco wants to follow us, then that's his business. We're not breaking any laws that I know of."

Beside him Vin gave a snort. "Yet!"

Chris didn't take his eyes off the road but gave a dismissive shrug in response. "We'll cross that bridge when we come to it..."

"Uh, yeah, Chris," interrupted JD quickly from the back of the Montero, "talking about bridges we need to cross, we need to get off this road pretty soon and start heading more to the west."

"Pretty soon? Christ, JD, what's that supposed to mean? Five yards? Five miles?"

Dunne glanced up from the ten thousand dollar piece of military-grade hardware on which he was tracking the satellite phone. "It means hang right when you see a likely stretch of road."

"Likely stretch...? What the hell happened to being able to pin point the signal to within a few meters?"

"It's not that simple, Chris. Sure, I know where the goddamned signal originates, I can even give you

the co-ordinates. What I can't tell you right now is how to get there from here!"

Chris contained himself although he could feel the increasing pressure in his temples as his frustration was replaced by a steadily building anger. His grip on the steering wheel tightened as he drew in a deep breath and slowly exhaled in a bid to maintain the control that he felt rapidly slipping away.

"So now we're guessing, huh?"

There was a moment of uncomfortable silence and Chris could feel the tension in the cabin rise a notch.

"This is Guatemala, Chris, not Boston," answered Dunne quietly, but his voice was tight with suppressed emotion, "and I'm working from a patched together piece of software and an out of date and inaccurate map, not following a state of the art in-vehicle sat-nav system that can tell you exactly where to get out and take a piss if you need to! I've done...I'm doing the best I can with what I've got, and if that's not good enough then I'm sorry! I haven't mastered walking on fucking water yet." He ducked his head and concentrated on the LCD screen in front of him, stabbing fiercely at the keyboard with one hand as he angrily raked his unruly hair out of his eyes with the other, before flinging a last salvo in Larabee's direction. "Just remember one thing; none of this would be happening right now if we'd done as Ezra said and taken the plane..." He stopped abruptly, in one, agonising, moment realising the implications of his words and the impossibility of taking them back.

Dunne heard a barely audible: "Oh, boy," from one of the others and he felt a flutter in the pit of his stomach. Some things should never be said. Even the truth.

Hengst looked as if someone had just sucker punched him, all colour draining from his face as he sat rigidly in his seat, yet JD could see that his eyes were bright with moisture. In front, Larabee's own posture was equally tense and a flush of blood had coloured his neck a dark, dusky red as he braked to slow the SUV, then changed down through the gears and guided the Montero to a gradual stop at the roadside. For a moment there was only the low rumbling sound of the idling engine and the rhythmic tick of the indicator to fill the otherwise silent vehicle, then with a heavy sigh Chris leaned forward, head bowed and shoulders hunched as he rested his arms on the steering wheel.

"I know."

Dunne opened his mouth to speak, then promptly shut it again. There was nothing for him to say.

The awkwardness of the moment was salvaged by a clearly exasperated Vin who broke the stunned silence with a much-needed infusion of reason that left no room for the wasted emotion of regret.

"Don't much matter now, does it? Ain't no way of going back and changing any of it." He released the door catch and shoved open the passenger door with his foot before turning back to address no one in particular. "You know, the way I see it right now is that we've got the SIC on our tail, we

don't know for sure how to get to where we want to be and we don't know what we'll find when we get there. Fact is, we know jack shit...!" Unfolding like a sprung flick-knife, the Texan completed the move to exit the 4WD. "But we got us a map reference and that's as good as it gets. We're only gonna get one shot at this, so let's not fuck it up."

Larabee straightened and shot a hard look at the former Texas Ranger but his stare was returned with equal intensity, Tanner's blue eyes reflecting a confidence and determination that Chris could not readily dismiss and which he, at last, acknowledged with a brief nod.

Vin slammed the door and jogged around to the driver's side. "I'll drive." He jerked a thumb towards the back of the Montero, lowering his voice as he spoke through the open window for Chris's benefit only. "Now, I reckon you should put your money where your mouth is, pard, and show the kid what a Special Forces vet can do with a map and a set of co-ords."

With the merest hint of a smile Chris wordlessly surrendered the wheel and swung his lean frame out of the cabin, moving aside to let Vin take his place.

A sudden flash of sun reflecting off glass caught his eye and, in a purely reflex action, he turned his head to stare with eyes narrowed against the glare back along the stretch of road they had just travelled. The dark-coloured sedan which had just crested a rise in the distance promptly slowed and drew off the road. Chris slowly shook his head. Although it was too far for him to positively identify the car as the Audi, it didn't take a towering intellect to put two and two together and come up with Velasco. Watching and waiting. The disturbing analogy that sprang to mind of a cat patiently stalking a mouse didn't sit well with Chris.

"You want me to lose him?"

Larabee quickly focused again as Tanner's voice sliced sharply through his rambling thoughts. "No." He swung the driver's door home with a solid thud. "Forget him. We'll see what he has in mind before we start getting too paranoid."

Vin shrugged and released the handbrake. "Whaddya mean 'getting'?" He tapped the gas pedal and briefly revved the engine in a less than subtle hint to Larabee that they needed to get moving again, before turning with a sly smile to the older man. "So, you gonna walk, pard?"

JD was uncomfortable. So uncomfortable in fact that he had not quite managed to make eye contact with Chris since Larabee had shouldered his way into the cramped space at the extreme rear of the SUV and squeezed in beside him. Although Chris had said nothing JD was still silently agonising over his impulsive outburst that openly criticised his boss. Even if he believed that the accusation was justified, Chris deserved more respect than that. But if the barb had stung, Larabee was not letting it get in the way of the job they had to do now. Instead his attention was fully focused on the map spread out on his knees yet JD could not shake the feeling that he would be held to account once the pressure was off and, when the time came, he didn't expect that Chris

would be likely to cut him any slack.

"Gonna give me a hint, cowboy, or do we just flip a quarter?"

JD glanced up from monitoring the still stationary satellite signal as the SUV decelerated, a fraction of a second before Larabee's head swung up in response to Vin's drily sardonic inquiry. They were rapidly approaching an intersection and JD suddenly found he was oddly grateful that it was now going to be Chris's call. Once they started to deviate from the main highways it was going to be anybody's guess where they might end up but when Chris answered there was no hint of doubt in his voice.

"Take a right." His face suddenly creased in a grin. "But keep that quarter on stand-by."

After almost half an hour of watching Chris Larabee at work, bringing them steadily closer to their goal as the signal from the satellite phone drew them in with the surety of a guidance beacon, JD could only be impressed by the man's navigational skills. Not that it had gone all their way. Several times they had been obliged to double back and find an alternative route and more than once the road had simply ceased to exist forcing them to negotiate terrain that challenged even the off road abilities of the 4WD.

At the wheel Tanner had remained unruffled; a study in relaxed concentration. Nothing seemed to faze him. He followed Larabee's directions with no more acknowledgement than a silent nod to affirm that he had heard and understood. So when the Texan suddenly hit the brakes and swore, a short, sharp, and frustration-laden expletive, Dunne felt the sinking feeling of disappointment in his gut before he even looked up to find out what had prompted Vin's outburst.

Beside Dunne Chris almost bristled, his body tensing as his head swung up to find their way barred by a single vehicle parked across the road. There was no pause for consideration, not a single moment of hesitation, for Larabee as he launched himself out of his seat and wrenched open the nearest door.

"I'll handle this!" he snarled, "Don't anyone move."

No one did.

Chris resisted the temptation to charge straight up to the Audi and demand what the hell Velasco thought he was doing. Instead he took a deep breath and deliberately slowed his walk as he let his initial flare of irritation subside, smothering it with a blanket of reason before it could develop into something he might be less able to control. Chris was well aware of his own shortcomings, diplomacy never having been his strongest asset, but to vent his frustration on the detective now would gain him nothing. As much as he wanted to uncover Velasco's motives, he had a feeling that direct confrontation was not going to work with this man.

As he approached the car, the driver's door swung open and the SIC detective emerged with such economy and fluidity of movement that he was already leaning against the front fender and

casually lighting a cigarette before Chris had closed the remaining distance between them. Yet, he had achieved the transition without any suggestion of haste.

Velasco waited for several seconds after Chris had come to a standstill in front of him before he finally lifted his head and made eye contact. It was a contrived manoeuvre intended to clearly establish the lieutenant's position as the one calling the shots. Chris let the moment ride, painfully aware of time wasting as he prepared the play the game.

"Is there a problem, Lieutenant Velasco?"

The detective made a slight, almost dismissive gesture with the hand that held the cigarette.

"I don't know. Is there a problem, Señor Larabee?" he made a wider, sweeping gesture to take in the surrounding landscape. "This is a long way from Guatemala City."

Chris gave an indifferent shrug.

"Did I say we were going back to the city? I said only that my client had to go back to arrange the transfer of the ransom money. I didn't say when."

Velasco shook his head and smiled.

"Ah, the subtleties of the English language. Lying by inference is the correct term I believe." His expression hardened marginally and the blue eyes frosted over. "You lied to me, Señor. You lied, because you didn't trust me."

Chris sensed disappointment underlying the sharply delivered accusation and the unexpected sentiment caught him off guard.

"And you've been tailing us since we left Cobán because you didn't trust me!"

Velasco nodded in agreement as he paused to draw deeply on the cigarette, delaying any reply until he finally released the smoke he had inhaled with an almost contented sigh.

"*Si*, this is so. And it would seem that my doubts were justified, no?" He tilted his head, begging the question, as his eyes bored with chilling intensity into Larabee's own. Chris almost dropped his gaze under the intense scrutiny but held as Velasco abruptly straightened and took a step forward. "So tell me, where exactly are you going?"

There was no menace attached to the movement, but Chris was left with the impression that Velasco was not a man to be taken lightly. The designer suit and GQ looks were superficial gloss. Window dressing. Scratch the surface and Chris could almost guarantee that underneath there was a hard and dangerous man, who would continue to politely smile as he was pulling the trigger.

Chris hesitated, still not sure that he should put his faith in Velasco. The man was an unknown quantity; a wild card. Yet, he had no desire to carry on a game of cat and mouse with the detective and the reality was that they were steadily running out of both time and options. Gnawing thoughtfully on his lower lip, he looked away from the lieutenant to stare beyond him and into the thick vegetation that bordered the road as if doing so would miraculously allow him a

precognitive glimpse into the future. Three lives hung on the balance of the decision he was about to make, but in the end he knew that he might as well be making the call on the flip of a coin and there were going to be no guarantees he would get it right. Finally, with a sigh of resignation, he shifted his gaze back to focus on Velasco.

"We're tracking the missing satellite phone." He watched carefully as Velasco computed that single scrap of information; saw the flicker of interest in his eyes. An almost imperceptible nod invited him to continue. "And I can't tell you exactly where we're going, because I don't know." The admission made him feel foolish the moment he'd uttered it.

"Ah, certainly that would explain the erratic nature of your journey." The lieutenant's expression remained unchanged but there was no doubting the cynical amusement in his voice. "Perhaps you follow the wild goose?"

Chris accepted the mildly derisive gibe. Realistically, he could hardly blame Velasco for thinking he had encountered an entire battery of loose cannons roaming unchecked on his territory.

"We've got a GPS fix on the signal," he stated simply, "But knowing the co-ordinates of the signal doesn't tell us how to get there." The ghost of a smile fleetingly appeared. "And your maps leave a lot open to interpretation."

Velasco's nostrils flared as he released a jet of smoke from his lungs. Again his expression remained fixed but his body language contradicted his outwardly calm appearance. "And you did not think to share this information with the SIC? With me?"

"If you want the truth, then no. There's a limited window of opportunity here, Lieutenant, and I'm not prepared...no, I can't afford to let that go while we shovel through a mountain of bureaucratic bullshit!"

After a moment Velasco sighed as he flicked the ash from his cigarette. "Señor Larabee, this is my territory. I was born right here in the Alta Verapaz. I know this land and I know its people. You are the stangers here - *extranjeros* - and, forgive my bluntness, you barely have enough Spanish to ask directions to the nearest *tocador*."

"And your point is...?"

"You are not in America now and you are perilously close to abusing the privileges afforded to you as visitors to this country. I would suggest that you tread carefully now, Señor. The SIC is not known for its tolerance. "

Again Chris was struck by the relaxed delivery of Velasco's words; he was not trying to intimidate, he was just stating facts.

"And what about you, Lieutenant? How far does your tolerance go?"

Velasco smiled. "Ah, Señor, to discover that you would have to put me to the test."

Larabee searched the man's face for any sign of duplicity. There was none. But then he had been

known to make errors in judgement before. He spared a moment to look back at the Montero, aware of the others watching and waiting and even more aware of the minutes steadily ticking away. Taking a deep breath he faced Velasco again, shaping his next words and wondering if he was insane or merely desperate.

"Then help us."

Velasco's response was a gracious inclination of his head and a widening of his smile as he promptly dropped the almost spent cigarette at his feet and crushed the butt into the ground with toe of his shoe. "Señor Larabee, that is exactly what I have been trying to do."

The noise was merely irritating at first. A constant high pitched drone without variation in pitch or volume that was impossible to ignore or, it seemed, avoid. He would have gladly settled for either but it slowly came to him that the buzz-saw whine was being generated from inside his own skull and there was going to be no immediate relief from the irksome monotone. Within seconds the annoying assault on his eardrum rapidly shrank into insignificance in the wake of his steadily increasing awareness of pain. And not just from one, single, source that he could identify, but countless hurts merging into a complex web of pain as hyper-stimulated nerve receptors kicked into overdrive.

At the same time an inexplicable sense of urgency rapidly filtered through several layers of consciousness and into his sluggishly responding brain cells, suddenly propelling him into confused wakefulness with the abruptness and acceleration of a missile launched from a slingshot. Lisa!

His first thought as he struggled to rise was for the girl; his second was that he was going to throw up. Several deep breaths later when the roiling nausea had mercifully receded and the abrupt explosion of pain in his skull had ebbed to a dull, pounding, throb he cautiously completed the move to sit up. Snatching at fragments of his memory and desperately trying to assemble them into some kind of meaningful order, his hand moved automatically to his head and he winced as his fingers explored a tender swelling above his left ear.

Goddamn! The bitch had hit him. He didn't remember it, he just knew it to be a fact. The way he suddenly knew with absolute and dreadful clarity that Lisa was already long gone.

He leaned forward then, one arm cradling his bruised and abused ribs, as all sense of urgency evaporated and he was left with nothing more than an overwhelming feeling of defeat.

The unexpected sensation of a hand gripping his arm startled him, but while his brain jumped the tracks, his only physical reaction was to slowly turn his head and blink owlishly through unfocused eyes. Buck? Still groggy, he had almost forgotten that he was not alone.

"Man, you had me going there for a while. Thought you were gonna bail on me for sure this time."

The voice revealed the same complete and utter weariness that he felt but the spark of warmth

and humour that made Buck Wilmington the man he was still shone through his words and if, in response, Ezra's smile was faint it was at least genuine. Buck's grip relaxed a fraction. "How you feelin' anyway?"

Ezra squeezed his eyes shut, massaging the lids between thumb and forefinger. "Believe me, you don't want to know." He sighed heavily. "Hell, I don't want to know." After a moment he turned his attention back to Wilmington. "Lisa?" He felt he had to ask, although he already knew the answer. "With Connie."

The Southerner would have nodded but he had already learned that any movement of his head made him nauseous, so giving himself up to the creeping lethargy of exhaustion, he simply closed his eyes and said nothing.

Larabee wondered again if he had made the right decision. For the past fifteen minutes his mind had moved in an endless circle, always coming back to the same question: what if I'm wrong? Sitting beside Velasco in the leather-upholstered comfort of the Audi as the self-possessed Guatemalan drove towards the hillside village that he, after several minutes of deliberation, had confidently marked as their target, it was easy to succumb to the first real stirrings of doubt. Suddenly it all seemed too easy.

The abrupt and unexpected turnaround in fortunes had received a guarded response from the others. Velasco's appearance had been greeted with reserved cynicism by all but Vin who had merely nodded his acceptance of the fact that the SIC detective would now be going with them and Manfred Hengst whose expression had mirrored his obvious, yet guilty, sense of relief. Chris could at least sympathise with Hengt's understandable reaction; for a civilian so completely out of his league the familiarity of an official police presence, however unorthodox, would be reassuring. For the others it was more likely to be reason for suspicion.

And Velasco was unorthodox, there was absolutely no doubt about that and, on reflection, Chris considered that perhaps it was that singular trait that made Chris now put his trust in him. That, and the fact that his remaining options were severely limited.

The plan was simple: scope out the village, check the situation, leave and regroup. No confrontation. No heroics.

No sweat.

Larabee felt the first flutter of anticipation in his belly; the fact that they were winging it only intensifying the sensation. Their hastily contrived cover allowed for himself and Velasco to pose as wayward travellers with car trouble; a couple of tourists off the beaten track with more money than sense. Ideally Vin and the others would stay out of the picture for the first phase of the operation but would be near enough to step up to the plate if the whole plan went belly-up.

Once again doubt gnawed at his confidence. Hell, they had no idea just what they might be up against here and had learned the hard way during his years in the special forces the kind of fuck-ups that could only come with lack of decent intelligence. Finally, with a sigh of resignation, he switched his thoughts to his companion at the wheel. Whatever happened now, Velasco was the one who would carry the can and, on reflection, Chris could not help but admire that kind of casual disregard for official consequences. In electing to aid them, the detective had already stepped outside the boundaries dictated by his superiors, but then Chris had a feeling that Velasco cared very little about boundaries. The detective might still be a wild card but Chris suspected that when push came to shove that Velasco would be a good man to have onside. He turned his attention to the man beside him, guessing that he would be testing that particular theory soon enough.

"Tell me something; what are our chances of getting the hostages back?"

Velasco lifted one hand from the wheel and with palm down and fingers outspread rocked it from side to side in a motion that Chris understood to mean so-so.

"With the ransom delivered to instructions then there is every chance for the girl to be returned unharmed. That is generally the way of things. But this way...?" he sucked in a quick breath as he let the sentence hang and shook his head, "it will take more in luck than it takes in skill. It is always a dangerous thing to challenge the wolf in its own lair."

"And my men?"

"The truth?" He paused, then after a few moments of thought answered cautiously. "I cannot say for sure but I think perhaps the outcome may not be so favourable."

Chris sighed heavily as the detective's words only echoed his own thoughts. "Yeah."

Velasco briefly took his eyes off the road to glance at Larabee. "And yet we still have the advantage, no?" The smile that followed was that of a grinning wolf with its prey already in sight. "*¿Quién aventura nada no tiene ninguna suerte, eh?*"

Chris recognised several words and he was concentrating on laboriously trying to assemble a meaningful translation when Velasco suddenly laughed, and he realised it was quite obvious to his companion exactly what he was doing. He gave a slow, almost sheepish grin, well aware of his linguistic limitations and prepared to allow the Latino to score off him. This one time at least. "Okay, okay! So I flunked high school Spanish..."

"Who ventures nothing has no luck," supplied the Lieutenant affably, as he slowed to negotiate a sharp bend, moving the Audi close to the centre of the narrow track but still managing to give Chris a distinctly nervous moment as the wheels on the passenger side seemed to drift disconcertingly close to the edge of the steep incline that bordered the road.

They had been climbing steadily for some time and the change in altitude had been slow and subtle, but now Larabee had an unobstructed view down a treacherous-looking slope and he

realised just how far they had come into the rugged mountainous heart of the Alta Verapaz.

"¡Mierde!"

Chris needed no translation this time and his head swivelled to a rapid eyes-front in response to the sudden and unexpected braking of the vehicle that accompanied Velasco's impatiently muttered expletive.

The truck was a battered, drab, olive green, GMC two and a half tonner and although it was no longer on the road, it wasn't quite off it either, creating enough of an obstruction to make Velasco hesitate before attempting to manoeuvre around it. And it sure as hell wasn't going anywhere anytime soon. Canted a few degrees off centre, Chris suspected that the offside front wheel had gone over the soft edge and the driver, unable to extricate the heavy vehicle, had simply abandoned it.

As Velasco cautiously nosed the Audi around the stationary truck, Chris automatically gave the GMC a more detailed scrutiny as it passed by his window, taking in the shabby and ill-used bodywork that had obviously seen better days and several amateur paint jobs, the canker of corrosion that was progressively eating away at sections of exposed metal and the evidence of numerous D-I-Y repairs carried out with twine, lengths of twisted wire and their more modern counterpart - the cable tie. He guessed the vehicle had been past its best when it had undoubtedly arrived from the US, the source of many used cargo trucks for the economically challenged Central American countries who were only too eager to take advantage of the lower taxes in the States.

As his brain sifted through the disparate scraps of data that had subconsciously registered, he looked back again at the nondescript van. Something didn't gel.

"Stop."

To his credit Velasco braked first, before asking the inevitable: "¿Cuál?"

"Take a look at the truck."

The detective swung his head round and glanced at the grey-green vehicle. "Okay, I'm looking." But his tone implied that although he was looking he was not seeing anything; at least anything out of the ordinary.

Larabee opened the passenger door. "No, I mean really take a look." He walked slowly back to the crippled GMC as Vin, following in their tracks, slowed the Montero and pulled in behind it. Tanner stuck his head out of the open side window, aviator glasses reflecting the sun as he spoke.

"Somethin' wrong, Chris?"

Larabee, who had paused to run his hand over the front nearside tyre, looked up in response.

"Wrong?" He gave a short laugh. "Hell no, in fact for once I think something just might be right!"

Velasco stood with his hands in his pockets, one hip relaxed as he watched Chris examine first the front and then the rear tyre for a full minute before he finally spoke. "Heavy duty, all-terrain tyres,

very new, very expensive."

"Exactly. Doesn't make sense, does it?"

The detective shrugged. "Perhaps not, but this should be of interest because...?"

Chris reluctantly turned his attention away from inspecting the well-defined ribs, blocks and voids of the tread pattern and looked back at an expectant Velasco. "Because I think this might be the truck that hijacked the kid."

The SIC lieutenant chewed thoughtfully on the inside of his lip, as if weighing up the possibility of such a claim being valid, before he finally spoke. "Tell me, why do you think that it should be this very truck, out of so many similar trucks found in this country, when I understand from your statement that no one saw the vehicle used in the kidnapping?"

Larabee straightened, dusting off his palms, before starting to check points off on his fingers as he reeled them off to the obviously sceptical detective. "Okay. One, it's right here, right now, only a few miles away from where we've already tagged the satellite signal and I don't believe in coincidences. Two, the size and weight of the truck checks against the tracks that were left at the roadblock, and three..." he paused to take a breath, his excitement tightly controlled yet tangible, "I recognise this tread pattern." He quickly moved to the back of the vehicle, confident that Velasco would follow. "See here, the different tread on the rear? Between the two you end up with a pretty distinct impression, and I'm telling you this is a match for the tracks I saw right after the kidnapping."

Velasco dropped into a relaxed squat by the rear wheel, staring intently at the rubber casing for several moments before looking back at Chris. "I won't insult you by asking if you are sure of this."

Larabee's gaze as he made, and held, eye contact with the sombre-faced detective was as intense as it was passionate. "I'll stake my life on it, Lieutenant."

"Estéban, please. I think perhaps now we can dispense with such formalities." He smiled as he rose from his crouched position, dusting off his pants in a gesture that was more out of habit than necessity. "And, let us hope that it does not come to that, eh?"

Chris responded with a slyly mischievous grin of his own. "It won't. And the name's Chris. Never been one for formalities anyway."

Velasco jerked a thumb towards the off-kilter truck beside him. "Now I think maybe a closer look is in order. Would you not agree?"

The closer look involved the Guatemalan gaining access to the cab by way of side window that he effortlessly jimmed with a purpose-designed length of steel he had fetched from the back of the Audi. As Velasco went to work with the finesse of a professional car-jacker, Chris wondered just what else the maverick lieutenant might have stashed away in the cargo space.

The rear doors proved more of a challenge, but while the rest of them had been debating the issue

Tanner had quietly stepped up to the plate and revealed a talent for lock-picking that had Larabee shaking his head. That kind of surprise he could handle.

Velasco made several terse calls on his cellphone, setting the official wheels in motion to identify the registered owner of the vehicle, while Chris supervised a detailed search of the truck, all too aware of the time ticking away and desperate to find any clues that might give them an advantage. Larabee knew that they were snatching at straws; all the connections he had made so far were tenuous at best, yet he was willing to stake everything on this single roll of the dice. If he was wrong then he would have to live with the consequences.

"Chris. I think you should take a look at this."

Jackson's voice cut into his thoughts quickly pushing the nagging doubts from his mind as he picked up on Nathan's tone. Although his voice was low and controlled it was obvious he had found something worth investigating but Chris got the unmistakable feeling that it was something he might not want to see.

A few moments later he was crouching beside the former medic in the back of the truck, looking at the tarry black stains on the floor of the cargo bay with mixed feelings.

"Blood."

Nathan traced the irregular smear with a gesture through the air with his hand. "Drag marks. And you can see here where its more concentrated in the one place."

Chris tried not to let his imagination run riot as the pieces started to tumble into place. Cold, hard logic told him that there could be any number of explanations for what he was seeing but instinct told him that this was indeed the very truck that had been used to kidnap his client's daughter. And that it was almost certainly Buck Wilmington's blood at which he was now grimly staring.

"It looks a lot more than it is," supplied Nathan softly, and for a moment Chris felt a surge of anger and resentment that Jackson should think that he needed that kind of reassurance, until he looked again at the dark puddles of dried blood that had collected in the corrugated channels of the floor and realised that it was exactly what he needed.

"Yeah," he replied quickly, and more sharply than he intended, "I know." He abruptly straightened and turned towards the open doors. "Okay, I've seen enough. Let's move it."

Buck had curbed his natural inclination to talk mainly because he was not sure where to start or even what to say and while this was not the time for idle chatter, he felt that he should at least make an attempt to reach out to the subdued and silent Southerner who had withdrawn so completely within himself. But he wondered what he could possibly say that would have any chance at all of getting past that barrier that Ezra had so readily put up, shutting everything and

everyone out. In a way Buck couldn't blame him, not after what he'd been through. The guy must be hurting in a big way.

He was just about done in himself. It had taken every ounce of energy he had to drag himself over to where Ezra lay, unconscious, but he had needed to see for himself that he was alright; that he was still breathing. Only now there was nothing left and there was a fuzziness around the edges of his consciousness that scared him more than he cared to admit, as if he was somehow becoming more insubstantial. His leg didn't hurt so much anymore but he felt overwhelmingly tired and it was getting harder just to think straight.

He guessed Ezra wouldn't be feeling too sparkling either. If a concussion was all he'd escaped with he would be lucky. If he had avoided a perforated eardrum from Connie's stunt in firing the gun he would be luckier still. Crazy bitch!

"You know somethin', Ezra? This job sucks."

The quiet snort of derision that came from the Southerner was enough to show Buck that he had at least heard. He might not be ready to talk but he was listening.

"Been working close protection for a few years now, ATF and army before that, and this isn't the first time I ever got shot but I gotta tell you it really, really sucks."

"Gets your attention," agreed Ezra, softly, but his focus was clearly elsewhere and Wilmington got the impression that the Southerner might well be talking about something else altogether.

"Yeah." Buck worked some moisture into his dry mouth, wishing the water bottle was a little closer but to get to it he would have to move again. Deciding against it, he grimaced as he shifted his weight and eased down onto the floor, no longer sure that he could remain sitting up much longer without passing out. "Sure as hell got mine."

For several minutes Buck said no more. Instead he focused on getting some oxygen into his system as he listened to the muted sounds coming from outside the shed. There was a lot of activity and some snatches of shouted conversation which he had no hope of understanding but it sounded to him as if things were becoming a little strained in the ranks. If nothing else Ezra had managed to rattle their cage. One man dead, another one out of action; hell, even as a hostage he had managed to throw a few curve balls their way. No wonder Connie had been a hair's breadth from blowing Ezra's brains out. In fact, the more he thought about it, the more he began to wonder why she hadn't.

"You know something else? You really know how to piss people off."

Ezra lifted his head a fraction and turned to look at Wilmington over his shoulder, his expression one of quizzical amusement. Gratified that he had succeeded in gaining the Southerner's full attention, Buck took the response as tacit approval to continue.

"And I mean big time. You got a death wish or something?"

Ezra gave a rueful smile and one hand came up to his head to finger again the bluish swelling above his ear. "Not any more."

Buck felt an inexplicable feeling of dread worm into his belly. "Hell, Ezra, that was meant to be a joke."

The Southerner sighed and in a gesture of utter weariness drew up his knees, and resting his forearms across them, cradled his head on his arms. When he spoke his voice was muffled. "I wish it was."

The Audi crawled along the uneven dirt road, the tyres crunching on loose gravel as it rolled to a gradual halt at the first cluster of cinderblock houses. Velasco had called it a village; as he scanned the sprawl of mismatched, rundown collection of dwellings Larabee thought he was being overly charitable in his description. Although he had seen many such settlements in his army career, the crude housing badly in need of repair, the complete lack of the most basic utilities or sanitation, and the overwhelming aura of poverty always brought about the same emotions; an initial reaction of shocked disbelief, then an uncomfortable feeling of embarrassment, rapidly followed by a deeper sense of shame. His next, equally depressing, thought was that there was little chance of finding the hostages here. While it was remote enough to be secure, it was also the end of the line and from what he could see there was no way out except the way they had come in. Logic told him that they could not afford to discount anything at this stage, experience told him that the possibility of this being the kidnapper's bolt hole was minimal but gut instinct told him that they had drawn a blank; they would not find the hostages here. He was almost relieved when Estéban's voice broke into his thoughts and burst the contemplative bubble that had momentarily distracted and discouraged him.

"Ready?"

Grounded again, Chris reminded himself to take one step at a time. He was here with one purpose and one purpose only; to find the missing phone and the man, or woman, who now carried it, and at this moment the terrible reality of this settlement and countless more like it across the globe meant little to him against the fate of one teenage girl and her two bodyguards. That was something far more personal. Something that he could at least try to redress.

He nodded although he felt the sudden gut-wrenching dread of an actor, unprepared for his role, being suddenly thrust centre-stage without having learned his lines. "Let's do it."

Following Velasco's lead, he pushed open the car door to step out into humid warmth that smothered him like a damp shroud and within seconds left his shirt clinging uncomfortably to his skin. Ignoring the unpleasant sensation and suddenly very aware of the gun concealed inside a waistband holster, he waited for the detective to make a move, automatically scanning the

cinderblock and wooden structures that flanked the dirt road and reminding himself that somewhere in this cluster of ramshackle buildings was someone with a very expensive piece of InterSept's communications inventory. At the moment he would allow himself to think no further than that. The satellite phone he was willing to write off but he wanted information and, to be truthful, in his present state of mind he didn't much care how he got it.

Chris was not sure what he had expected but the complete indifference with which their appearance had been greeted was definitely not it. A dozen pair of eyes had calmly marked their arrival and immediately dismissed it. The unspoken message was clear enough; they were intruders and would receive no welcome here. He flicked a questioning glance at Velasco but the detective seemed relaxed and totally unconcerned by the cool reception. Larabee felt a quick flare of irritation, conscious of the small window of opportunity still open to them. He had only one question he needed answered: where the hell were his men and their charge? He started to move forward but a casual hand signal from the detective warned him to stay put.

"Slowly, my friend," he murmured, "there is already little trust here. We do not wish to burn the bridge before we have even crossed it."

Chris knew he was right but it did nothing to curb his growing anxiety that escalated with every passing minute. He moved up beside Velasco as he lifted the hood, and the two of them bent over the engine bay.

"They're not here."

"No, I think you are right," conceded the detective, "but I also think we are close."

"We'd better be, we don't have much time," muttered Chris, grimly.

Velasco glanced up, his expression unexpectedly sympathetic. "I know." He looked quickly away, and made a pretense of adjusting something on the engine before straightening again. "So we should perhaps do what we came here to do, no? Just follow my lead, and Chris..."

"Yeah?"

"...try not to look too intimidating, okay?"

Larabee gave a faint smile. "I'll do my best."

The lieutenant started forward, then half-turned and fixed Larabee with a thoughtful stare before he spoke again. "And remember, that a man who holds his tongue may pass for wise."

In spite of the gravity of the moment, Chris laughed softly. "Are you telling me to keep my mouth shut?"

Velasco suddenly grinned. "Somehow I don't think that will be a problem, unless your Spanish has greatly improved or you have learned Q'eqchi in the last ten minutes!" He slapped Chris on the shoulder, a signal to follow him. "Come. Let's see what secrets this place can be persuaded to give up."

Vin Tanner was a patient man by nature, and that patience had been carefully honed over the years by his ongoing pursuit of excellence in marksmanship until it transcended both natural inclination and acquired skill to become almost an art form.

He sat motionless now, although the nagging pain in his lower back had been steadily intensifying over the last hour and he recognised the tightness in his neck and shoulders as the forerunner of another headache, but exuding a degree of calmness that betrayed nothing of his physical discomfort or the unsettled nature of his thoughts. Somehow watching and waiting had always been easier when he had a rifle in his hands but right now he was feeling the impotence of inaction, and not liking it. And worse, he felt exposed, which he liked even less.

The Montero was parked at the roadside, out of sight of the village but in full view of anyone approaching or leaving the settlement. In either eventuality he had his instructions; no one was to pass in either direction. With a soft sigh, he looked across to where Josiah had stationed himself on the opposite side of the road. So well had Sanchez concealed himself that, even knowing his position, it took Vin a few seconds to mark him. Having reassured himself that all was still quiet, he switched his gaze to the 2-way radio handset lying on the centre console as if willing it to crackle into life but it remained mute and he returned to staring out of the window, biding his time but his craving for activity even stronger than it had been before.

In the seat behind him Hengst moved restlessly from time to time but other than the sound of JD's fingers tapping lightly on the laptop keyboard there was no sound from anyone. The Texan glanced surreptitiously in the rearview mirror and for a few seconds he watched Manfred Hengst distractedly and compulsively turning the bezel on his undoubtedly expensive chronograph as he stared blankly into infinity. He was impressed with the German's self-control. Not once in the many long hours since Lisa had first been snatched had Hengst lost his cool but Vin guessed that, whatever his outward appearance, he was locked in a private hell that only a parent could begin to understand.

As for himself, he was trying not to think too much about Buck and Ezra. He had spent the best part of two days feeling guilty; firstly because he had been so easily duped by Connie into stopping the Montero, then because he had been left behind. No matter how many times, or from which angle he looked at it, he could not help feeling that he had let the team down. It didn't matter how many times Chris, or anyone else, told him that it had been nobody's fault, deep down he felt responsible for whatever Ezra and Buck might be going through right now. And, if Chris was right about Connie being involved in the kidnapping, then he had no illusions that either man would be treated well. He had experienced Connie van der Schoor's brand of vindictiveness first hand and he remembered too well the absolute loathing she had displayed for the Southerner. One thing he did

know for certain; he wouldn't wish the likes of Connie on his worst enemy.

With no real effort Vin's thoughts travelled back to Guatemala City: the day at the mall. The day Ezra had challenged a mightily pissed Chris Larabee in his defence; not that he had looked for anyone to fight his battles for him, but Ezra had put himself in the firing line and Vin was not a man to easily forget that kind of gesture. Any more than he had forgotten how it had been the Southerner who had intervened at the airport. God, how long ago had that been? It seemed a lifetime, but when he worked it out it was a little over two weeks.

The shrill chirrup of a cell phone abruptly shattering the tense silence triggered an adrenaline surge that momentarily jolted his heart into overdrive and brought him instantly out of his reflective mood. He turned around to look behind him only to find his own, slightly baffled, expression mirrored in that of both Dunne and Hengst who were staring with undisguised curiosity at Nathan as he snatched his cellphone from his pocket and snapped out a terse: "Jackson!" His unusually brusque manner suggesting to Vin that he wasn't the only one who had been startled by the unexpected ringtone.

The call was brief, with Nathan's only contribution being a single interjection to confirm he had understood before he terminated the call with a hasty: "Thanks. I owe you one." Pocketing the Nokia he sighed then allowed his gaze to roam over his rapt audience who were still keenly watching him in silent anticipation.

"Connie van der Schoor has no record of any criminal activity in the States, Germany or the Netherlands," he began, "she doesn't show up on any database for even so much as a traffic ticket. Basically, she's clean..."

Vin snorted and twisted back to face the front of the vehicle. "Hell, that don't mean squat, 'just means she ain't been caught yet!"

"But," Nathan continued, over-riding the interruption, "her name did come up in association with someone who *is* known to federal agencies; the son of the leader of a crime syndicate originating in Suriname. Seems she has a few friends in low places."

"Terrorists?" ventured Hengst, his voice steady but betraying some of the strain of the last few days.

Nathan pocketed the phone and shook his head. "My contact says purely criminal. Drugs, kidnapping, illegal immigration, chi..." he stopped abruptly, halting the seemingly ongoing catalogue of crimes and quickly shifted his focus from the German to Vin, "...cross-border trafficking, mostly in the people-smuggling trade, between Guatemala, Belize, Honduras, Mexico and the States."

"Sounds like we hit the jackpot," grunted Vin, irritably, leaning forward to massage his knee, "trouble is, knowing who they are and what they do don't exactly help right now."

"No," agreed Nathan, softly, "but maybe you can stop beating yourself up about what happened on the road to Tikal."

The Texan stopped rubbing his knee but didn't look at Jackson, his voice pitched low but holding a note of warning when he replied. "Leave it, Nathan."

Jackson shrugged. "Okay, if that's how you want it, but believe me, whether you'd stopped because of Connie or not, this would still have gone down. These guys aren't playing games, they're playing for big money and they're playing for keeps. The only difference would have been that you'd have been a dead man."

Half-turned in his seat Vin slowly raised his head, aiming a hard and uncompromising stare at Jackson and for a moment anger sparked like flint on stone in his eyes. His mouth moved as if he was about to say something in retaliation and the African-American waited for the backlash that he felt was sure to come, but instead the Texan seemed to collect himself, and the tense set of his shoulders suddenly relaxed as he gave a single, curt nod.

With a smile Jackson leaned forward and reached out to wordlessly squeeze Tanner's shoulder in a gesture of understanding before shifting his gaze to stare thoughtfully out of the crazed windshield at the empty road.

"Wish we knew what the hell was happening up there."

There was an interval of awkward silence as Wilmington struggled to find something to say that would fill the void created by Standish's disturbing revelation, and although his concern for Ezra's current state of mind was growing by the minute, he could think of no other strategy than to keep him talking.

"Well, I gotta hand it to you, Ezra," he started, forcing some levity into his voice, "you really got that pretty little Dutch girl all riled up and fit to bust her britches."

"It's a gift," murmured Ezra, sarcastically, but his tone was dull and apathetic.

Eyeing the exhausted Southerner warily, Buck hesitated for a second before finally pressing on. "Is that what happened in New Orleans? You pissed someone off?"

Ezra didn't look up, but after a long pause he sighed as he inspected his mangled and bloodied wrists. "You could say that."

Buck swallowed, his mouth suddenly dry, knowing that he was entering dangerous territory but determined to keep going anyway.

"So what happened?"

Buck had expected some reaction but even he was surprised by its intensity as Ezra's head jerked up and he was suddenly fixed with a startled, almost haunted, look. "What?"

"Tell me what happened in New Orleans."

In that moment everything that had gone before and everything that was destined to come between the two of them hung in the balance, and Wilmington half expected Ezra to either turn away and close him out or tell him to mind his own goddamned business. In fact for a fleeting instant Buck was reminded of a wild dog, hungry and craving human contact, but mistrusting the hand that could just as easily beat it as feed it. Then the moment passed and the Southerner gave a dismissive shrug.

"Why? What could I tell you that you haven't already heard?"

The two of them traded stares across the narrow space and the millions of miles that suddenly divided them, Wilmington keeping his own gaze steady as he answered gently: "Because I want to hear it from you. Sure, I've listened to the spin, second- and third-hand rumours, but I'd like to hear your story. I'd like to hear the truth."

"And you expect to get that from me?" Ezra replied quietly, bitterness infusing every word, "You made it clear enough that you think I'd sell out to anyone with enough cash! Hell, seems even Connie knows that, so why the fuck would you think I'd tell you anything?"

Buck felt a stab of guilt as he remembered the woman toying with Ezra, probing for some weakness, before she had pulled the trigger on the Sig. He had been only half conscious at the time, playing possum to avoid drawing Connie's attention to himself as he slowly roused from having passed out, but her words had registered in his awakening brain. Now they came back to him in a gut-swooping rush: *Offer him enough and he'll roll over for anyone. Sell out to the highest bidder? Just ask his friend, Buck...*

He had no idea how Connie knew but as he frantically searched his memory he vaguely recalled a heated conversation he'd had with Chris back in Guatemala City; just one of many, now he thought about it. Larabee had told him that Hengst was going to offer Ezra a lucrative contract to go work for him, and Buck had reacted predictably. Had Connie been there? He closed his eyes and swallowed hard, suddenly feeling both the crushing weariness of his injuries and the undeniable truth that, in every sense of the word, he had betrayed the Southerner.

"Listen, Ezra, I know what you're thinking..."

"No you don't," whispered Ezra, so softly that Buck barely caught the words, "You don't know anything about me."

Wilmington struggled to lever himself up on one elbow but found the simple action almost beyond his abilities. Sweat trickled freely down his neck and between his shoulder blades, and he felt sick and faint but suddenly he needed to explain. For some reason it had become very important to him that Ezra understand. If he was going to die, and the chances were that neither of them would see outside the four walls of this Guatemalan hell-hole again, then he didn't want it all to end with the

Southerner believing he had once again been shafted.

"You're right, Ezra, I don't," he began, his voice tight with pain as he tried to ignore the fire now raging through his knee and thigh, "but believe me, that's not how it was. You don't know the whole story..."

Buck's words trailed off as Ezra gave a sadly triumphant smile and lowered his head. *Touché*.

For a few seconds Wilmington was at a complete loss for words then, impulsively, he lunged forward and stretched out a hand, snatching at Ezra's sleeve. "Christ, Ezra, I'm...sorry."

The Southerner slowly looked down at the grimy and bloodied fingers clutching a handful of fabric and then, just as slowly, back to Buck, his expression weary.

"What do you want from me?"

Buck would have liked nothing more than to be able to tell him, but he had finally pushed himself beyond his limits and before he could form the words his vision blurred into grey and his ears were filled with the harsh, rasping sound of his own breathing, as he slowly felt himself falling.

Ezra reacted a fraction too late. As it was, Buck's sudden collapse caught him off guard and his arm, still held firmly in Wilmington's grip, was wrenched painfully forward as the bigger man slumped bonelessly to the floor. For a moment he stared blankly at the unconscious man then, as he looked down at Buck's pale, waxy features, icy fingers of dread crawled over his skin and the reality that he was looking at a man struggling to hold onto life suddenly penetrated the fog of concussion.

There wasn't a part of him that didn't hurt. His head felt as if his brain was trying to expand beyond the physical limitations of his skull, every joint and muscle protested at the slightest movement and he was afraid that at any moment he was going to lose the ongoing battle with nausea and throw up again, but he wasn't dying. Not even close. And he should know, having been a long way down that particular road before. Buck, on the other hand, was in bad shape. A fact, Ezra told himself bitterly, that he would have been aware of sooner if he had not been so completely focused on his own misery.

Forcing unco-operative muscles into action he shifted closer to Wilmington and with no small difficulty managed to position him more comfortably but the cold, clamminess and unhealthy, grey, pallor of his skin sapped Ezra's confidence that with his limited skills he would be in any way able to influence the inevitable outcome if Buck did not receive medical attention soon.

The wounds stank; the sickly smell of corruption that seemed to coat the back of his throat, threatening to finally tip the balance in his struggle to maintain control of his stomach and, having taken down the crude dressings, Ezra now wondered if he had not made a mistake. He was certain that, in the absence of Nathan with his valuable paramedical skills, someone like Vin would have been much better equipped to deal with such a situation than he was. Tanner was at least the

survivalist type; whereas he, on the other hand, was just a survivor. He was used to operating alone, looking out for himself, and he was becoming increasingly doubtful that he was cut out to take on the responsibility for someone else's welfare. But they were in this together, whether either of them liked it or not, and he could not escape the truth that, whatever Buck Wilmington's shortcomings, he deserved more than this. So, he would do the best that he could with what he had and trust to providence that by some miracle they could both come out of the experience alive.

Focusing on Buck's immediate needs at least kept him from dwelling too much on the future or, in his mind at least, the lack of it. He deliberately avoided thinking about Lisa, because to do so only exposed his own sense of inadequacy in not being able to better protect her from their captors and, for now, he was determined to focus only on an outcome that he possibly could change, rather than one that was now out of his control.

Instead he found his thoughts wandering to what Chris and the others might be doing, and whether Vin had survived the attack on the Montero. The last he had seen of the Texan was a brief glimpse of him taking evasive action as the windscreen had been penetrated by a single bullet, but after that he had been too immersed in getting Lisa to safety to pay any more attention to Tanner's fate. For that alone he felt a pang of guilt, and with it a sudden, startling, realisation that it mattered to him. In some ways he found it disturbing, but the truth was that he had broken his own first rule of self-preservation and allowed himself to care. He smiled wryly, as he tore a length of lining from his already ruined and long-since discarded jacket. His mother would be disappointed in such a lapse. But then, when had he ever done anything that pleased his mother?

Buck stirred restlessly, reminding him that he didn't have a lot of time to waste in daydreaming and, just as quickly, Ezra's innate sense of cynicism returned in full force and he told himself that it didn't matter in the least what he felt about any of them, or indeed about himself, because very soon he would be dead.

Wilmington's agitation increased, and Ezra hastened to complete his crude effort at cleaning and dressing Buck's injuries. He had already sacrificed as much water as he dared, not knowing how long they may yet be left imprisoned in the gloomy shed without access to either food or water, but he was at least satisfied that the leg now looked - and smelled - a lot less like two-day old roadkill.

For several minutes Buck was undecided whether he should move, speak or breathe. The one thing he did know for certain was that he couldn't manage all three at once, so he opted for breathing as, at that moment, it seemed the most important for his immediate well-being. He knew it should be an automatic reflex but for some reason it was taking more effort than it reasonably should, as

if there was no substance to the air he was breathing, and he was reminded of a trip he had once taken to Mexico City and the rarified air there.

"Fu-uck!"

The single word gusted out in a long-drawn out sigh that mutated into two syllables, achieving his second objective but the third remained frustratingly elusive. His body simply refused to cooperate.

It hadn't occurred to him that he still hadn't opened his eyes, until he felt a dribble of water touch his lips and trickle into his mouth. Ezra. For a split second he considered keeping his eyes closed if only to avoid making eye contact with the Southerner; simply because he was both afraid, and ashamed, of what he might see there. Hell, he'd be lucky if Ezra ever wanted to speak to him again. He swallowed convulsively and felt the flow of water marginally increase, swallowing several large gulps before turning his head to snatch a breath and finally look at the man leaning over him.

He wasn't sure what he had really expected but if Ezra had any axe to grind he was hiding it well. In fact, as his face swam into focus, Buck could have sworn that there was nothing but an open and honest concern there, but in an instant it had transformed into Ezra's customary smooth expression that revealed nothing at all of the man's emotions.

After a moment Buck gave a reasonable imitation of his usual cocky grin and forced out a breathily disjointed: "When you're losing the argument big time, go for the sympathy vote. Works every time."

The Southerner responded with a sardonic smile, turning to recap and set down the almost empty water bottle. "Lying bastard," he countered, good naturedly.

Buck's laughed softly. "Yeah, well, reckon it takes one to know one."

The following interval of silence stretched to the verge of awkwardness, but just when Buck was starting to think that he had screwed up again and was rapidly thinking of how to salvage the moment, Ezra lifted his head and levelled a disconcertingly intense stare in his direction, a soulful look that Buck found that he could not turn away from.

"About New Orleans..."

Buck felt a moment of dismay, suddenly feeling that he was going to regret ever hearing those quietly spoken words.

"Listen, Ezra, you don't have to. I had no business asking you." He was aware that there was an element of panic in his voice. "You don't have to do this, not for me."

Ezra tilted his head a fraction, a puzzled look in his eyes, but after a split second of hesitation he just smiled sadly. "Yes, I do, Buck; I really do. But you're right about one thing, I don't have to do it for you. I have to do it for me."

Chris wished now he had a comm link. They had debated using the ear piece but decided against it on the grounds that, although JD would be able to guide them more easily to the origin of the satellite signal, it was highly visible and would not only create suspicion but perhaps jeopardise any real chance of a successful outcome. For Chris the risk had outweighed the benefit and he had waived the convenience and advantage of an open communication link for the element of surprise, but now he felt isolated. The feeling that they were walking blindly into a potentially dangerous situation made him uneasy. Not because he had any concern for his own safety but because he was afraid that one wrong move could blow the whole thing. If they lost this gambit then they would have lost the game.

Estéban seemed to be having no such qualms as, showing no hint of either haste or tension, he moved with a relaxed and confident attitude towards the nearest villager who watched his approach with a total absence of curiosity that Chris found disconcerting. He held back, hoping that his own ill-fitting guise of wayward traveller was even half as convincing as Velasco's, allowing the detective make the opening moves as his gaze travelled slowly over the untidy jumble of timber and corrugated iron shacks, jury-rigged lean-tos and more substantial prefabricated dwellings that straddled the rutted track.

His gut feeling was that the answers he wanted were here. Somewhere.

Walking a few paces away from the Audi then back again, he moved in the restless and bored manner of one with little patience who is, for once, obliged to wait. This passive role was not one he liked, and it was becoming increasingly difficult for him to maintain the outward appearance of being relaxed when his brain was already into overdrive. In a token effort to channel some of his frustration, he made several slow circuits around the vehicle but after five minutes of purposeless movement he finally conceded defeat and halted again. With a deep sigh he leaned against the Quattro, resting the backs of his thighs against the mud-flecked front fender and wishing, for the first time in over a year, that he had a cigarette.

He let his gaze wander indiscriminately over the settlement, a seemingly casual appraisal that registered the smallest detail, as he searched for any sign that might possibly mark their target. He didn't need much to go on. In fact in his present mood he would be shooting first and asking questions later. He thought of the semi-automatic tucked inside his waistband and knew he was thinking in metaphorical terms only; they needed information, not a body count. At least not yet.

Velasco had talked of the place giving up its secrets but to Chris's practiced eye the village was giving nothing away and he hoped that Estéban's impromptu interrogation was getting better results than his own disappointing attempt at surveillance. So far, to Chris's growing dismay, the detective seemed to be content do to no more than exchange sporadic pleasantries with the old

man and he wondered irritably if all conversations with these apparently reticent descendants of the Mayans took as long as this one.

He had been watching Velasco and the villager for some time, understanding nothing of the exchange and wondering how much more time the detective was prepared to squander with his winning hearts and minds approach, when he became conscious of the fact that he was, in turn, being watched. He resisted the initial knee-jerk reaction to make a quick visual sweep of the area, reluctant to acknowledge that he was aware of being under scrutiny but nonetheless, like most humans, he found the sensation uncomfortable. Within a few seconds the area between his shoulder blades began to prickle and he started to feel the vulnerability of exposure; a feeling that he knew would persist until he either moved from his current position or could at least mark his watcher. He quickly shunted aside the fleetingly disturbing image of being framed in someone's gunsight as a moment of extreme paranoia and instead glanced at his watch, silently urging Velasco to speed it up, before casting an apparently idle glance around the immediate area.

There were two of them. Just kids. A girl of about five and an older boy; brother and sister Chris guessed from the similarity in looks, and they stared with the unwavering and open curiosity of the innocent.

For a moment he was transfixed, he had been prepared for almost anything but the natural inquisitiveness of children, then the tension slowly leached from his body and, with an abruptly dismissive shake of his head, he laughed softly. *Chris Larabee you've been in this job way too long.* He smiled at the two wide-eyed youngsters, touched by the way the boy stood slightly in front of his sister in a stance that suggested he was her protector, but it was a bittersweet moment as it struck him that the boy was about the same age as his son, Adam. With a sudden keen sense of loss he mentally corrected himself: the same age as Adam had been when he died.

Three years on, his death was still a healing wound but at least now he could reflect on the memory of his wife and son without the pain that for a time had threatened to cripple him emotionally. He had almost destroyed himself in the weeks and months after the fire, unable to get past the grief and the guilt that, day by day, had steadily consumed him. He should have been there; and he had held on to the belief that if he had been home that night, things might have been different. And even if him being there couldn't change what happened, at least then he wouldn't have been left behind - left alone - to grieve. With a heavy sigh he pulled himself back from those dark reflections. He had moved on and their passing was now the dull and distant ache of a phantom limb; no longer there in physical form but its former presence never forgotten.

Chris focused again on the children who continued to watch him with an undisguised and unwavering interest that he initially found unsettling. Then he wondered just how many times these people had been subject to the same sort of scrutiny from ill-mannered tourists who would

think nothing of blowing on a day's entertainment what most of these villagers could not hope to earn in a month of Sundays and, again, he felt a distinct sense of injustice in recognising the gulf that existed between his way of life and the day to day struggle for existence of a disenfranchised indigenous people.

With a sharp reminder to himself that he was there for a purpose, he quickly brought his straying thoughts under control and shot an impatient glare in Velasco's direction but the SIC detective was still deep in conversation and either failed to see, or chose to ignore, Larabee's silent censure.

He swung his head back towards the two children, who had not moved an inch since he had first become conscious of the pair, to find that in addition to being stared at the little girl was now tugging in growing agitation at her brother's sleeve and pointing excitedly in his direction. Unable to stop the automatic reflex of someone under prolonged scrutiny, he self-consciously made a rapid appraisal of his appearance. After considering, and dismissing, a number of options including something as embarrassingly basic as whether his fly might be undone or worse, in his mind, that his handgun was openly visible, Chris realised that the girl's attention was fixed instead on the bulky satellite phone attached to his belt. At first he assumed the hi-tech handset would be a novelty for the children, then with sudden clarity it registered that her increased animation had nothing to do with it being in any way unfamiliar, but rather because she recognised it as something she had already seen before.

In that instant time seemed to slow to a crawl and he felt as if somehow he was no longer standing on solid ground. They had known the second phone was here; they had electronically tracked it and JD had been confident that there could be no possible mistake, but somehow this one little girl's gesture had now made it a real and incontrovertible truth. Gut clenching with anticipation he controlled the urge to sprint over to the two children, reason overcoming the instinct to take action. "Estéban." His voice was tight. Not his own.

Forcing himself to look away from the two youngsters, as if breaking eye contact would make them disappear, he slowly turned to Velasco. The detective was still talking, although he had allowed some of his attention to drift away from the Q'eqchi at the sound of Larabee's voice and he frowned in response, an unspoken question in the slight frowning of his brow. Chris signalled with a jerk of his chin and was relieved when, as obscure as the gesture was, Velasco followed his gaze as it tracked back to the children. The Guatemalan's frown deepened, understanding that there had been some new development of which he was unaware, but trusting enough to respond without any further prompting. Excusing himself to the villager he moved without haste back to the Audi.

"What is it?"

Larabee shifted his stance slightly and tapped the phone slung at his hip, keeping his voice low. "This. The kid has seen one before."

Velasco turned his attention to the youngsters, clearly weighing up the possibility and considering the implications. "You are sure?"

"As sure as I can be."

After a few seconds of deliberation, the detective gave a quick nod. "Okay. Perhaps these little ones can tell us what their elders will not."

Chris started forward only to find Estéban's hand firmly restraining him, his expression suddenly sombre. "Take care. These people value their children more than gold. We could well find ourselves in the hands of a lynch mob should our intentions be misinterpreted."

Sure enough, the old man Velasco had been speaking to was already eyeing them suspiciously, and once again Chris recognised that he owed the Guatemalan a great debt of gratitude; never before had Larabee felt quite so out of his depth as he did now.

"Jesus," he breathed, "Deliverance country or what?"

Velasco gave him an odd look, not understanding the reference but picking up on the negative connotation, before abruptly wheeling away and leaving Chris to follow in his wake. Larabee shrugged; so, he just failed the political correctness test but right now he didn't much care. This place was starting to give him the creeps.

Estéban made it as far as greeting the children, dropping down into a less intimidating eye-level crouch, before the old man rose from his stool with a shout. Chris didn't know if it was a protest or a warning but either way it was enough to create a minor disturbance and, as a small cluster of silently watchful villagers quickly formed, he found it oddly comforting that he was armed. Trusting that Velasco knew what he was doing Chris switched his attention instead to the ranks of curious bystanders, the rapidly growing interest that the detective had succeeded in generating making him uneasy.

If the man had moved slowly, merging with the subtly shifting crowd, Chris might never have noticed him but the very fact that he broke cover and bolted drew his eye like a predatory hawk to a fleeing rabbit. And, like the hawk, he acted solely on instinct launching himself into immediate pursuit. He had already covered several yards at a sprint before he fully realised the possible misinterpretation of his actions as a collective murmur of discontent rippled through the villagers. The shift in mood was subtle but if there had been distrust before it now bordered on hostility.

He heard Velasco shout, but whether his words were aimed at the villagers or were intended for him Chris had no idea, and he was not stopping to find out. To hesitate now would risk losing them the only lead that had so far presented itself and already there was more clear air than he would like between himself and his quarry. Something solid and weighty struck his shoulder a glancing blow - a rock he guessed - hard enough to hurt but not enough to deter him from the chase. Instead he ran on, choosing to ignore the buzz of angry voices that erupted around him. Velasco could deal

with the social politics, he had something with a little less talk and a lot more action in mind.

"Ever work undercover, Buck?"

Wilmington, feeling a lot more at ease since Ezra had fixed his leg, eyed the Southerner, from where he now lay stretched out on the floor, with a degree of wariness. The question sounded innocent enough, casual even, but he had an uneasy feeling that Ezra was trying to lead him into some admission he might later regret. The suspicion lasted less than a second as he realised that Ezra didn't have the look of a man trying to score points, but rather a man who was at the end of his rope. He looked pale and drawn, and the bruised swelling above his left ear reminded Buck that he was probably badly concussed into the bargain. Not for the first time he wondered just how much it took to put this man down.

"No way, not me," confessed Wilmington finally, "I'm not cut out for the cloak and dagger stuff. Too much like hard work. Guys like me prefer to keep it simple, you know; just let the dog see the rabbit and let us loose kinda thing. No, I just bust the bad guys."

Standish gave a wan smile. "Only it's not always the bad guys you need to watch out for."

Buck's eyes slid guiltily away from the Southerner and suddenly not sure of what he should say next he settled for a quietly expressive: "Yeah."

"It's not something you can leave behind at the end of the day, Buck. No time card to punch, no overtime, no weekends off, no going home when the shift's over and forgetting about the whole thing until the next day. You live a lie for weeks or months on end, you exist day after day in a world that bears no resemblance to the one you left behind; you become someone else and every single day you wonder if this is the day when it all goes belly up. But you live with it because it's all part of the challenge, part of the rush - how far you can go, how close you can get, how deep you can burrow into that reality without losing yourself. Or getting caught. And then one day it just blows up in your face. It's something you're always waiting for but, you know, when that moment finally comes it's never how you think it will be. Suddenly you're on the other side of the line and..." he sighed wearily, his expression suddenly far away as if reliving a particular memory, "you're on your own."

Buck held back, sensing that Ezra was about to take the first hesitant step into a painful past but afraid that if he spoke now the moment might be lost forever, and he had already decided that Ezra had earned the right to tell his story in his own time and in his own way. And he would listen. He owed him that much at least.

"I was transferred into New Orleans out of Atlanta for just one purpose; to go in and blow the lid off corruption in the agency. Watertight setup. I was offloaded from Atlanta after seven months of

hard work establishing my cover there. Not that it took much. All I had to do was live far enough beyond my means to start people talking and then, after I blew more gambling in just a few months than I could possibly earn, rumour and suspicion did the rest for me." He looked up at Wilmington with hooded eyes and a cunning smile. "And you know how well the grapevine works." The inference was not lost on Buck, but Ezra was obviously not about to dwell on it as he quickly moved on. "By the time I got to New Orleans I was already bagged and tagged; on the take and ripe for the taking. It took another three months before things finally began to fall into place, then suddenly I was doing a juggling act trying to work two angles on the same job. I was in deep cover, working a legit assignment but at the same time trying to make the link between one or more moles in the Agency and the cartel I'd infiltrated."

"And you made it?"

He laughed softly, a short, bitter sound. "Someone thought so."

"Enough to want to get you out of the picture?" prompted Buck, cautiously.

"It was a set up. And they crucified me." Ezra kept his head down, staring at his hands. "I've never been so fucking scared in all my life!"

The forlorn simplicity of his words sent a chill through Wilmington; if he still had any doubts about the truth of Ezra's claims, those misgivings were shattered forever now by the undisguised pain in the Southerner's voice.

"There were nine of them waiting for me that night. Nine." He sighed then fell silent as if he was caught in some distant memory, but after a few moments he seemed to gather himself and carried on, his voice flat and expressionless. "Didn't stand a chance. My cover had been blown away and they knew everything about me, the Atlanta connection...the works. I remember one of them saying: You're a dead man - and I really believed him. But there are things worse than dying, Buck." "I guess there are at that," whispered Buck, softly, recognising now that Ezra's studied detachment was just another defence mechanism, and starting to wonder at what dark memories still lurked in the hidden recesses of his mind.

He remembered then how easily he had dismissed the details of the Southerner's ordeal; and how quick he had been to stand in judgement of him on no more than hearsay. *Where there's smoke and all that*. But the smoke he'd been so sure about then, now turned out to be an elaborately created smokescreen and, like all the others who had been so ready to vilify Standish, he had been blinded by it.

"When they were done I wasn't a dead man, but I wanted to be; then and for a long time after. I lost my job, my credibility, my self-respect...hell, I almost lost my leg. They left me nothing but a smashed up body and a desperate desire to die." He sighed and picked distractedly at the shreds of abraded skin on his wrists. "I don't know who pulled me out of that bayou or even why. I was too

far gone by then. I just know that I spent every single day of the next three months wishing they'd finished it that night."

"Jesus." Wilmington was unable to hide his shock at the unexpectedly candid confession. He knew all about that kind of darkness of the soul. He'd been there before with Chris after his wife and son had died; and it was no place to go alone. For a moment he watched Ezra; then ventured: "And now?"

The Southerner's head came up in response, green eyes alive in darkly shadowed sockets.

"Now, I don't have the luxury of choice, Buck." A crooked smile tilted the corner of his mouth. "Like it or not, this time I'm really fucked."

Wilmington struggled to raise himself, disturbed by Ezra's seemingly ready acceptance of what they both knew was the likely outcome of this insane game. The difference between them, Buck decided, was that he knew Chris would be pulling out all the stops to find them and that, even if he was too late, he would have taken his best shot, because he had an unshakable faith that Chris would never let him down. And he would hold onto that shred of hope, no matter how fragile it became, until he took his last breath. But Ezra had never had anyone to put his faith in. He needed to learn something about loyalty and friendship, both elements of which seemed to be lacking in his own professional, if not personal, experience.

"What's this 'I', bullshit? Reckon we started out in this together and we'll finish it together, so better make that 'we're' fucked, okay? And just remember this..." He fell back again, breathing quickly, drained of energy but determined to finish. "...it ain't over till the fat lady sings."

Ezra's smile came slowly, erasing some of the hard lines of pain and exhaustion, only to slide away again as the door to the shed abruptly exploded inwards and half a dozen armed Latinos boiled through the opening to fan out in a tight semi-circle around the two men.

With a quiet sigh he switched his attention to the open door, preparing to meet the coming challenge but already certain of the final outcome.

"Well, Buck. I don't know about you but I think I just heard the last chorus of God Bless America."

Sixty yards and losing ground. Unaccustomed to the rarefied air his lungs were already on fire, but he was not about to let the son-of-a-bitch get away even if he burst a blood vessel trying. Right now that seemed entirely possible but he couldn't give up now when the only lead he had was within his sight, if not his reach.

Behind him he could still hear the escalating buzz of agitated voices and, rising above it, Velasco's voice; commanding, taking control. But it became a minor distraction as he focused mind and body on the chase, digging deep to find an extra burst of speed that was fuelled in part by sheer determination but owing still more to desperation.

That first extended sprint had been taxing enough but, as he was drawn further into the heart of the settlement, the constant weaving and turning in the confined spaces between buildings sapped his energy even more. Worse still, the village that Chris had believed to be little more than a cluster of haphazardly constructed houses bordering the road, proved to be a sprawling and frustratingly disorganised maze that seemed to follow no logical pattern or form. More than once he was forced to double-back, unable to find a way through. Now sweat dripped irritatingly into his eyes and trickled freely between his shoulder blades as he awkwardly hurdled yet another obstacle barring his way, but none of it mattered. He just knew that he had to keep going. He needed answers and nothing was going to stop him getting them.

Skidding on a scattering of organic refuse that littered the ground he lost his footing, landing heavily on one hip and sliding forward for several feet with all the grace of a baseball player stealing a base, swearing as already abused muscle and bone connected with solid ground. That same hip still bore the fading remains of the bruises he had collected in Guatemala City when the SUV was rammed; a moment in time that now seemed too long a go to even contemplate. Goddamn the bastards! Barely missing a step, he was up on his feet again and running as hard as he could before the pain even registered.

Scattering squawking chickens as he ran, he ploughed heedlessly through a carefully tended vegetable plot and only avoided skewering himself on a metal picket that struggled to support part of a roughly constructed wire netting fence, by deftly twisting to change direction at the last minute. The rusted steel snagged his pants and he impatiently wrenched himself free, ripping the fabric and grazing the skin beneath, but caring little about either.

Chest heaving, as his lungs worked overtime to draw the oxygen his body demanded from the thin air, he paused to take stock, no longer certain of either his bearings or his next move. Aware now that he had been operating from instinct rather than following any rational plan of action, he pushed aside a sudden surge of anger as wasted emotion and quickly adjusted his strategy. Mindful of the valuable seconds ticking away he snatched the two-way handset from his pocket and, ignoring all communication protocol, urgently barked just six breathless words: "Get your asses up here, now!" Without waiting for a response, he shoved the unit back into his pocket and smoothly drew his gun. Time to get serious.

He slowly rotated in place, all senses alert as he waited for some cue; a sound or movement that might betray the fleeing man's position. It was always possible that the panicked Latino was already free and clear, running hell-for-leather to God only knew where, but Larabee's gut feeling told him that he was still somewhere close by, still panicky, and having no better time of navigating the settlement than he was; whoever the son-of-a-bitch was, he didn't look, or act, much like a local.

It was barely a sound; no more than a whisper of fabric against fabric, the merest suggestion of motion, but it was enough to raise the hair on the back of his neck and warn Chris that he was not alone. Sensing danger he reacted purely on instinct, dropping into a defensive half-crouch as he wheeled around in a reflex manoeuvre that saved him from the swinging length of timber that would have otherwise have smashed into his head. Instead he felt only the rushing breath of its passing as he quickly shifted his stance and prepared to meet his attacker. Carried on by the impetus of the swing and his own forward momentum, the man crashed solidly into his intended victim, his weight knocking Chris off balance and driving them both to the ground.

Chris landed on his back with an explosive grunt as the air was punched forcefully from his lungs, struggling to throw off the heavier Latino who had fallen across him and was now trying to crush his throat with the steadily increasing pressure of his forearm. The man stank of sweat and fear, and that fear was lending him strength. He already had the advantage of greater height and weight, and he was in a better position to use them, but he quickly found that he was no match for Larabee's years of experience in close combat, or the determination that was now fuelling him.

As fights go it was short and intense; a brief but violent altercation from which neither man escaped unscathed. Chris had lost his gun in the first few minutes. Left with a choice of letting it go or having his wrist smashed, it had been a no contest decision but there was now the risk that his own gun would be turned against him and, as he strained to gain some small advantage over his bigger and heavier opponent, his mind was focused on avoiding that very thing. Bucking and contorting like a roped mustang he felt the pressure on his throat increase until, vision swimming, he finally gathered both wits and stamina enough to topple the bigger man with a throw that slammed him heavily into the ground. It was a few second's respite, no more, allowing him to scramble to his feet and take a strident and painful breath before the man was up and at him again.

Chris staggered back, absorbing the impact of a headlong charge, defending rather than attacking and resisting the urge to nail his attacker once and for all. He wanted him down, not out. He needed this man alive, alert, and able to talk if he was to be of any use, yet his opponent had no such consideration holding him back. He was scared and desperate, and he would kill if he had to in order to escape. Chris could not afford to exercise that option.

The sound of a motor straining up the steep hill to the village filtered into a remote corner of his awareness, but he had no time to appreciate the arrival of much-needed back-up as the Latino's clumsy and frenzied attack escalated in response to that same sound.

Misjudging a head-butt that, had it connected, would have put Chris out for the count, the man's forehead smashed instead into Larabee's right cheek as he turned to avoid the blow and an excruciating starburst of pain exploded in his face. Eyes tearing, he reeled back and swore,

momentarily losing his grip on the Latino's jacket as he took advantage of the moment and broke free. He ran then and Chris groaned inwardly as he stooped to pick up his gun and shove it in his waistband before he again took up the chase. Goddamn it, he really was getting too old for this kind of crap!

Only this time it was different. He had the fugitive in sight, and rather than losing ground he was only yards behind and gaining. This time he had him. Then, without any warning, the buildings abruptly fell away behind him and he was into open ground at the upper end of the settlement. Somewhere behind him should be Velasco and, hopefully before too much longer, Vin, but for now he was on his own. And running out of options.

Conscious of the growing tightness in his chest and the painful constriction of his bruised throat, Chris threw the last of his energy into a final burst of speed and launched himself forward in a flying tackle. It wasn't the cleanest take-down he had ever done; it was clumsy and badly timed, but it still brought the man to ground in a bone-jarring crash.

He came up fighting, and Chris was ready for that, already knowing he would try and make a break for it. But he wasn't ready for the crushing jolt of a clenched fist rammed solidly into his crotch. Whether by chance or design, the viciously delivered punch found its mark and was more than enough to momentarily put Chris out of action. With a grunt he doubled over, just barely controlling the urge to retch but still reeling from the savage pain ripping through his lower body. The moment was enough to make him lose his grip on his captive and for one, dizzyingly nauseous instant, he didn't much care.

Using the sudden, brief, lull in the struggle to his advantage, the man started to scramble away but, even temporarily incapacitated, Larabee was not in any frame of mind to give in so easily. The knowledge that, after all his efforts, he could still lose his prey spurred him into action. Face twisted in pain and driven by an overwhelming sense of fury, Chris lunged forward and hooked his fingers around the only part of the Latino still within his reach; an ankle. Tolerating the kicks and wild antics of his captive in a frantic effort to dislodge his already tentative grip, Chris instead tightened his hold on the man and, using his own energetic contortions to give him impetus, began to drag himself closer. Risking what he knew was the last of his stamina in a desperate, last ditch, assault, he threw himself onto the man's legs and scrambled forward to straddle his thighs. Time to nail this bastard once and for all.

Face drawn and pale, he tried to ignore the dull and sickening ache concentrated between his legs, and used his own weight to pin the flailing man to the ground. Grabbing an arm, he deftly twisted the wrist and shoved it high up his captive's back caring little that the man writhed and swore beneath him at the pressure he was exerting. Shifting his position, he dropped a knee into the small of the man's back and with his free hand grabbed a fistful of his hair, slamming his head into

the ground until the struggling finally trailed off to nothing more than a weak protest, and the Latino finally groaned in submission.

Adrenaline still coursing through his veins, Chris jerked the man's head up with one hand, forcing his back into a painful arch as he kneed him again in the spine. Quickly releasing the arm he had pinned between his shoulder blades, he snatched his gun from its clip and shoved it against the angle of his jaw.

The man's terror-filled eyes bulged as the blond bodyguard's finger tightened on the trigger and he felt the cold steel of the barrel dig into the soft flesh beneath his jaw. The American's voice was quiet and breathless, but the malice it carried sent a chill through his belly, and so certain was he that he was going to die at that very moment, that he almost lost control of his bladder.

"Talk - or die, you motherfuckin' son-of-a-bitch!"

There was a brief but tense interval punctuated only by the heavy breathing of the two men before a familiar, accented, voice interjected and, by default, granted at least a temporary stay of execution to the captive, although there was no promise of salvation in the words.

"I would suggest you consider your choice quickly, *asqueroso*. I think he means what he says."

Chris, his chest still heaving from the chase and his efforts to subdue his unwilling charge, spared a moment to glance up at a relaxed and smiling Velasco who now stood only feet from the sweating and struggling pair. The lieutenant's tone was almost friendly, but Larabee had already spent enough time in the detective's company to recognise that beneath the softly spoken advice was a thinly veiled threat of dire consequences should that advice be ignored.

Immobilised by the pressure of Larabee's knee in his back and the awkward angle at which his neck was being twisted, the Latino spat out a stream of breathlessly delivered invective that even Chris with his limited Spanish had no trouble understanding.

"*Vete al carajo! Tomar por culo!Tu madre. Chinga tu puta madre, cabron!...*"

The torrent of verbal abuse was brought to an abrupt end as Chris roughly shoved the muzzle of his pistol harder against the man's neck eliciting a sudden grunt of pain and then silence.

"Not the kind of talk I meant, asshole!"

Velasco looked amused but his eyes were still like chips of ice as he stepped forward and toed the man in the side with the reluctance of someone moving aside an unsavoury piece of refuse that lay in his path.

"Goddamn peasant! No manners," he agreed, still using English rather than Spanish, "Gutter filth." In a move that surprised Larabee with its suddenness, the detective dropped into a crouch before the hapless man and savagely thrust a canvas backpack at him that he had, until then, been holding just out of sight. "Yours, I think."

Chris blinked the sweat from his eyes and squinted beyond Velasco as, just then, the Montero

skidded to a dramatic standstill not ten feet away and the backup he had called for a lifetime ago, boiled out of the open doors to fan out in a loosely-formed cordon around him and his hard-won prize. The four semi-automatic pistols aimed at the now subdued captive brought a faint smile to his face that took the edge off the irony of his words.

"Glad you could make it."

Vin kept his eye fixed on the Latino although the man had not moved a muscle since he, backed up by his three equally hard-faced companions, had drawn his weapon and aimed it with a definite sense of purpose in his direction.

"Yeah. Thanks for the invitation. We were starting to get bored." He nodded at the wide-eyed Latino. "Looks like you got yourself a live one there."

Chris glanced back at the man with an air of casual dismissal. "Not for long if he doesn't start talking."

Tanner let his gaze slide to Velasco as the lieutenant flipped open the haversack and lifted out a twin to the satellite phone that Chris still carried on his belt. His face betrayed nothing but he traded a meaningful glance with Larabee. Jackpot!

The detective hefted the unit in his hand, a frown creasing his forehead as he spent a few seconds wordlessly examining the device. Finally, raising his eyes, he stared long and hard at the man on the ground before a chillingly feral smile appeared on the handsome face.

"I think you have some explaining to do, my friend."

He made a quick motion with his head as he stood, a universal signal that drew an immediate and unquestioning response from the waiting men. Needing no further prompting the four bodyguards moved in; Sanchez and Jackson, covered by an unusually sombre Dunne, relieving Chris of his prize as Tanner stepped up to offer his hand and haul the weary and battered Larabee to his feet.

"You okay, pard? Saw that slimeball go in below-the-belt. Reckon I felt that one."

Chris nodded, but leaned on the Texan, not quite able to straighten fully, and let out a long, slow, wheezing breath.

"Not half as much as I did!"

Vin was unable to suppress a sympathetic wince as Chris forced himself upright with no little difficulty. Keeping a firm grip on his friend's upper arm with his free hand he eyed him critically, not convinced that the older man was anywhere close to being okay. His complexion was grey, and there was a livid, red spot under one eye that promised to blacken in the very near future, but Tanner was not going to be the one to suggest that Larabee back off or even slow down. There was too much at stake now and he knew that Chris would keep pushing himself until he dropped and the best that Vin could hope for was to stick close and, when the time came, be there to pick him up and dust him off again.

Vin leaned easily against the fender of the Montero and from time to time eyeballed the surly and defiant, but obviously uneasy, prisoner. He had been searched in silence by a grim-faced Sanchez who had systematically emptied the man's pockets and roughly patted him down for concealed weapons. Many minutes later, the Latino was still leaning awkwardly over the vehicle's hood, purposely ignored, as he bent forward with his arms outstretched and legs spread in an attitude of enforced submission that Tanner knew to be not only uncomfortable but also degrading.

Chris had moved away just far enough for his words to be indistinct but there was no mistaking his mood; Larabee was pissed off and he was making no secret of it. He and Velasco had been in a face-off for the past few minutes and at first glance the body language and the raised voices suggested that the two men were locking horns, but Vin's gut feeling told him that there was more than a little showmanship involved, at least on Larabee's part. Even so, there was no doubt in Tanner's mind that Chris was close to red-lining. He was wagering everything on this last turn of the card, and if the Latino didn't give them something to work with then they were well and truly screwed. But time was steadily ticking away and the last thing any of them needed was for Chris to start losing it now.

The Texan allowed his attention to drift to Manfred Hengst, now standing a short distance away at the edge of the gathering crowd and flanked by Nathan and JD, the three of them having taken on the task of keeping the curious villagers at bay.

On the subject of losing it, the man looked as if he hadn't slept in days and, although the German had remained impressively unruffled so far, the cracks were finally beginning to show. Distracted, his gaze flicked endlessly between the captured Latino and the man in whose abilities he had, rightly or wrongly, put his complete trust. Now, toying constantly with his watch, his fingers nervously rotated the bezel, and Vin guessed that the reason for the almost compulsive movement was the knowledge that he should already be on his way back to Guatemala City to hand over the ransom; something that was sure to prey heavily on his mind. After all it was his daughter who was the bargaining chip in this negotiation.

With a sigh he resisted the temptation to look at his own watch and instead shifted his stance to take some of the weight off his injured knee, once again giving his undivided attention to his charge and feeling a lot more like the Ranger he had once been than the bodyguard he was now supposed to be. Perhaps, he mused, there wasn't as much difference between the two as he'd first imagined.

The Texan's moment of reflection ended as Larabee suddenly shouldered past the SIC lieutenant and strode with menacing purpose towards the Montero. Velasco looked on, his expression doubtful but resigned, as Chris steadily closed the gap between himself and the target of his forthcoming

attention.

He had thought that after several months of both working and living alongside Larabee that he had some measure of the man but in the next few minutes he found himself rapidly adjusting his estimations; this was a man he didn't know at all.

Without pausing Chris grabbed the unsuspecting man by the jacket and roughly hauled him away from the vehicle, spinning him round and slamming him back against the hood with force enough to make the Montero rock on its suspension and give the Texan cause to be thankful that he'd remembered to set the park brake.

"Where are they?"

Tanner was beginning to wonder if Larabee really expected an answer to his question or if he was simply using intimidation as a softening up tactic, when the Mitsubishi rocked violently again as Chris jerked the man forward by his lapels and slammed him hard against the hood a second time. This time Vin was certain the 4WD actually moved.

"I said, where are they?"

The Latino's answer was to spit at him, and although Larabee's head snapped back in a reflex action he was unable to avoid the gob of spittle that struck his cheek. Without releasing his grip Chris ducked his head to wipe his face on his shoulder and, as he slowly raised his head again, levelled a look at the man he had pinned between himself and the Montero that had Vin holding his breath. There was no mistaking the promise of violence in the cold and uncompromising expression; and there would be no going back.

It was a cold, calculated, punitive, and totally efficient assault; a tidily executed combination of martial arts moves that wasted neither time nor effort and put the man on the ground, sprawled on his back, gasping and thrashing like a landed fish as he struggled to regain the ability to breathe. Heels ineffectually scabbling for purchase he tried to put some distance between himself and his nemesis but, without any suggestion of haste, Chris took two steps forward and planted one booted foot on the man's belly as he reached behind him and purposefully drew his gun.

"You've got thirty seconds to start talking."

The man froze, his eyes darting between the short-barrelled Bersa .38 and the man wielding it, judging his chances.

"You crazy, man," he wheezed, the words heavily accented but recognisable as English just the same.

"Yeah, you got that right. Wanna go for broke? Fifteen seconds."

The Latino looked wildly around him, but all he saw was cold, hard, faces impassively looking on; no help there.

"Ten."

He gave a nervous laugh. Disbelieving yet uncertain as the gun swung to point at his chest.

"Five...four...three..."

"Wait!"

Chris cocked his head to one side, waiting; inviting the man to go on.

"No! You...you cannot..."

Chris sighed, a sound of disappointment. "Want to bet your life on it?... One!"

In a single, smooth action, Larabee swung the pistol from chest to groin and with a last, indifferent, glance at the incredulous Latino he fired.

Five shots echoed off the surrounding hills, one flat crack blurring into the next as each bullet, placed precisely in the angle of the man's thighs, kicked up a shower of dirt and stones.

The scream was genuine. More fear than pain, although Larabee experienced a gratifying, if somewhat petty-minded, sense of satisfaction from the fact that he had extracted some small measure of revenge, where gravel and shards of rock from the roadbed had peppered the man's crotch and, in one or two places, drawn blood. He had no doubt that it felt a lot worse than it looked, and from the sound of the man's moans punctuated with what were obviously prayers to the Virgin, he guessed that, at the very least, he believed himself to have been castrated. He gave a mental shrug. Tough. His part was done.

As if on cue Velasco drew level with the blond American ignoring the performance of their captive, whose moans were starting to subside as reason started to make inroads into his current state of mindless fear. He kept his back to the downed Latino and lowered his voice.

"Impressive work, Senior Larabee." His expression yielded nothing but his voice held a hint of laughter. "Lacking finesse perhaps but effective."

"Yeah, well, I do my best." His face slipped briefly into a grim smile and he slapped the detective on the shoulder. "Your turn." He started to wheel away then quickly turned back, his expression once again grave and his voice betraying some of his anxiety. "We don't have much time, Estéban." The lieutenant nodded and grasped Larabee's upper arm in a gesture intended to reassure. "Go now. Leave this one to me."

"Change in plan, boys."

Wilmington studied the woman for a moment as if he was not quite sure that he had heard correctly. "There's a plan?" His smile was faintly contemptuous as he closed his eyes, shutting her out as he laid back down again and surrendered to overwhelming weariness, murmuring a barely heard: "Could've fooled me."

Connie wasted less than a second of her time on the wounded bodyguard, his sarcasm ignored as

her gaze shifted instead to a far more challenging target. Wilmington was a spent force, fading fast and, as such, not worthy of any further expenditure of her time or energy. Standish, on the other hand, had shown a resilience that she found both irritating and intriguing. He was, even now, watching her with a benign indifference that infuriated her. What did she have to do to break this man? She was unable to resist a small shudder of pleasure as she pictured the arrogant American begging for his life. And he would. She would make sure of it.

"We are leaving."

The Southerner smiled. Mocking.

"Meaning we as in you, rather than we as in us, I take it?"

"Perhaps. You see, we have a slight problem. Too many people, not enough wheels."

Ezra waved a dismissive hand. "Please, you go on ahead. Don't put yourselves out on our account. We'll just wait for the next ride out."

"Ah, but I have a much better idea. You see, I was thinking more along the lines of you taking the express route out of here. Just you. A first class, one way ticket...straight to hell!"

Standish looked down at his hands with a tired, half-smile just tugging at the corner of his mouth.

"Oh, you disappoint me. I've already been there."

That quiet acceptance was the catalyst that in a single instant blew away the last remnant of restraint remaining in the Dutch woman. As her face twisted into a mask of undisguised fury, she aimed a savage kick at the Southerner, catching him with her steel-toed boot low in the right side so that he grunted with the pain of it. That at least gave her some sense of satisfaction, but she would have him doing more than grunt before the day was through. He would either beg for life or he would beg for death; either way she didn't much care. The end result would be the same.

"Well, asshole, you're fucking-well going there again! And I can guarantee that this time, you won't be coming back."

So this was it; the end of the line.

He had never truly believed that the final outcome would be any different. He had gate-crashed this little party; the uninvited guest who made a nuisance of himself and was about as welcome as a social disease. So, it was not unexpected that he would eventually be shown the door and he had long ago resigned himself to that fate.

He didn't have Buck's unwavering although, to his way of thinking, somewhat naïve conviction that by some miracle all would turn out well. Ezra's faith went no further than his own abilities, and hope was one extravagance he had never been able to afford.

"Get up."

Ezra weighed his options. He could be difficult, in which case his resistance would surely bring

about an even more premature and ignominious end than he already predicted; or he could be compliant, and make the most of every extra minute he could gain. He might not be prepared to trust in providence but he was willing to wager on chance. At least that way, if opportunity did come knocking, it wouldn't find the door bolted with him already gone.

He got up.

It was not the easiest thing he had ever done, and the pain of moving was not in the least bit feigned. As if the nauseating dizziness that accompanied every move he made wasn't enough, the abused muscles in his legs were stiff and unresponsive, and as soon as he started to rise the crushing pain in his chest returned with a vengeance. Breaking out in a cold sweat, he took his time straightening trying to gauge how far he could stretch the lame duck act before Connie lost patience with him. Except, he reminded himself, it really wasn't an act.

But she waited, watching him with an expression of studied indifference as he forced protesting muscles into action and, with painful slowness, finally managed to get to his feet. Her eyes moved slowly and critically over his body and he found it unsettling that she seemed to be finding pleasure in the fact that he was so obviously hurting although, given her track record, it didn't come as any great surprise to him either. Suddenly irritated by her morbid interest in him he took a deep breath and, bracing for the pain he knew would surely follow, drew his shoulders back to stand straight, meeting the woman's gaze with a defiantly challenging stare. An empty gesture, perhaps, as a fresh spasm of pain ripped through his chest but no less satisfying as Connie quickly looked away, unable to maintain eye contact for more than a few seconds. He smiled. He might have drawn the losing hand but he wasn't quite ready to fold.

If it had been an effort for him to stand, it was taking even greater effort for him to remain that way. The savage pounding in his skull had escalated to a point where it was making him feel both dizzy and sick, and for a few tense seconds it was a toss up as to whether he was going to pass out or throw up. As it was he did neither and, as the threat of imminent collapse receded, he felt a profound relief that he had at least been spared that indignity.

Refocusing on the tableau in front of him, he was suddenly reminded of a pack of hyenas circling warily at a distance, waiting to bring him down and pick over his carcass as soon as he showed any sign of weakness. Considering his remaining options the grim analogy was probably closer to the truth than he liked to admit but, as he turned his attention back to the woman who had become his personal nemesis, he gave a wry smile that was at odds with the flutter of apprehension rippling through his gut.

"Well, I'm up."

It was said with a nonchalance that only emphasised the unspoken challenge behind the words. He was forcing her hand, and there would be the inevitable consequences to deal with, but he was

tiring of the game.

Right on cue, Connie reacted; if Ezra had learned anything during their brief and, from his point of view, regrettably violent association with Ms. Van der Schoor it was that she had a short fuse. She moved quickly and he prepared himself for yet another assault but this time instead of striking him, her hand snaked out to snatch a length of nylon rope from the man on her right. Already fashioned into a rough noose, his stomach did a back flip as the fluorescent yellow loop dropped easily over his head and settled lightly on his shoulders.

Her smile was a feral as she gave a vicious tug on the length of rope in her hand, tightening the nylon braid painfully around his neck and briefly choking him before she eased off on the tension and allowed him to take a rasping breath. There was no mistaking the message: she was in control now.

"Time to go walkies."

Connie laughed, a cold, humourless sound that triggered a spark of fear in Ezra that wormed icily through his belly and he understood then that this woman was about to redefine for him the meaning of suffering. Another sharp jerk on the rope forced him to take a half-step forward to keep his balance but still he held back, feeling the rope uncomfortably tight around his neck but refusing to follow willingly.

"Ezra!"

He turned awkwardly at the unexpected summons. He had almost forgotten Buck. Now looking now at the pale and haggard features of the wounded bodyguard as he struggled to sit up, one hand reaching out towards him, he felt a sudden, inexplicable, sense of sadness and loss. Wilmington plucked his sleeve, missed and tried again. Then with a superhuman effort, he lunged forward and awkwardly grasped Ezra's hand in his own, increasing the pressure in a crushing squeeze before he was forced to let go. The emotionally numbed Southerner barely noticed the big Latino roughly grab his arms and tie his hands behind his back as his puzzled gaze locked with Wilmington's and held for several heartbeats. The man who had once made no secret of the fact that he considered former federal agent Ezra Standish a liability now looked at him with an expression that Ezra had difficulty interpreting: Pity? Sorrow? Respect? Slowly, a sad smile spread across Buck's face and the exhausted bodyguard sketched a quick salute.

Ezra felt a tightness in his throat that had nothing to do with the nylon cord biting into his neck as it struck him with terrible finality; Buck was, in his own way, saying goodbye.

There was no time for him to analyse his feelings as the rope circling his neck again tightened with a sharp jerk, and he took a couple of stumbling steps in order to keep his balance before being forced by the growing pressure on his windpipe to reluctantly follow in Connie's wake. Showtime. Daylight exploded in front of him. The dazzling brightness after the long hours spent in the gloomy

shadows of the shed momentarily blinded him as his pupils made a sudden and painful adjustment to cope with the harsh light. Lowering his head, he shut his eyes to avoid the glare and briefly, but inconsequentially, wondered what had happened to his sunglasses. Mentally backtracking, he struggled to remember when he had last had them but his memory was not co-operating and after a few moments of futile reflection he came to the unhappy conclusion that he didn't know, and for some reason that bothered him as much as their loss. Zeiss Skylets. Titanium frames. Four hundred dollar lenses, damn it!

A powerful shove from behind deliberately calculated to knock him off balance sent him sprawling in the dirt. He missed kissing the ground by the narrowest of margins, twisting at the last second to allow his left shoulder to absorb the initial impact but the landing was hard and now he lay with his face pressed into the dirt, winded and listening with a frightening sense of *déjà vu* to the laughter and jeers of his captors. For a moment past and present seemed to converge as fragments of the deeply buried past squirmed to the surface bringing with them a sense of panic and dread that sent a ripple of raw fear through his belly. With a shudder, he thrust away the sickening memories that his mind had so traitorously dredged up and struggled to rise, determined that he would not grovel in the dirt like a beaten dog, whatever it might cost him.

The suggestion of a smile suddenly flickered across his face as a different memory edged into his consciousness. An office in Boston. Chris Larabee ranting at him to swallow his goddamn pride and listen. Pride? Hell, that was all he had left right then! Breathing hard, he awkwardly got to his knees, then slowly to his feet and raised his eyes to meet those of the woman who held not only the rope around his neck but also his life, in her hands. Connie's eyes narrowed as she looked suspiciously at him, then with a savage tug at the rope she whirled away leaving him no option but to follow.

Just like now.

They were in an open area roughly the size of a basketball court, flanked on two sides by various outbuildings that seemed to be either workshops or storage sheds reinforcing Ezra's belief, from the evidence he had seen so far, that they were being held at a *finca*, a coffee plantation, although given that much of the highlands of Guatemala were given over to coffee growing the knowledge was hardly a revelation. It did suggest to him though that they were not as far from the original location of the kidnapping as the distance they had travelled in the truck seemed to indicate. Not that it mattered, but intelligence-gathering was as natural as breathing for him and another old habit that died hard.

As he would.

Connie led and he followed. He could see no purpose to the exercise but assumed the woman got a perverse kick out of forcing him into a subservient role. Master and slave. If she hoped to shame

him then the ploy was falling well short of the mark. This was humiliation 101 and he had already graduated summa cum laude from that particular school. There was nothing she could teach him.

Been there, done that, darlin'.

It was getting hot. Perspiration prickled across his back and dampened his armpits, drawing on the last of his fluid reserves and increasing his awareness of thirst. He wondered how long she was going to keep dragging him around on a leash and guessed until she either got bored, or he had served his purpose. He licked his dry, cracked, lips. God, he could sink a beer right now.

Yeah, and people in hell want ice-water.

"Ezz-raaa!"

Lisa.

Her fear and anguish as she wailed his name brought him out of his trance-like state with brutal efficiency as his emotions swung wildly between the extremes of relief and dismay. Relief that she was unharmed and dismay that she may yet become the pawn in Connie's increasingly bizarre game.

He stood motionless, eyes downcast, resisting the increasing pressure around his neck as Connie slowly reeled in the rope, until he was forced to move forward level with the Dutchwoman. With the rope looped several times around her hand she pressed her fist into the side of his neck, gradually increasing the tension and forcing his head up until he had no choice but to look ahead. With a deepening sense of shame and regret he stared dully at the tear-streaked face of the girl he had sworn to protect and watched her struggle in the pawing, too-intimate, grip of a lewdly grinning kidnapper.

Connie raised the Sig, now held firmly in her other hand, and lightly stroked his face with the barrel.

"Such a sweet young thing, heh? Time now for her to grow up, I think." She turned Ezra's face towards her and looked searchingly into his eyes. "You know, sweetheart, because of you this whole thing is FUCKED!" She spat the word at him, and brutally twisted the rope at his throat. "Because of you, there will be no ransom. No million. The deal is off!"

Ezra wheezed painfully as he tried to breathe through a constricted trachea, aware of the Sig now resting under his sternum and with Connie's last words echoing in his oxygen-depleted brain. Her voice hissed in his ears, filled with an equal measure of venom and satisfaction: "I won't be leaving this pest-hole empty handed though, you bastard. There is a market for pretty young girls across the border and your little rich bitch is worth at least a hundred grand!" She laughed harshly. "But you? You are worth nothing..."

He wasn't sure how he came to be there but suddenly he was on his knees; the relentless pressure on his throat had eased, and his chest heaved as he sucked in hoarse, rasping gulps of air to fill his

starved lungs. He rocked unsteadily as someone crashed into him, and it took some seconds before his clouded senses cleared enough for him to register that Lisa had broken away from her guard and was clinging to him in a fierce embrace. Connie was ineffectually trying to wrestle the girl away as she spat a torrent of furious abuse alternately at Lisa and the uncertainly hovering Latinos who seemed to be viewing the unexpected development with morbid fascination.

Feeling Lisa's arms around him and the wetness of her tears against his cheek as she struggled to keep hold of him, Ezra felt both the awful impact of his powerlessness and a rush of affection for the teenager. In a voice that sounded nothing like his own, he found himself brokenly whispering through his abused larynx for her to be brave, urging her not to cry, and, whatever might happen, not to give up hope. But they were only words, empty words at that, and the realisation that it was all he had to offer her now left him feeling gutted.

In the end it took three of them to haul the teenager off him, still struggling until she finally submitted to the overwhelming odds and allowed them to restrain her. But as she was roughly dragged away, she turned to look again at the kneeling Southerner and the woman standing over him, her slight body heaving with the efforts of resisting the two Latinos. After throwing a withering glance at the Dutch woman she slowly let her gaze fall again on the stricken bodyguard and with a triumphantly defiant smile she opened her mouth and yelled: "I love you, Ezra!"

Ezra ducked his head, struggling to contain his emotions as he felt the cold, hard muzzle of the gun in Connie's hand pressing hard against the bone just behind his left ear. His mouth went dry, and he felt faint as the blood drained from his head to pool somewhere deep in his belly. He could hear the cicadas in the trees, the rustling of the leaves in the breeze, and as voices faded to a muted and unintelligible hum, he closed his eyes and took a deep breath. So this was it. This was how it all ended.

The Texan was driving the Montero hard, motivated by a combination of necessity, skill, professional pride and pure adrenaline to keep up with the faster Audi, which Velasco seemed intent on pushing to the limits of adhesion. Fifty yards head, the black car's tail-lights flashed on and off transmitting a rapidly executed sequence of alternate hard braking and aggressive acceleration as the Guatemalan at the wheel struggled to negotiate the tight bends and steep inclines of the Alta Verapaz. Trailing in its wake, Vin duplicated the actions of the car in front, ignoring the escalating pain in his damaged knee as he worked the pedals and concentrated on keeping the 2 tonne vehicle on the road. It was a rough ride sure enough but no one was complaining. In fact no one was saying anything.

Tanner had his own theory as to why that might be but he wasn't about to share it with anyone

else. He had been in law enforcement long enough to witness a lot of unorthodox methods and questionable tactics, but nothing he had seen at any time in the past had prepared him for Velasco's particular style of interrogation. Under any other circumstances he might even have felt some shred of pity for the unfortunate Latino.

What could he say? The SIC detective had got a result; he had persuaded the man to talk. End of story. Although he was prepared to believe that Velasco, given time, could probably "persuade" a stone to bleed.

Beside him Dunne shifted restlessly. With no further need of the GPS tracking system, he had abandoned his beloved computer, and his station in the back of the SUV, to claim a front-seat position for the next phase. No one had challenged his right to be there. The kid had earned his stripes in getting them as far as he did, but now it seemed the intense silence was rattling him. With his attention still firmly on driving Vin cast a sidelong glance at the younger man, so obviously keyed up and radiating pure energy, and decided to put him out of his misery.

"That SIC guy is some piece of work, huh?"

JD shot him a quick look and readily snatched the bait.

"Damn right! Ain't seen nothing like...hell, that guy nearly...Velasco was gonna...y'know that scumbag just about crapped himself."

"Yeah, well, " sighed Vin, softly, remembering the man's terror-struck face, "Reckon I can understand that."

"And Chris! Geez, I really thought he'd lost it there. Remind me never to piss him off."

Tanner smiled faintly as he changed down a gear and gunned the engine to take a tight bend in the road before flooring it to catch up with the fast-disappearing Audi.

"If I remember it rightly, JD, you already did that back in Guatemala City, and he didn't threaten to shoot your balls off."

Dunne grinned as he braced himself against the car door.

"No, but I sure thought he was going to."

"JD, you just had the privilege of seeing the "good cop, bad cop" scenario in action."

The younger bodyguard shook his head quickly.

"Uh, uh. No way. I've seen good cop, bad cop before, and that wasn't it. That was definitely not it! That was bad cop, worse cop. No, it was bad cop and your worst fucking nightmare!"

"Well whatever it was, it did the trick," offered Vin, smoothly. "Sometimes gotta bend the rules a little."

"Or throw the book away altogether," added Josiah in a quiet rumble from the back. "This isn't the NYPD anymore, son."

JD looked around to study the three men in the back, taking in the sombre and unforgiving

expressions and coming to terms with the fact that he was definitely into a whole new ball game, but he was beginning to wonder if this ball park had any boundaries.

"No names, no packdrill, huh?"

"Something like that," agreed the former marine, with a smile that only served to emphasise the hard expression that darkened his eyes.

JD turned to look out of the front window, his attention fixed on the Audi, staring for a long time at the black car before he spoke again.

"Do you think he would have done it? Lieutenant Velasco. I mean, would he have pulled the trigger?"

Vin did not take his eyes from the road.

"What do you think?"

Dunne thought about it, turning the possibilities over in his mind, then with an air of mild surprise answered: "I reckon he would have, you know."

Tanner abruptly floored the gas pedal taking advantage of an open stretch of road as Velasco's Quattro, doing the same, suddenly surged ahead, before he turned and levelled troubled blue eyes at Dunne.

"Yeah, I think you're right."

Chris Larabee had never been the type of man to let emotion get in the way of reason, at least not in his professional life. Somehow he had never quite reached that same degree of clear-headed detachment in his personal life, but that was another story. It bothered him now that he had allowed his anger and frustration to rise to the surface and, for just one moment, he knew that had he had been on the verge of losing control. The urge to kill the man who now sat, subdued and sullen, in the rear of the Audi had been so strong that he had almost obeyed his most primal instincts. It had been a close thing.

Yet Velasco had taken that lapse, the power of that raw emotion and used it to their advantage. He had been the ice to Larabee's fire; cold, dispassionate and, as it turned out, far more deadly. The man was either a genius or a madman. Chris had not yet figured out which and, to be truthful, at this point he didn't much care. As far as he was concerned Estéban Velasco could have been as socially maladjusted as Hannibal Lecter and he would still be willing to ride shotgun for him.

Chris compulsively checked his watch again. His anger had gradually transformed into a cold, crawling, thing that had settled in the pit of his stomach to gnaw at his already waning confidence, while his mind kept racing ahead creating scenarios, forming, and just as quickly discarding, strategies only to circle back to the same unhappy conclusion: that they might already be too late.

Larabee was always suspicious of intelligence gathered under duress. In his experience, a man threatened with imminent execution would say anything to gain even a moment's respite. They could be acting now on nothing more than a pack of lies created by a desperate man intent on saving his own skin. He had said as much to Velasco but the SIC lieutenant had just smiled and shaken his head. His reply consisted of two words: Trust me.

Well, he had trusted him and now they were heading for God-only-knew-where on the word of a scumbag who would probably sell his own kid sister for a few bucks. But there was no other option because, in truth, this man's word was all they had to go on. Chris had only been able to understand perhaps one word in ten of the dialogue that had taken place between the two men, but there had been no mistaking the fear that had oozed from the unnerved and demoralised captive. So, feeling the uncertainty of being right out of this particular loop, Chris could only hope that the enigmatic Teniente Estéban Velasco knew what he was doing because right now he was prepared to admit to anyone that he sure as hell didn't.

Lost in reflection Chris was not prepared for the sudden stop as Velasco hit the brakes and, as he was thrown forward, he instinctively raised one hand to brace himself before the seat belt snapped him back with a jerk. His heart-rate kicked into double time as adrenaline surged into his system and he quickly glanced over his shoulder to make sure that there was no threat from the man sitting behind him, before the pieces finally clicked into place and he turned questioningly to Velasco.

"This is it?"

Estéban gave a little gesture with his chin to indicate the property to the left of the track where the natural flora reluctantly gave way to cultivated land.

"The *finca* lies over that rise." He twisted in his seat and fixed the sullen Latino, handcuffed to the rear door, with a hard stare. "If this *asqueroso* wishes to live beyond his next breath."

The man visibly started as the detective fired off a staccato burst of Spanish at him, then nodded once. "*Si. Sobre esa colina.*" Velasco's eyes continued to bore into him and he hastily added: "*En la vida de mi madre.*" As if to swear on his mother's life would convince the detective of his absolute sincerity.

The lieutenant responded with a quiet laugh as he turned to release the park brake and gestured through the open window to Tanner, who now waited patiently behind the Audi, to pull off the road.

Larabee looked again at the roughly sketched map that the kidnapper had hastily made and tried to visualise the compound that was represented by the crudely drawn symbols, then distractedly ran a hand over his face and, not for the first time, wondered if he was crazy.

"Chris?" Vin's voice, gently broke into his thoughts, reminding him that they didn't have time for either lengthy deliberations or last minute doubts. The moment had arrived. He had to make a decision and he would be forced to live with the consequences whatever the outcome.

He drew a deep breath and lifted his head to look at the six men clustered round the car, finding it ironic that they were still seven, but where there should have been Buck and Ezra, he now saw Hengst and Velasco.

"Okay. Let's do this. Nathan, I want you to come in around the back here..." He stabbed a finger at the map where a cluster of buildings was represented by several irregularly drawn squares. "...and Josiah circle round to come in from the west, here. There's a good chance that they might still be holding the hostages in this area so go in easy and don't make a move until the rest of us are in position. Remember, we have to do this by the numbers or we're going to have a situation here that I don't even want to think about." His eyes rested for a moment on Dunne. "JD, I need you to come in from the south-west along this side and take position here behind..." His finger moved to pinpoint another location labelled in Spanish. "...the drying sheds?" Chris looked to Velasco for confirmation.

The detective nodded. "And remember these are open structures so take care not to be seen."

"Vin and me, will come in from the north here, over the rise."

Velasco nodded his approval as he studied the map. "We are small in number but we have the advantage of surprise..."

"We also have no way of knowing," interrupted Tanner, quickly, "just what we're going to be up against. The way I see it, all we know for sure is that the kidnappers were still here early this morning, and that there are at least seven of them."

Dunne looked quizzically at the Texan. "How'd you figure that?"

"Lisa. She told Chris she'd seen eight kidnappers, and we have one of 'em here."

The youngest of the team forced a grin. "Fair fight then."

Vin returned the smile. "Right on, kid!"

Finally Chris turned his attention to Hengst.

"Mannfred, I want you to stay here."

"Herr Larabee, it is my daughter..." he began, stiffly.

"Yes, I know, but it's not your fight. I won't be responsible for putting your life in danger. I don't want to have to explain to Lisa that I got her daddy killed."

Hengst looked as though he was about to argue but Velasco quickly intervened.

"He is right," the lieutenant agreed, softly. "Besides I need you to guard my prisoner." Without hesitating, he took out his handgun and checked the clip, before handing it to the German, butt first. "You know how to use a gun?"

"I have experience with the shot gun, not the pistol." Hengst turned the weapon over in his hand and his gaze strayed to the Latino, now sitting half out of the car, still cuffed to the open door. "But I learn very fast."

Larabee's stern face suddenly dissolved into a grin. "I'll bet you do." He moved quickly around the front of the 4WD to stand beside Hengst. "Here's your first lesson." He drew his own weapon to demonstrate. "Safety off..." He raised the Bersa and almost casually drew a bead on the kidnapper. "Point...and shoot!" He mimed firing the gun with a quietly aspirated: "Pow!" before lowering the gun again, gratified to see that the Latino had broken out in a sweat.

Expression serious, the German nodded slowly, although there was a hint of a smile tugging at his mouth. "This I think I can do."

Larabee tapped his arm; a gesture of approval. "Good. If he tries anything, shoot him."

Velasco stepped away from the car and up to the German, keeping his voice low as Chris started to mobilise the others. "I have called for back up from Cobán. If luck stays with us they should be here within the hour but whatever happens, do not come after us. You must stay here to brief the police on the situation. *Comprende?*"

Hengst summoned a half smile. "To quote a greater intellect than mine: 'they also serve who only stand and wait'."

"Coming, Lieutenant?"

Velasco turned in response to the soft Texan drawl of Vin Tanner, excusing himself to the German, as the remaining three InterSept bodyguards melted away into the trees.

"One moment."

Chris, standing a few feet away, checked his watch, acutely aware of the seconds ticking away as the detective moved to the back of the Audi, reappearing moments later with a scope-mounted rifle loosely held in one hand. As Velasco jogged back, pocketing a handful of cartridges, Larabee dropped his gaze to the unexpected addition to their small-arms arsenal.

"Reckon you must've been an Eagle Scout," was his only comment as he fell into step beside him deciding, as Velasco shouldered the weapon with an easy familiarity, that some questions were best left unanswered and that gift horses should never be looked in the mouth. Especially ones that might bite.

Tanner held back allowing Larabee and the SIC lieutenant go before him, as he eyed the rifle carried by the detective with professional interest, recognising it immediately as a pro's weapon; lightweight, powerful, expensive. He didn't know a whole lot about Guatemalan law enforcement agencies but he was prepared to bet his balls that a kick-ass piece like that was definitely not on

standard issue. He guessed he should be questioning the possible reasons for Velasco routinely carrying a marksman's weapon in the back of his car although he wasn't exactly an innocent in that respect himself. But the bottom line was that he didn't give a damn right now. All he knew for sure was that this guy could be one mean son-of-a-bitch and he was glad that they had wound up on the same team, because the only other thing he knew for certain was that he wouldn't want Velasco as an enemy. He was scary enough as an ally.

Still mulling over the matter of trust, the Texan quickened his pace to keep up with the two men in front of him who were moving ahead with a speed and purpose that he had difficulty matching. His knee, as much as he had tried to ignore the persistent pain that drilled through it, was finally starting to slow him down.

Swearing softly under his breath, he followed only to discover that, even with Velasco and Chris trail-blazing a rudimentary path, there was no easy way through the dense fringe of forest bordering the road. But the minutes were ticking away, and he didn't have the luxury of taking his time.

Without warning the ground rose sharply before him and he almost groaned aloud as he was presented with a steep and rugged incline that he had no choice but to climb; he either went up, or he went back. And as there was no way he could even contemplate turning back now, he would go on.

Chris was already three fifths of the way up, and ahead of him the lieutenant, burdened with the rifle, was awkwardly scrambling like some odd species of terrestrial crab to the summit. Taking a deep breath and a split-second to acknowledge that what he was about to do was not only crazy but probably irresponsible, he kept going, determined not to add any more failures to the growing inventory of screw ups that he had succeeded in racking up over the last few weeks. Hell, it wasn't much more than a little hill; how hard could it be?

Less than ten minutes later, breathing hard, sweating heavily and hurting badly, he was beginning to wish that he was somewhere else. He guessed Cobán would do; Guatemala City would be even better but, thinking on it, his own number-one-with-a-bullet preference was somewhere back home. Anywhere back home. In fact anywhere that wasn't where he was right now, was just perfect.

He paused, wiping the sweat from his forehead with his sleeve, and warily looked up as a shadow suddenly blocked out the light. A few feet above him Chris was silhouetted against sun, securely braced and reaching down, fingers outstretched towards him. With a lopsided grin he gladly took up the offer, gripping Larabee's hand and allowing himself to be bodily hauled up the last few feet to the crest of the rise. Silently nodding his thanks he rested, just briefly, to catch his breath in the thin highland air, fighting the urge to reach down and massage his knee while uncomfortably aware

of Larabee's steady gaze focused on him.

He answered the unspoken question without making eye contact.

"I'm fine."

"Did I say anything?"

"You didn't need to."

Chris sighed. "You shouldn't be doing this, you know." He made a vague gesture in the direction of Tanner's injured knee. "Gonna be paying for it later."

"Yeah, yeah, so Nathan keeps telling me. Guess I'll take my chances though. Got my ass up here okay didn't I?"

Larabee shook his head with the hint of a smile that suggested he wasn't buying into any arguments on that score and instead looked at his watch.

"Come on then, we're already cutting it pretty fine." Chris suddenly flashed a feral grin at the Texan. "Wouldn't want to miss the party."

The two men started off again in the wake of the energetic lieutenant who was already disappearing from view and moving with a purpose, only to come to an abrupt halt less than five minutes later in response to an urgent hand signal from Velasco as he crouched warily behind a light cover of foliage. Without looking back he gestured for them to keep quiet and stay down, his attention never wandering from what lay beyond the screen of vegetation in front of him.

Vin's level of alertness immediately racked up several notches; Velasco was like a hound dog on a rabbit, and right now that could only mean one thing. The Texan felt the familiar stir of excitement mingled with apprehension in his gut and eased forward, aware of Larabee moving up noiselessly on his left. So, this was it.

Chris hunkered down beside the SIC detective as Tanner moved up to squat behind the two men.

"What's up?"

"I think perhaps you had better take a look for yourself." Velasco shifted aside to give the Americans some space and parted the leaves in front of them. "I think we have a problem."

"Fuck!"

From his point of view Vin thought that just about said it all.

It had taken him a few seconds to process exactly what was taking place in the compound below; about the same time it had taken for Chris, he guessed, judging by Larabee's reaction. Chris was not one to waste words, and certainly in that one short, sharp, expletive he had managed to convey the same sense of dread, trepidation, frustration and anger that had gripped Tanner as he had finally understood and accepted what he was seeing.

"Ezra."

Even from 75 yards away it was easy to see that Ezra had not had an easy time of it so far and, as

the bound Southerner was paraded around on the end of a leash held by none other than Connie van der Schoor, Vin's gut tightened in a familiar reaction that told him things were likely to get a whole lot worse, and if there had been any doubt before that the Dutch woman had been involved, there sure as hell was none now.

There was no sign of Buck. Or Lisa.

He strained forward, needing to see more and trying to weigh up the odds before the whole deal went to hell in a handcart while they looked on, but a firm hand on his shoulder wordlessly reminded him not to make any rash moves and he forced himself to relax.

"This is your man?"

The Texan nodded in reply, murmuring distractedly in reply to Velasco's question: "One of them", as he turned instead to Chris who had drawn back and was now speaking urgently but quietly into his radio, briefing the others. An elbow in the ribs from the detective quickly grabbed his attention again and he watched with rising anger as Ezra was reeled in until he stood within inches of the Dutch woman. Vin found his skin crawling as she raised the pistol in her hand and with an almost sensual intimacy stroked the Southerner's face with it. There was something vaguely disturbing in her actions and in that moment Tanner knew beyond any doubt that if they didn't move now, they would be too late; she was going to kill Ezra.

"Chris. We don't have much time... "

Larabee threw him a look that suggested Vin tell him something that he didn't already know and thumbed the button on the Motorola to end his transmission before shouldering in beside the Texan. He was breathing hard, body tense as he watched Ezra being forced to his knees, throat constricted by the noose and obviously on the verge of passing out.

"Can you take her from here?"

"What?" Vin's pulse jumped as he swivelled to look at Larabee, momentarily caught off guard by the question, before casting a wary glance at Velasco. "Chris, this is..."

"Can you do it?"

Without waiting for an answer, Chris reached over and gestured for Velasco to give him the rifle. The SIC detective hesitated for just a second then, deciding to trust in Larabee's judgement, surrendered the weapon. Chris quickly snatched it up and, in a rare state of agitation, thrust it at the Texan. "You gotta do this, Vin. Take her down. Do it now."

Tanner looked at the rifle that had suddenly appeared in his hands. A good weapon, nice weight and feel, but it wasn't his. He'd never fired it, had no chance to sight the scope; and while he was good by anyone's standards he wasn't infallible. Nor was he a miracle worker. He knew his own limitations even if Chris didn't. Chris was talking about a precision shot and if the sights were off even by a degree...

"Jesus, Chris! It's not that simple..."

Chris turned away and looked back at the clearing, his voice even but charged with emotion.

"Yes it is. If you don't, Ezra's going to die down there. That crazy bitch is going to blow his head off."

Vin stared down at the Southerner. "You don't know what you're asking! This is an uncontrolled situation; an untested weapon. If I'm off then I could just as easily end up shooting Ezra." He looked again at the rifle, his hands moving over the surface as he spoke. "And in my line of work that's not an acceptable risk."

Larabee turned around and levelled a hard stare at the Texan. "In your previous line of work, maybe, right now, it's a luxury you can't afford. If you take the shot there's a chance that you might hit Ezra, right? There's also a better chance that you won't. But I can tell you this for nothing, Vin, if you don't at least try then Ezra's a dead man for sure!"

"He's right," added Velasco softly, "I think there will be no hesitation for these people in executing this man. Is he not also your friend?"

Vin slowly raised his head, his expression frosty. "You're asking for the impossible. You wanna lay that kinda shit on me, then go right ahead but it don't change a thing."

Three heads turned as one, as a commotion heralded by a scream broke out in the compound, and a small figure dashed into view cannoning into the kneeling Ezra and holding on with a strength and determination that defied all efforts to disengage her from the bodyguard. Lisa. Alive and apparently unharmed.

Grimly silent, Vin watched the scene play out like a silent movie, as a trio of the kidnapers wrestled the teenager away. He adjusted his grip on the rifle, and brought his breathing under control, habit taking over as he allowed nothing to distract him as he focused all his attention on the Dutchwoman. Watching. Waiting. And as she made her move and raised the gun to the Southerner's head, Vin smoothly brought the rifle up to his shoulder and set his eye to the scope. "But that does."

The world around him ceased to be. He existed in another dimension without sound or colour, where reality was reduced to nothing more substantial than a single square inch of flesh and bone above his left ear; a precisely defined square inch of pressure exerted by the pistol pressed to his skull.

His pistol. His skull. His life.

Just a four and a half pound squeeze on the trigger was all that was needed to end it.

He tried to draw a breath, maybe his last, but the rope around his neck abruptly choked off any supply of air. Suddenly it was as though time was moving on without him while he remained fixed

in space, a surreal distortion of perception that left his senses reeling; white noise rushed to fill the expanding void in his brain and his vision faded to grey, as he was drawn ever deeper into a swirling vortex of mind-numbing horror.

His heart was no longer beating in any recognisable rhythm, instead becoming a continuous frantic flutter fuelled by the reactive outpouring of adrenaline into his bloodstream, and in a distant corner of his oxygen-starved brain he considered the possibility that he might yet beat the bullet, but only by the questionable grace of succumbing to cardiac arrest first.

At that moment there was a brief slackening of the noose and as a rush of sweet air flooded his burning lungs he sensed rather than felt a subtle change in his executioner's stance. Opening eyes that he didn't recall ever closing he stared fixedly ahead, focusing on infinity, and braced himself for the moment. Dear God, let it be done.

The silence was absolute; as if the universe itself was holding its breath, waiting for the final moment. For the end.

The explosive shattering of the stillness was that moment. A single flat, percussive crack that stopped his heart in his chest; the sound of it so startling him that he flinched, his head jerking back as muscles tightened involuntarily in an autonomic response that should not have been possible. Was not possible. Something wet and warm splattered against his left cheek, and his mind balked in sudden horror as he struggled to understand how it could be that he was still kneeling. Still upright. Still alive.

Dazed and unable to function except at the most basic level, he drew in a shuddering lungful of air as shocking and as sweet as a baby's first breath then, suddenly overwhelmed by a wave of sickening dizziness, he slowly sank back to sit on his heels, not certain that even then he was going to be able to stop himself from keeling over and pitching face down into the dust.

"Go! Go! Go!"

Larabee was on his feet and urgently screaming into the walkie-talkie, anxious to take advantage of the first confused seconds following the shot to maximise the element of surprise and minimise the risk to his own scant force. Beside him, Vin held his position, the rifle stock still pressed snugly against his cheek and another round already chambered - just in case. But the shot had been good. Not great, but there was no questioning the result. He quickly moved the rifle in a series of shallow arcs, automatically quartering the open space as he sought to neutralise any other possible threat to the Southerner's safety but the area was clear. The birds had flown. He exhaled slowly and lowered the rifle, aware now of the sweat trickling uncomfortably between his shoulder blades. Jesus! He never wanted to have to do something like that again. Too goddamned personal. Too fucking close.

"Vin? You okay?"

He realised then that he had frozen, and was standing motionless with the rifle held loosely in his hand, staring down at the remote and solitary figure of a blood spattered Ezra still kneeling in the centre of the clearing. For some reason that disturbed him more than the sight of Connie's lifeless form.

"Uh, yeah. Fine." Except he wasn't. He blinked and pulled his gaze from the scene that had inexplicably transfixed him with the raw power of its imagery. Goddamn it, what was wrong with him?

Chris spared him a look of what might have been sympathy, then stepped forward and silently took the rifle from him, throwing the weapon back to Velasco in one quick, economical, motion.

"Great shot, Esteban!"

The detective took an automatic step back, snatching the rifle out of the air and after a split second of hesitation gave a quick nod of understanding followed by a sly grin and a mock bow. "My pleasure to be of assistance."

Larabee shot an appraising glance at Tanner before wheeling away.

"You did good, Vin! Now let's haul ass before the shit really hits the fan, huh?"

Moving forward to follow, Velasco gripped Vin's shoulder in a friendly squeeze. "I do not mean to make light of your part here today but believe me, there is less paperwork this way. Not to mention that in Guatemala death is the penalty for what you just did."

Tanner shrugged. He was just doing what he knew best and he hadn't stopped to analyse the possible consequences before he pulled the trigger but now he understood that Velasco was making one hell of a gesture in covering for him. "Hell," he murmured, "In half the states of America death is the penalty for what I just did, but as long as my ass don't get flamed, it's cool."

The detective grinned. "Then, my friend, we are in complete agreement."

Larabee's voice came back at them as he forged ahead through the tangled undergrowth, seeking the quickest way down the steep slope to the clearing where the sudden familiar crackle of small arms fire confirmed that a firefight was already underway.

"If you girls are just about done with the mutual admiration, we got some unfinished business here. So, move it! NOW!"

Chris swore as he struggled to find purchase, trying desperately to keep his balance on the steep slope, frustrated by the knowledge that however fast he made it to the bottom it was not going to be soon enough. They were scattering; and it seemed to be with no plan in mind other than every man for himself.

Vin's shot had been Ezra's salvation, but it had also blown away any chance of a clean operation. He

had no regrets about that, and if he was honest he didn't give a damn where the bastards scattered to as long as they kept right on going; let Velasco and his mob worry about them.

His own concerns lay closer to home. With Ezra already accounted for and in plain sight, he had switched to scanning the compound looking for Lisa and Buck. Even as his thoughts raced at lightning speed, fed by the adrenaline pumping through his body, absorbing tiny details and developing a strategy on the fly, at the back of his mind lurked the dread that even now they might still be too late to avoid tragedy. For all he knew Buck may already be dead but the threat to Lisa was still a real and present danger, and that had to be his first priority. Goddammit, where was she?

He jumped the last ten metres as the slope abruptly sheered off to near vertical, choosing a hard landing over the less inviting option of taking the skin off his back in an uncontrolled slide to the base, and the instant his feet made contact with solid ground he armed himself; two-way in one hand, pistol in the other. He felt vulnerable enough now he was out in the open, and without the benefit of reconnaissance he had no real idea what resistance he could expect or from what direction. He didn't like it but as Buck would say: life's a bitch, ain't it?

The one thing he did know was that having thrown away any chance of stealth, they would have to go in hard and rely on speed instead but, whatever the cost at the end of the day, he had to find Lisa.

In a shower of gravel and soil Vin slid awkwardly to the base of the incline, swearing roundly as, all too soon, he struck solid ground. Seconds later he was joined by Velasco, who suffered an equally undignified landing having lost his footing on the treacherous ground. Vin didn't know Spanish but he was pretty sure he got the gist of the detective's subsequent twenty second burst of invective. He knew just how he felt.

Chris broke from a conversation he was having over the two-way and cast a sober glance at the Texan, jerking his head towards the centre of the clearing.

"Vin, go take care of Ezra. Get him outta sight in case anyone decides to finish the job off, okay? No telling what this goddamned bunch of crazies might do now they're cornered. We'll find Lisa."

Tanner nodded and started towards the kneeling and bound bodyguard, wondering as he got closer if he hadn't drawn the shorter straw. He quickly hid his shock at Ezra's appearance although the Southerner didn't seem to be aware that he was even there, let alone what his reaction might be. In fact Vin didn't think Ezra had moved in the time it had taken him to get down the hill and across the compound and now, seeing him up close, he could understand why.

He resisted a natural impulse to barge straight in and either loosen the cord still drawn tightly around Ezra's neck or free his hands if only because he wore the dazed expression of the shell-

shocked and his gut instinct was warning him that to start manhandling the Southerner at this point might not be the best idea.

Keeping his voice low, he palmed his pocket knife and dropped into a crouch beside the kneeling man.

"Ezra."

For a moment there was no response and Vin began to wonder if he'd even been heard then slowly, like man surfacing from a deep trance, Ezra slowly turned his head towards him. It was clear that even that small movement was not easy for him, and only then did it occur to the Texan that the noose was still under tension. Connie had been holding it when she died, and she was holding it still; succeeding in exacting one last, petty, vengeance on the Southerner even from beyond the grave. In one quick movement Vin flipped open the blade of his pocket knife and reached across Ezra to slice through the braided nylon line, before quickly pulling the free end through the loop and angrily throwing the offending rope aside.

The bruising was deep, the skin abraded and raw, in a ragged semi circle that marked Ezra's throat in a livid tattoo, but as Vin shifted to free his hands he found it was nothing compared to the state of his wrists. Swearing softly, he cut through the bonds and wordlessly rested a hand on Ezra's shoulder, knowing he had no way of putting into words what he wanted to say. Instead he just shook his head and whispered a deeply felt: "Jesus, man!"

Ezra raised a hand to his throat and gingerly massaged the bruised skin over his larynx.

"So, the cavalry has arrived at last." The voice was hoarse and scratchy but the smile, although strained, was genuine.

Vin returned a quick grin of his own, relieved to hear Ezra speak and, for some reason, even more relieved to hear the familiar sarcasm. He extended a hand to help the Southerner to his feet.

"Yeah. Better late than never."

"Granted, Mister Tanner." Ezra gratefully gripped the Texan's arm and levered himself up with a grunt, sparing a moment to cast a glance at the lifeless form of the Dutchwoman. "Although I doubt Miz Van Der Schoor would agree."

Vin doubted she would either. He stook a step forward and dropped to one knee beside the body. He felt no great satisfaction at what he had done but professional interest drove him to check the results of his handywork. Now he was up close he could see that the bullet had gone in cleanly, above and behind her left ear. It had done the job but he had been a fraction out; any more and he would have missed. Her face was unmarked; she merely looked startled, her blue eyes staring fixedly into infinity, but the blood still flowing from under the woman's head told another story. And it was an ending he knew he could live with.

"I'm assuming I have you to thank for this?"

For a few seconds both men stared at the attractive young blonde, neither showing any emotion, or exchanging anything of their thoughts. This was not the time.

"Consider it a favour."

Ezra gave a curt nod and started to turn away but hesitated, then quickly bent down and took the gun - his gun - from Connie's hand. Without expression he cleared the slide and checked the clip then, satisfied, he rammed the clip home with the heel of his hand.

Vin quickly moved to intercept the Southerner, recognising the sense of purpose behind the actions.

"What the hell are you doing?"

Ezra levelled a hard stare at the Texan.

"They took Lisa."

Tanner grabbed the other man's arm.

"Ezra. Take a look at yourself for a goddamned minute! You ain't in any shape to go chasing after bad guys. Just stop and listen up, hey? Chris is onto it. You don't have to..."

Ezra shrugged free of Vin's grip and abruptly wheeled away.

"Yes I do." He turned without breaking his stride and gestured to the largest of the outbuildings fifty metres or so behind Tanner. "Buck's in there; shot - twice. If you move fast you might still be able to make a difference."

Powerless to stop the determined and stubborn Southerner, Vin felt a surge of frustration.

"Goddamn it, Ezra! You looking to get yourself dead or somethin'?"

To his amazement Ezra gave a slow, almost secretive smile then, sketching a quick salute, broke into a jog and was gone, leaving Vin as puzzled as he was concerned, and with only one alternative; to do as Ezra had suggested and find Buck.

The Sig felt heavy and awkward in his hand and although he quickly flexed his fingers and adjusted his grip on the weapon it still felt clumsy and unfamiliar. Alien. Disconnected. Disembodied. Just like the rest of him.

His heart was tripping over itself hammering out a running cadence and he was fighting the urge to throw up with every step, but he kept moving anyway. There would be time enough to think - and feel - later. Perhaps.

A sudden shriek, just as suddenly silenced, sent an unpleasant worm of fear slithering through his belly. Lisa. He reacted on instinct, veering in the general direction of the scream but he instantly regretted the sudden change in direction as a sharp stab of pain jabbed brutally at his ribs and momentarily robbed him of the ability to breathe. Ignoring the warning signs that his abused body was so urgently transmitting he instead pushed himself into a desperate sprint that he knew he had

no real hope of sustaining. Logic told him he should give up; take a back seat and let someone else do the mopping up. Someone who didn't feel like he'd just been over Niagara falls in a barrel, and every tortured muscle and joint agreed one hundred percent, but driving him on was the overwhelming need to see the job through to the end.

And he almost blew it.

Vin had been right. He wasn't in any shape to go chasing after bad guys but he'd done it anyway. Now it looked as though the Texan was right about the result as well. He was going to get himself dead.

There were four of them. And he had gate-crashed the party.

It took him several heartbeats to consider just how he had managed to blindly stumble into a situation that, under normal circumstances, he would have gone out of his way to avoid. A situation that was now about to get completely pear shaped, and again he came back to Vin's extremely astute observation that he wasn't in any shape to go chasing after bad guys.

But if there was one saving grace to his monumental faux pas, although he was certain that Chris Larabee would have a far less charitable expression for it, it was the fact that his sudden appearance had been something of a surprise to all concerned. Including himself.

Four heads had turned as one in his direction, four different faces all wearing the same puzzled what-the-hell-are-you-doing-here expression. Four heads and one gun.

Ezra allowed himself to take a breath, not sure yet if he would have the chance to take another. He had barged in on a Mexican stand-off, and that single act of carelessness had now blown any potential for breaking the stalemate. The only difference his presence made was that now there were five people involved in the stand-off rather than the original four. *Nice going there, Ezra.*

Larabee, backed by a smartly-dressed Latino Ezra had never seen before, faced off against a lone kidnapper who had Lisa in a choke hold; none other than Connie's partner and paramour - the man Ezra had some time, long ago, christened Ché, for the Cuban revolutionary that the man obviously styled himself after.

"Drop it. Drop the gun!"

Ezra glanced down at the weapon held loosely in his hand almost as if he had forgotten he was carrying it. It still felt heavy and unwieldy in his hand but he didn't doubt that he could still fire it if and when the time came. One thing he did know for certain was that he would not give it up. He had surrendered this gun before in a decision he might yet live to regret and he was not about to make that mistake again.

"I don't think so."

"Ezra." The voice was Larabee's and the tone held both a question and a warning.

The Southerner allowed his gaze to momentarily flick to Chris, knowing exactly what he was

thinking. Everything hung in the balance now and here he was, a loose cannon, poised to blow the whole thing at any moment.

He had no plan. No clear idea of what direction to take. He wondered vaguely if Chris had. Still, it didn't really matter now; all the cards in this hand seemed to have already been dealt and all that remained was a show of hands.

The pounding in his head seemed to grow more intense and he swayed unsteadily, feeling dizzy and seasick, as if the ground under his feet was moving. He was going to be sick. Breathing in short, shallow gasps he concentrated on trying to stay upright, aware that all eyes were still on him.

"It's finished. Let her go." He sounded more tired than threatening.

"I will be the one to say when it is finished," spat Ché, responding with almost textbook predictability, violently jerking Lisa back against him and putting the gun to her head. "Now drop the gun!"

Out of the corner of his eye Ezra noticed a subtle movement to his right; not from Chris but from the man with him. A controlled shift in stance, barely a movement at all but it was enough for Ezra to pick up on and decide that perhaps the best option right now would be to keep Che's attention solidly on himself.

He slowly held the gun out to one side at arm's length, fingers clear of the trigger, in a demonstration intended to stress that he was not about to make any rash moves and that his sole purpose in moving was to put the weapon down on the ground.

Ché watched him, his eyes flickering nervously from Ezra to Chris and back again. Ezra smiled as he started to bend his knees, a slow, knowing, smile that seemed to unsettle the already rattled kidnapper and had the immediate effect of drawing his attention back to the Southerner. Back to where he wanted it. Hell, it was almost too easy.

Almost. He crouched unsteadily, struggling to keep his balance as the dizzying wash of seasickness came over him again. Wavering, he dropped abruptly and jarringly to one knee to stop himself keeling over, instinctively bracing himself with his right hand; the one that held the gun. He forced his head up, seeing through the mist of vertigo the suspicion and panic etched on Ché's face, and the certainty that he was the victim of some trickery. Ezra sucked in a deep breath, trying not to throw up, and let go of the gun as fast as he could, raising both hands and yelling assurances in rapid Spanish that he was putting the gun down. It was a tense few seconds and Ezra's heart was thundering in his chest as the moment of crisis passed and Ché eased the pressure off the trigger. Lisa's face was drained of all colour, her eyes wide and frightened as she made little hiccupping noises, trying not to cry. The Southerner breathed slowly out. Dear God, but that had been too close. Unable to bring himself to look any longer at the terrified girl, he bowed his head in abject weariness and wondered if Vin had truly done him any favours.

Estéban Velasco was a patient and pragmatic man, remarkably so given his Latin blood, but even so he had waited a long time for this moment. Seven years to be exact. He had not known the woman that the American, Vin, had so efficiently disposed of but this man was a different story. This man he knew.

Constantino Seinpaal. *La comadreja*. The weasel.

Velasco slowly exhaled, realising that the pressure building steadily in his chest was a result of the simple physiological fact that he had forgotten to breathe. Velasco's mind was racing, his thoughts tumbling over each other as he considered just how the man he had been hunting for almost half his SIC career came to be in this place, at this time. So many years of frustration and lost opportunities as again and again *la comadreja* had slipped through the net. Yet now, purely by chance, here he was standing no more than ten metres away.

"He's bluffing," murmured Larabee, beside him, his gun trained steadily on Seinpaal.

They were standing shoulder to shoulder, not daring to make any move as long as Seinpaal had Lisa as his shield. No way to go forward, and no way to go back. Stand-off.

"No, my friend, I know this man," whispered Velasco, grimly, "and he is deadly serious. Do not try to test him."

A quick sideways glance and barely perceptible nod from the American was enough to assure him that Chris was not about to do anything rash, but it didn't change the situation either and right now it looked as though the only way out of the impasse would be to yield and let Seinpaal - and Lisa - go. And he knew that he would never do that.

The lieutenant tightened his grip on the rifle in his hand, frustrated by the fact that he was, in effect, unarmed. There was no way imaginable that he would be able to bring the weapon to bear and fire an effective shot without risking getting either Lisa or himself killed in the process. His sidearm was even further from his reach, wedged securely in the waistband of his pants at the small of his back, but time was running out and Seinpaal did not look like a man who was ready to negotiate.

Velasco edged a fraction away from Chris, with no plan in mind other than to put some space between himself and the American, but Seinpaal tracked the movement with feral eyes. Even from a distance of ten metres the detective saw his finger twitch on the trigger and he froze as Seinpaal tightened his hold on the Hengst girl then took a quick step back, dragging her with him. Goddamn it, this whole sorry situation was going to blow up in their faces if they weren't careful.

He was rapidly calculating the possibilities, none of which included permitting *la comadreja* to slip out of his grasp yet again, when the delicate balance of the situation abruptly shifted. *Caray!* Larabee's man; the one who had been destined for execution. What the hell was he doing here?

Seinpaal instantly switched his focus, and his aim, to the interloper and Velasco sucked in a sharp breath feeling an unpleasant swooping sensation in the pit of his belly, certain that the already brittle stand-off was about to erupt in tragic and bloody violence.

A shouted demand for the bloodied and seemingly dazed American to put down his gun was met with a calm refusal that made the hair on the back of Velasco's neck prickle and beside him, he heard Larabee swear under his breath. Seinpaal shifted uneasily and nervously licked his lips, his gaze flickering uncertainly as he tried to divide his attention between two different points of focus. His gaze finally settled on the newest arrival on the scene and Velasco's pulse quickened as the first spark of an idea ignited in his brain, finally bringing a sense of order to the array of possibilities that had been teeming through his mind at light speed since he and Chris had first confronted *la comadreja* with the girl.

Tuning out of the verbal exchange and trusting Larabee to do all the right things, he fixed his gaze on Seinpaal and eased sideways, just as he had attempted to do earlier, only this time there was enough going on to mask the movement. He needed to get in front of Chris and quickly but without being too obvious about it. Then he had to hope that the American would understand what he was doing, and follow through. He took a slow, deep breath. So much depended on chance but then, what was ever certain in life?

His heart seemed to swell and fill his chest. If he fucked up on this then it would be the end of his career. He was already a pariah in the SIC, and another high profile "error in judgement" would cost him his badge. He wondered briefly if Larabee could use another man in his outfit.

Adrenaline pumping, he managed to gain another surreptitious six inches of ground, as Chris breathed a quiet but emotionally charged: "Sonovabitch". The man, Ezra, had indicated that he was giving up his weapon but a moment later he was down on one knee with his gun arm thrown up, triggering what Velasco's grandfather would have described as a *cojones congelados* moment. Velasco was certain it was no trick, the bodyguard was clearly done in, but Seinpaal was on a hair trigger and for one hearty-stopping, gut-wrenching moment he thought that his worst case scenario was about to come true. Then, amid a torrent of surprisingly fluent Spanish from the American, the gun was on the ground and the surrender complete.

Time to breathe again. Time to move. Time to act.

Velasco raised the rifle into the air in a gesture of surrender, his hand well clear of the trigger, and took a step forward.

"Look! Here is my weapon. I only ask that you do not harm the girl."

The detective took his time, carefully bobbing into a crouch to lay the rifle on the ground before slowly straightening with his hands in the air. He was acutely aware of the gun nestled at the small of his back, out of sight but also out of reach.

He couldn't see Chris's expression but he could make an educated guess as to what was going through Larabee's mind; because he knew how he would be reacting if their places were reversed.

"Put the gun down, Chris," he urged, "This is not the way."

He felt a flare of irritation as Seinpaal's lip curled in a sneer, but kept his emotions in check. He was trying desperately to stay two steps ahead of the cunning bastard and could only hope that Larabee would be able to keep up with him. He was juggling with lives here and failure was not an option he cared to consider.

"I don't think..."

"Put the gun down, Señor Larabee." He sharpened his voice. "I believe I am in authority here."

To his credit Chris made no argument and the bodyguard's Bersa joined the rifle on the ground. As he started to rise he murmured a clipped: "Hope you got a plan going here, pard."

"Trust me," he barely breathed the next words, "Just watch my back."

Hands still in the air, he turned slightly away from the other man and hoped to God that he would take not only the cue, but also the first opportunity.

The change in Seinpaal was instantaneous. He gave a snort of disbelief mingled with derision, quickly followed by a laugh. His *bravata* cut deeply into Velasco's professional pride but he avoided the natural temptation to fall into SIC mode and stare him down. His personal code of survival included a golden rule that said: when facing a loaded gun, don't ask to see the bullet.

Dragging the girl awkwardly with him, he took a couple of steps back and moved his pistol in an arc that covered all three men.

"Thank you for your co-operation, gentlemen. This just makes killing all of you so much easier..."

With a grin he swung the heavy weapon back and forth, enjoying the moment, drawing it out.

First mistake.

Lisa, more afraid now than she had been at any time but also more desperate, bit down savagely on Seinpaal's arm. He tried to shake her free, an annoying distraction, but she hung on with the tenacity of a pit bull and his attention finally wavered as he tried to deal with her.

Second mistake.

Lisa struggled to break free, her elbow smashing into his groin with enough force to make him double over. Eyes tearing and his face a mask of twisted fury, he momentarily lost his grip, but as the teenager tried to bolt his hand snaked out and grabbed her by the hair. Hauling the sobbing girl back to him, he whipped the pistol across her cheek and as she stumbled from the blow he shoved her to the ground.

Third and last mistake.

No longer shielded by his hostage, Seinpaal was left with no time to ponder where it had all gone wrong. Larabee's hastily fired bullet was just enough off the mark to miss being a killing shot,

instead it shattered his right elbow, leaving his gun hand hanging uselessly. Shocked, Seinpaal looked down at the ruined arm in disbelief. This was not supposed to happen! He stared in confusion at the bright blood steadily pumping out in a rhythmic pulsing arc, and tried to lift the gun but there was no bone, muscle or tendon remaining intact to respond. As he dazedly pondered his next move, an excruciating blast of pain suddenly exploded in his chest and, mouth filling with blood, he lost all ability to control his body and slowly pitched forward. As his face came to rest on the baked earth he found it puzzling that he should feel so terribly cold when the day was so bright and warm.

Taking no chances, Velasco quickly stooped to retrieve Larabee's own gun and with a grim, humourless smile tapped Chris on the arm.

“Good work.”

Chris shook his head. He had only managed one shot. The real business had been done by someone else before he could steady his aim and fire a second time.

Ezra.

Larabee's attention snapped to the Southerner who was already up and moving, the gun still in his hand but now held loosely at his side and pointing at the ground. His walk was slow, measured, painful, and Chris could only wonder at the strength of purpose that kept a man going long after other men would have given in.

On impulse he reached out and gripped Velasco's arm halting him in his tracks as the detective started to move off towards the fallen man and girl. Seinpaal was dead, he was sure of that. Ezra's concern was solely for the girl and Chris couldn't fault that; it was his job, what he was paid to do, but somehow as the exhausted Southerner bent to lift the still stunned and barely stirring teenager, he didn't think either obligation or money had anything to do with it.

Velasco's brow creased in a puzzled frown, forming a silent question which Larabee answered with a quick jerk of his chin in Ezra's direction.

“Reckon he deserves a coupla minutes before we go barging in.”

“But Seinpaal...?”

Seinpaal? So Velasco already had the son of a bitch tagged. That in itself threw up a few questions that Larabee was interested to know the answers to but Chris suddenly got the impression that Velasco had issues of his own that he was anxious to deal with. Chris met the lieutenant's earnestly questioning look and after a second or two his sober expression relaxed into a smile.

“He ain't goin' nowhere.”

Vin swore softly as he suddenly found himself standing alone in an empty compound with only a

corpse for company and, feeling the skin-crawling uneasiness of being out in the open and completely exposed, he quickly looked for cover in the shadows of the closest outbuildings. Ezra's parting words urging him to turn his attention to Buck now filled his thoughts with a mixture of urgency and dread as he considered that Wilmington had been shot almost three days ago. *If you move fast you might still be able to make a difference.*

Moving cautiously he skirted around the edge of a sprawling open-sided shed, and quickly scanned the immediate area. The silence was unnerving and he had the strange feeling that he was involved in some insane and lethal game of hide and seek. The kidnappers had scattered but that didn't mean that they were gone; and in his experience rats - of any kind - had a nasty habit of fighting dirty once cornered. The Texan took a deep breath and darted to the next scrap of cover, swearing as his knee gave way under the added stress and threw him off balance to send him crashing heavily into the galvanised skin of the shed, burning his shoulder on heated metal in the process. *Sonuvabitch!* He quickly drew back and moved on, limping now on his injured leg and cursing yet again the day he ever set foot in Guatemala.

The sight of a partly open door in one of the larger sheds drew Tanner slowly forward but his approach was still wary. Wilmington was around here somewhere, wounded and needing help sooner rather than later if Ezra was right, but Vin had seen men used as bullet bait before and he had no intention of walking into any trap for the sake of getting to Buck five minutes earlier. He could wait that long.

The air inside was hot and close, and Vin blinked as he stepped from bright sunlight into the dim, shadowy, half-light of the shed. The place was rank; it stank of stale piss and other, less identifiable but equally unpleasant, odours that caught in the back of his throat. Ducking his head, he breathed through his mouth and grimaced. *Jesus!* Letting his eyes adjust to the changing light he did a quick sweep of the building. Nowhere to hide anything; just one big open space scattered with the debris that always seemed to go with abandonment and neglect. He started a second sweep as he moved forward, eyes searching and quartering every square foot; checking, dismissing and quickly moving on. Nothing. *Shit!*

He moved deeper into the shadows, away now from the light streaming in through the open door. He saw a length of nylon rope discarded on the floor; the same rope that had bound Ezra's wrists. He looked up to the block and tackle suspended from the roof and his mind threw up an image that he hastily shoved away preferring not to go even one step down that road as, tight-lipped, he focused grimly on searching the rest of the shed.

Sacks; food scraps; plastic water bottles; a bloody jacket; and flies...hundreds of flies. *Dear God!*
Buck.

If you move fast...

In those first few seconds he couldn't move at all, paralysed by the certainty that he had arrived too late; Buck was already beyond help. But a sudden rattling intake of breath from the man on the ground dramatically exploded the conviction that Wilmington was no longer in need of help and after a stunned millisecond Vin recovered his wits enough to take action and quickly covered the remaining distance between himself and the wounded bodyguard.

Dropping to one knee beside the frighteningly pale and still form, Tanner tried to judge Wilmington's condition but he was no medic and he struggled now to remember everything he had ever been taught in trauma support training. He was reassured by the fact that at least Buck was stirring although it was clearly an effort for him to make any kind of response. Once he succeeded in opening his eyes it still took several seconds before there was any spark of recognition, then he managed a ghost of a smile which slipped away as quickly as it appeared. Bloodied fingers reached for Vin's arm, slipped, caught his sleeve instead.

"You're too late..."

"You just hang in there, Buck. Have you outta here in no time..."

"No." Wilmington's agitation grew as his grip on Tanner's sleeve tightened, "No, listen." The words came in short bursts, the effort of talking competing directly with his need to snatch frequent intakes of breath. "Ezra. Lisa. The crazy bitch took 'em out...killed Ezra."

"Hey, hey, settle down and wind it back a frame or two there, pard. Ezra's fine. Saw him with my own eyes not ten minutes ago. He ain't exactly sparkin' on all cylinders and he's mighty pissed but he sure ain't dead." He didn't bother to add that it had been a close call; Buck was wound up enough already.

The news, if anything, appeared to add to Wilmington's confusion. "Heard it. Heard the shot."

"Yeah. You heard it alright." Vin forced a strained smile. "But that was the sound of the cavalry ridin' in to save the day."

Wilmington took another long moment to process that piece of information but at last seemed satisfied that Vin was telling him the truth and relaxed a fraction.

"And Lisa? Where's Lisa?"

Vin sombrely shook his head. "Don't know. Some guy made off with the kid soon as we made the bust. Chris and the Lieutenant went after them."

"The Lieutenant?"

"Long story."

Wilmington shivered briefly and closed his eyes again, obviously taxed by the brief exchange. "I got time."

Vin put aside his gun and hastily shrugged out of his jacket, draping it over Buck's chest and murmuring more to himself than making a genuine reply: "Don't like to rain on your parade,

Bucklin, but I reckon that's one thing you ain't got.”

The Texan was so focused on Buck that at first he didn't hear the soft footfalls moving outside the shed and the first inkling that he might have company was triggered by a sudden change in the quality of light as a shadow briefly flitted across the open door.

Heart pounding, his fingers crept towards the semi-automatic on the ground by his right knee, thinking it would be the final straw in an already seriously screwed assignment if he managed to get himself shot in the back for failing to follow the most basic procedure of making sure his own ass was covered. The moment of self-recrimination lasted less than a microsecond as the urge for self-preservation kicked in and he snatched the gun up then pivoted on one knee to face the doorway, his finger already squeezing the trigger as he quickly scanned to acquire a target that would see the action completed.

“Jeeezus, JD!”

Or, in this case, aborted.

Vin lowered the gun, his calm expression at odds with his pulse rate which had momentarily leapt into three digits. “Almost got yourself shot, kid.”

Dunne moved into the shed, lowering his own gun. “Ditto.”

The Texan gave a quick, slightly embarrassed grin. “Yeah, well I won't tell if you don't.”

JD quickly shoved the pistol into the holster at the back of his belt, looking beyond Vin; his open expression flitted quickly between dread and hope, and morphed through all stages between before he finally brought his emotions under control and ventured a hesitant: “Buck?”

Tanner nodded just once as he stood up and holstered his own gun, moving up beside the younger man who seemed rooted to the spot. “Yeah.” He lowered his voice. “I need to get Nathan here quick. You got a two-way?”

Dunne fumbled in his pocket and handed over the small cellphone-sized communicator.

“Is it bad?”

Vin kept his voice low. “Bad enough. You stay with him, and I'll round up some help.”

For a moment JD looked stricken. “Me? I don't know what to do! What if he...?”

“Listen,” interrupted Tanner quickly, his voice an urgent hiss, not daring to follow where JD was leading, “you do whatever you have to do. Hell, I don't know! Just talk to him. You can do that can't you?”

Dunne drew in a deep breath and straightened, turning earnest brown eyes on the former Texas Ranger. “You just get Nathan here, okay?”

Vin tapped his arm, wordlessly acknowledging the agreement, and moved outside as he thumbed the transmit button and the Motorola crackled into life.

Chris Larabee felt as if he had not slept in days and, as he wearily massaged the aching muscles in the back of his neck, he thought about coffee. The thought had nothing to do with the hectares of coffee plantation currently surrounding him but owed more to a sudden, intense craving for a hefty jolt of caffeine. Or a cigarette. He plunged his hands into his pockets and sucked in a deep breath.

There was none of the usual feeling of elation that followed success. Any sense of satisfaction he might have felt had quickly soured in the aftermath of the raid as he had moved through the compound taking stock and counting the cost.

He had spared a moment to shake Ezra's hand; there had been no time for anything other than a superficial exchange but something told him that the Southerner would not have welcomed more. It was obvious that Standish had not had an easy time, yet although he showed the evidence of the physical abuse he had suffered over the past few days he still managed to project an air of confident ease and quiet dignity that Chris found oddly reassuring. But then, he reminded himself, this was Ezra Standish; whatever emotions lurked beneath the calm exterior were his alone, not for public display.

Everyone had their own ways of dealing with things.

He made a quick visual sweep of the immediate area but Velasco had the con now; his authority as an SIC detective had officially relegated Larabee to bystander. They both understood the necessity for it, and for once Chris was more than happy to shift the load. As it was there would be too many questions. Without the lieutenant's intervention they might well be wrapped up in enough red tape to keep them in Central America for a long, long time. Well, Velasco was welcome to all the bureaucratic bullshit; he just wanted to go home.

Turning away from the buzz of subdued activity in the compound he walked purposefully towards the cluster of squalid outbuildings that he had, until now, avoided. Time to do some dealing of his own.

In spite of his conviction that he had made the right call, that he had responsibilities that outweighed whatever personal feelings he might have, he still felt a pang of guilt for having paid scant attention to Wilmington in the wake of the rescue. Buck would understand. He had a job to do and he couldn't let either friendship or emotions get in the way. The client came first.

Chris quickened his pace, aware that he was rationalising. He knew he had made the right decision but just because it was right, didn't mean it was easy. He and Buck went way back and he couldn't help but feel that now, when it really mattered, he had let him down.

Vin materialised from the deep shadows between the buildings as Chris approached, his sombre expression answering Larabee's first question. He asked it anyway.

“How's he doing?”

Vin gave a slight shrug that said everything and said nothing.

“Could be better. He's been asking for you.”

There was no censure in the Texan's voice but still Larabee felt the barb of guilt twist in his gut. He should have come sooner.

Moving past the Texan and into the shed, he could understand why Vin had chosen to stay outside. The air inside was hot, stuffy and fetid but Chris had been in worse places and put up with worse stinks to be troubled by anything other than his concern for Buck's wellbeing. And if Nathan's expression was any kind of indicator, it didn't look good.

Jackson intercepted him before he had taken half a dozen steps, grasping his arm and steering him slightly away from Wilmington.

“He's been asking for you.”

“So I heard. Came as soon as I could.” Chris knew his tone was sharper than it should have been and that Nathan meant nothing by it, but he still felt that he was being judged by these men and that somehow he had failed to make the grade. He rubbed his eyes; God, he was tired. “Vin said he's not doing so good.”

Jackson gave a quick shake of his head. “Shot twice in the leg, no medical attention,” he waved a hand to encompass the shed, “less than ideal conditions; he's lost a lot of blood and he's in shock, add to that dehydration and infection...” he stopped suddenly, “Well, you get the picture.”

Chris did.

He was shocked by Buck's appearance. Over the years Buck, like himself, had taken some hard hits and had the scars to prove it; a slash from a machete blade had almost cost him his life back when they had soldiered together in El Salvador, but this was the first time he had ever seen his friend look anywhere near close to death. And it scared him.

He slowly lowered himself to one knee beside the motionless form of his friend and reached out to lightly rest his hand on Wilmington's shoulder. The wounded man's eyes opened and it took a few seconds for him to focus on the man at his side, before he gave a tired smile.

“Hey.”

Chris forced himself to respond with a tight smile of his own. “You look like crap.”

“Now that's downright impossible,” he countered smoothly and with typical Buck Wilmington conceit, but it wasn't hard to read the barely suppressed fear and pain in his eyes that told their own story. “Vin tells me we nailed the bad guys.”

“Most of 'em, yeah. A couple slipped through the net.”

Hugging his arms closer to his body, Buck shivered in spite of the close atmosphere of the shed.

“So, how long before we can wave *adios* to this little slice of heaven?”

“Longer than I'd like,” confessed Chris, quietly, “Suddenly we're in the middle of a goddamn crime scene.”

Wilmington's eyes closed again and he sighed deeply, an autonomous response to answer his body's demand for more oxygen. The talking seemed to have exhausted him reinforcing Larabee's doubts that Buck could hang in until the ambulance that Velasco had already summoned from Cobán could reach them.

“Ezra's okay.” The words were breathed more than spoken.

Larabee frowned, puzzled by the apparent non sequitur.

“Yeah, Ezra's holding up okay...” he stopped as Buck's hand reached from under the covering of jackets and gripped his arm as his eyes, bright with fever, fixed on him.

“No! Telling you...he's an okay guy.” His fingers dug painfully into Chris's forearm as if he needed to emphasise the point. “Took the heat for the kid and me, but you gotta know they messed him up, Chris. And he just kept taking it...”

Buck's voice trailed away, and Larabee nodded slowly. It made sense; he had witnessed first hand what Connie Van Der Schoor was capable of and, given what he knew of Ezra's past, he could well believe the Southerner's tenacity in refusing to submit to her will. He didn't know Ezra that well but he did know that he was a man who would rather break than bend.

“Won't tell you nothin'. It's all in here,” continued Buck softly, releasing Larabee's arm to briefly touch his chest. “But don't let him fool ya; he's hurtin' - and hurtin' bad.”

“Understood.”

Wilmington nodded once, satisfied with that response, then shifted and winced, his already pale face turning the colour of putty. “Now how about earning your pay and doing something worthwhile like getting us out of this godforsaken pest hole, instead of sitting around shooting the breeze?”

In spite of his concern for his friend Chris was forced to smile.

“I'm onto it. You just hang in there, okay?”

Buck closed his eyes, his expression relaxed now.

“Waited this long didn't I?” Then after a beat: “Knew you'd come.”

Larabee ducked his head, taking a moment to get a grip on his wayward emotions as his fingers closed around Wilmington's cool and bloodless hand in a brief, reassuring, squeeze before gruffly answering: “Reckon it's time we all went home, Buck.”

“Amen to that,” Buck sighed then added with a crooked grin: “Now, if you'd just call me a cab...”

Standing outside in the moist heat a few minutes later, Chris wished it was that easy. By his reckoning they were a good three hours from Cobán and, even with help on its way, it would be several more hours before Buck saw the inside of a hospital. If Wilmington was to have a fighting

chance they needed to go now and go fast. His first instinct, driven by the very real fear that Buck might yet die, was to load him into the Montero and floor the gas all the way to Cobán; only it wasn't going to be that simple. Nothing was ever that simple. Feeling the crushing weight of his responsibilities he walked quickly away from the shed.

He needed to talk to Velasco.

The lieutenant was standing with Ezra, his stance easy and relaxed as he engaged the Southerner in conversation. Recalling his own first contentious meeting with the detective he hoped Estéban was not pushing too hard but once he moved within earshot he realised that far from being any interrogation, this was two men thrown together by a shared experience, doing little more than shoot the breeze. If Velasco had more pressing questions then he was keeping them for later. And looking at Ezra now, Chris could understand why.

Velasco reached into his pocket for a pack of cigarettes, took one for himself and then casually offered one to the Southerner. After a moment of hesitation, Ezra took one and with a slight nod of appreciation and a guilty smile gratefully accepted a light from the detective, dipping his head briefly to touch cigarette to flame then straightening as he drew the smoke deep into his lungs. For a few moments neither man spoke, each shrouded in a haze of pungent tobacco smoke and seemingly absorbed in his own thoughts.

Joining the pair but still maintaining a discreet distance, Chris let his gaze linger for a few seconds on Standish then, conscious that closer scrutiny might not be welcome, he hastily switched his attention to the lieutenant.

“Mind if I join you?”

Velasco tilted his head, the attitude of someone who is not quite sure if he has misunderstood the question, and mutely held up the distinctive red and white pack of Marlboro for confirmation. A curt nod from Larabee prompted a knowing smile from the detective and he tossed both the pack and a plain, but obviously expensive, gold lighter to the American.

A few moments later, Larabee was taking his first pull of tobacco in more than two years. With a sigh he exhaled and looked critically at the cigarette in his hand, debating whether it was worth it. He glanced up and for just a moment his gaze locked with Ezra's before the Southerner, his expression unreadable, calmly looked away. But not before Chris had seen the haunted look in his eyes and the fine tremor in his hand as he held the cigarette to his mouth. Taking another drag of the acrid tobacco he filled his lungs again before bitterly flicking the half-smoked butt to the ground. Hell, yes, it was worth it.

“We need to get Buck out of here,” he announced, abruptly, “If we wait any longer, he's not gonna make it. I was thinking maybe...”

Velasco dug in his pocket and held out his car keys.

“Here. Take the Audi.” He threw down his own barely started cigarette and crushed it underfoot. “If you go now you should meet the ambulance half-way. Save time. I’ll patch a call through to alert them.”

In the interval it took a bemused Larabee to get his head around what Velasco had just said, the detective took a step forward and pressed the keys into his hand. “Go.”

“But what about...”

“Everything is under control here,” interrupted the lieutenant, reasonably, “Now go!”

Chris looked down at the keys, suddenly lost for words. Maybe it was that simple. He finally managed to respond with a gruff: “Thanks.”

Velasco grinned and reached to clasp his shoulder. “Just try not to scratch the paintwork, okay? And I’ll see you back in Cobán.”

“Agreed.” He turned to Standish. “Ezra?”

The Southerner waved a dismissive hand. “I’ll take the next stage out.”

Chris hesitated. He wasn’t comfortable with the idea of leaving Ezra behind knowing some of what he had been through, but he was unwilling to go head to head with the Southerner and so was obliged to accept his decision. With a quick nod, he lightly touched Ezra’s arm in a wordless gesture of farewell and turned away, his mind already on getting Buck loaded into the Audi and driving as fast as he could towards Cobán.

Nathan Jackson watched the Audi move off with mixed feelings. Chris had made an executive decision and he had no choice but to abide by it, yet still he couldn’t help but feel that he should have been the one to go with Buck. Larabee had quietly overruled his protests that he was the logical choice to accompany the injured bodyguard and, instead, had taken JD. They had all agreed that it was a matter of urgency that Wilmington get to a medical facility sooner rather than later, but he had not been convinced by Larabee’s argument that there was now little more he could do for Buck and that his talents would be better utilised by staying; that there were others still to consider. Others that might be in need of his skills. So, JD went and he stayed. He accepted it, but he didn’t have to like it.

“Seen Ezra?”

Vin’s voice broke into his thoughts and he turned slowly to look at the other man as the Texan limped towards him.

“Not recently. Why?”

Tanner shrugged, but looked uneasy.

“No reason.”

“Doesn’t sound like no reason. What’s up?”

Vin idly toed the ground with his boot and looked slowly round the compound before he spoke, and when he did it was with an almost apologetic reluctance.

“Just don't think we should be leaving him too much on his own, you know, all things considered.”

“Yeah, I take your point but he's not letting anyone get close. Hell, you know Ezra.”

“No, I don't.” Vin replied softly, “That's the trouble. I don't think anyone does.”

Nathan frowned, not quite sure where the conversation was leading.

“And your point is...?”

Vin kicked at the dirt and sighed heavily. “Hell, I don't know. Forget it.”

And with that he abruptly turned and walked away, leaving Nathan with the uncomfortable feeling that he had just been tested and had, in some way, failed.

Putting Vin's mood down to the fact that everyone seemed to be strung out after days of unrelenting stress with too little sleep and too much caffeine, he went back to the shed to collect what remained of his medi-kit but made a mental note to check on Ezra when he next saw the Southerner.

As the focus in the compound switched to getting Buck's evacuation underway Ezra had quietly faded into the background. Not that his concern for Wilmington was any less than any of the others but because he felt he had nothing more to contribute in the way of help for the injured bodyguard, and because he needed to be alone. He needed some space; some time to regroup. Game over.

He found a shady spot behind the drying racks where he could trade, for a few moments at least, the reality of what lay in the filthy compound behind him for the spectacular view of the rugged hills of the Alta Verapaz.

He was hurting now; weary to the bone and sick with fatigue. From the sharp, stabbing pain in his left side that took his breath away as he sat, he was almost certain he had broken at least one rib although he found it vaguely disturbing that he couldn't recall how or when.

With a sigh he closed his eyes and tried to ease into a marginally less painful position thinking that right about now he'd willingly trade his eternal soul for a stiff drink and a hot bath. From there it was effortless slide into torpidity, suspended somewhere in the twilight between sleeping and waking, as exhaustion finally claimed him.

The touch was light, barely a feather stroke on his arm, but it was enough to startle the Southerner and for a fleeting moment, before he came back to earth with a galvanising jolt, he again felt the crawling caress of Connie van der Schoor on his skin. In those few seconds his sense of revulsion was so strong that he jerked violently away from the contact, triggering a new wave of pain in his chest that instantly sobered him but left him struggling to catch his breath.

“Ezra...please. It's only me. Lisa.”

He lifted his head. The girl looked pale and drawn, and now confusion was mingled with concern on her young face but, edging closer, she tentatively put a hand on his shoulder and looked straight into his eyes.

“Does it hurt very much?”

Ezra suddenly found it difficult to speak but the constriction in his throat now had nothing to do with the livid bruising that circled his neck. He swallowed painfully, battling to keep control of his brittle emotions, and finally managed a tight laugh that caught in his throat and slipped dangerously towards a choking sob before ending abruptly in a sharply drawn intake of breath.

“Just a little.”

Lisa hand strayed from his shoulder to his neck and he felt her fingers softly brush against raw, tender flesh. This time he didn't pull back but after a few moments he gently drew her hand away, pausing to give it a reassuring squeeze before finally releasing her and instead, as silent tears streamed down her face, drawing her into a weary and emotional embrace.

“I want to go home, Ezra.”

The Southerner sighed softly.

“You and me both, darlin'.”

But he was suddenly struck by the irony that he didn't have one. All that waited for him in Boston was an expensively impersonal hotel suite that, in truth, he couldn't afford and, in a moment of absolute clarity, he saw that perhaps now was his chance to change that; maybe his last chance. The solution was simple: if Manfred Hengst's offer of a job still stood when all this was over he would take it.

The narrow ribbon of twisting, undulating and poorly maintained road steadily unfolded before them as the powerful motor effortlessly chewed up the miles, the sophisticated suspension mercifully evening out the ride in spite of the rough surface. Even so there were times when the wheels struck a deeper rut than usual that sent juddering shockwaves through the chassis. Times when his attention wandered.

He glanced in the rear-view mirror less concerned with following traffic, which had so far been sporadic, than the welfare of his passengers. He curbed the urge to ask JD again how Buck was travelling, the kid was strung out enough without him asking unnecessary questions for which he already had the answer. Wilmington had been in bad shape when they had started out and he was still in bad shape, and no matter how many different ways he asked the same question the answer was going to be the same.

“How much further, d'you think?”

Dunne's voice betrayed his anxiety although Chris could tell he was working hard at trying to hide it.

“Well, JD, I figure it's like those math questions you get in grade school. You know, train A leaves station C at 12.30 travelling at 40 miles an hour and train B leaves station D at 12.50 travelling at 50 miles an hour, at what time does train A pass train B?” He caught Dunne's eye through the reflection in the rearview mirror and smiled. “And my math sucks.”

JD gave him a sideways look.

“That's gotta be the longest way around saying you don't know that I ever heard.”

Chris shrugged philosophically.

“Okay, I don't know. That better?”

“ I reckon it had better not be too far.”

Larabee spared a moment to half-turn in his seat and risk a brief look over his shoulder. Wilmington, who had spent most of the journey sleeping, was becoming more agitated. His movements were fretful and his breathing had changed enough for even Chris to see the difference. Swearing softly under his breath he turned back to focus his attention on the road.

“Remember what Nathan said,” he prompted evenly, as much to reassure himself as to remind Dunne. “Just try and keep his body heat down.”

“Yeah, I know,” he answered tightly, “but I've used the last ice pack and he's still burning up. I don't know what else to do.”

“You're doing just fine, JD.” Chris struggled to stop his voice giving away his own sense of urgency, knowing that they were on borrowed time now. “Keep wetting him down, use whatever water we have left, okay?”

“On it.” Terse. Determined.

Larabee held back on saying any more. JD didn't need him on his case stating the obvious, but he couldn't help but feel the frustration of being relegated to observer. With more than a decade of friendship between him and Buck it was the hardest thing he had ever done to just keep on driving knowing his best friend was deteriorating by the mile and there was not a goddamned thing that he could do about it.

He wondered again if he had made a mistake in leaving Jackson, and his expertise, behind and again he told himself that his decision had been the right one, the non-emotional and rational choice based on the best deployment of resources. Even for Buck - no, especially for Buck - he could not afford to let the ties of friendship cloud his judgement and he had seen the signs in Ezra that all was not well with the Southerner. He knew that haunted look and knew with equal certainty that sooner or later Ezra was going to crash and burn. Besides, Jackson had done

everything he could for Buck back at the plantation, he had admitted as much himself. It had been the right thing to do. So why did he now feel the crushing weight of doubt that left him feeling like the biggest Judas of all time?

Hands tightening on the wheel he took a deep breath and let grief take hold for just enough time to be reminded of the bitter pain of loss, then he slammed the door on it. No. Not now. The game wasn't over yet. Instead he channelled his energy into focusing on the road ahead as if he could summon the appearance of the ambulance they were to meet by sheer force of will.

Larabee had anticipated the moment for so long that when it came he almost missed it, not immediately recognising the approaching Land Cruiser as anything but another utility vehicle among many of similar vintage and condition that they had passed in the last hour or more and had it not been for the police cars that crested the rise right on its tail, he might have driven on. Instead he realised his mistake in time, flashed his headlights and braked hard to bring the SUV to a stop in a spray of red dirt and gravel at the roadside.

The Land Cruiser, on which Chris could now see the worn markings of a plain blue cross and the single word *ambulancia* stencilled on its side, abruptly swerved across the road to swing in behind the Audi as the police cars swept by in a showy but brief blast of flashing lights and sirens. The driver slammed on the brakes then quickly reversed, backing up towards the stationary car so fast that Chris, certain that he was about to be rear-ended, instinctively braced himself for the impact. It took a few seconds for him to process the fact that the expected shunt was not going to happen and that the unlikely-looking ambulance had indeed stopped with several feet to spare, and its equally unlikely-looking crew was already standing beside the Land Cruiser without any indication as to what their next move might be.

Slowly shaking his head he hit the seat belt release and got out of the car, trying not to let his doubts show but wondering if perhaps after all he shouldn't just have kept going and driven Buck all the way to Cobán himself.

This was not what he had expected but then, this was not Boston. Neither was it Guatemala City where at least hospital and emergency services could be readily accessed, if you had the means to pay. This was the real Guatemala and, he reminded himself, what he saw was the best he was going to get. He hoped, for Buck's sake, it was going to be enough.

The soft murmur of subdued voices flowed over and around him blending with the pleasantly soothing hum of the motor to produce a relaxed somnolence that was the closest he had been to real sleep in many days but close was as far as it got. For the moment he was content to find refuge behind closed eyes and keep at bay the inevitable curiosity; the questions he wasn't ready

to answer. He needed more time. A lot more time.

By Ezra's estimation they had been on the road about an hour and, with Josiah at the wheel, the SUV was steadily reeling in the miles back to Cobán but there was still a long way to go.

Shifting slightly in his seat he found that in trying to ease one discomfort he was doing little more than exchanging it for another; the crushing tightness in his chest was back and the pain in his side was like a knife between his ribs every time he moved. He had learned to tolerate the ever-present headache but he was discovering that concussion and long road trips did not mix and, for the first time in his life, he was starting to feel the effects of motion sickness. The very idea filled him with dismay but the reality was that unless he could get his feet on solid ground and breathe some fresh air soon, he was going to throw up. Swallowing hard, he tried to take some deep breaths without inflicting any more pain on himself and willed his rebellious stomach into submission.

"Ezra? You okay, man?"

The hand that closed around his forearm startled him almost as much as the unexpected voice in his ear and he barely succeeded in controlling the impulse to snatch his arm away. He slowly opened his eyes and looked evenly at his questioner before answering. He was a long way from being okay; he knew it and Jackson knew it but this was an unspoken offer of help. He could take it or leave it.

"Do I look okay?" Even to his own ears he sounded spiteful.

Jackson shook his head, not in answer to the question but rather showing a benign tolerance that he would have expected nothing else from the Southerner.

"If you want to know the honest truth, Ezra, I've seen roadkill in better shape."

"I'll take that as a no then shall I?"

Sarcasm oozed through his words and a frown of annoyance briefly creased Jackson's forehead then disappeared again just as quickly.

"We're still a couple of hours out of Cobán, just thought you might be needing to top up on the pain-killers."

"Right now, I'd be more interested if you had some twelve year old whiskey to offer," countered the Southerner, smoothly.

Nathan shrugged at the rebuff.

"Suit yourself, Ezra."

He seemed disappointed at Ezra's flippant response and Ezra suddenly felt guilty for not being more grateful that someone was looking out for him, but he wasn't ready to expose himself to anyone's sympathy, however well-intentioned. So he did what he always did when someone tried to get too close; he shut him out.

"Thank you, Mr. Jackson. I will."

“Goddammit, Ezra, give the guy a break. He’s just tryin’ to help. Maybe if you’d just let him take a look at you, you wouldn’t be getting blood all over the seat.”

Vin’s low pitched voice coming from the seat behind interrupted the increasingly stilted dialogue between the two other men and Ezra automatically checked what he could see of his ruined shirt, not sure if the Texan was just trying to make a point or if he really was bleeding. Without saying a word Vin reached over and pulled back his already open collar far enough to expose part of his shoulder; proof he was telling the truth. He didn’t look. He didn’t need to. But Nathan leaned forward, eyes momentarily narrowing, before he swore softly.

“Son of a bitch, Ezra. What the hell did they...?” He stopped abruptly, his gaze quickly darting towards Vin and Ezra guessed that, behind him and unseen, the Texan was silently vetoing that particular line of questioning. To his credit Nathan took the hint and instead of pressing the point turned his attention back to the Southerner. Moving closer, he eased the shirt further off Ezra’s shoulder and took a closer look at the bruised and still-bleeding wound.

“Looks like a bite.” The surprise was there, along with the unspoken question.

Ezra quickly dismissed the image that sprang so visually to mind of the frantic Latino, desperate enough to use teeth and nails in the absence of any other weapon; eyes bulging with fear as understanding came that he was truly fighting for his life.

“Full marks for observation, Mr. Jackson,” he drawled, feigning a disinterest that he did not feel. He could feel the sweat trickling uncomfortably down between his shoulder blades while, paradoxically, his skin was erupting in goose-flesh.

Without making any comment Nathan reached across and powered open the window, letting in a blast of warm, humid air that instantly challenged the climate control of the vehicle but at the same time eased the feeling of suffocation and overwhelming dread that had so quickly closed in on Ezra.

“I should clean that up.”

As much as Ezra wanted to be left alone he found himself nodding in agreement, suddenly too tired to argue any more. If Jackson was at all surprised by the sudden change of heart he succeeded in hiding it well and, as he reached over the back of the seat to take his medi-kit from Vin, Ezra had the distinct feeling that he’d just been neatly outmanoeuvred by the two men. With a weary sigh he unfastened the two remaining buttons on his shirt, a tacit signal for Nathan to begin, and turned his head to stare out of the open window. And so he withdrew, detaching himself from the proceedings as he focused instead on the green blur of scenery that scrolled by as Sanchez gunned the 4WD northwards. He responded where he was expected to but mostly the murmur of Nathan’s voice as he worked was only a minor distraction that barely penetrated his consciousness.

“...Ezra?”

With a jolt he reacted to his name but he knew he had missed something. Nathan was giving him a look that suggested he was waiting for an answer, but Ezra had no idea what the question might have been. He shook his head, his confusion obvious.

“Your shirt,” prompted Nathan quietly, waiting, and after a few seconds of thought he made the connection that he was expected to take it off.

He was not sure that he even could.

“Vin’s shirt,” he found himself saying, looking down at the decidedly worse-for-wear, once-white shirt. He vaguely recalled a long ago agreement that he would temporarily trade his handmade Italian shirts for a loan of Tanner’s off-the-rack specials for the trip up country. It had started as a joke at the time, but now he felt genuine regret that he had not been a better custodian of the Texan’s property. “Sorry, Vin. Owe you one.”

He realised with a start that Nathan was still patiently waiting. Watching. Goddamn it, he needed to get his shit together! Right now he would barter his soul for a few hours of uninterrupted sleep. And a quart of good whiskey.

Leaning forward he started to ease his left arm out of the sleeve but his strained shoulder and damaged ribs warned him in very direct terms that he was asking the impossible. Abruptly he stopped, braced himself, then tried again, this time more cautiously dipping his shoulder as he carefully worked the fabric down his arm.

The pain that ripped through his chest at that moment took his breath away. Slowly doubling over with the heel of his right hand pressed to his sternum he experienced the double unpleasantness of feeling the blood drain from his face as sweat oozed freely from every pore to immediately chill on his skin. He tried to catch his breath but was instead overwhelmed by the terrifying sensation of suffocation.

Holy Mother! Faced with the frightening reality of not being able to draw air into his lungs he felt the first blossoming of panic. Then, as his vision started to blur around the edges and voices became more distant and less intelligible, he desperately searched for the door release catch but instead found himself resisting quick and mobile hands that only seemed to be trying to frustrate his efforts. Then, as his panic escalated, he became engaged in a desperate struggle that only fuelled his agitation. For Christ’s sake, did no one understand? He couldn’t breathe. He needed to get out. He needed fresh air.

Nathan lunged forward as soon as Ezra, clearly in pain, suddenly clutched at his chest and within seconds it was obvious that he was in real distress. He was having serious difficulty breathing and, as his colour paled to an unhealthy shade of grey, Jackson felt a ripple of apprehension flutter through his stomach.

“Josiah!”

But the warning was unnecessary. The Montero was already rapidly decelerating and in the process of slewing to a juddering emergency halt at the roadside just as Jackson roughly shoved the dividing armrest out of the way and after a brief struggle succeeded in wresting control of the door catch from the stricken and panicky Southerner. He didn't have time to wonder what was going through Ezra's mind, or why he seemed suddenly intent on throwing himself from a moving vehicle, he just knew that there was something seriously wrong.

Leaning across the struggling Southerner, he used the advantage of his greater weight to push him back into the seat and hold him there, while he tried desperately to make some sort of clinical assessment. Goddamn it, he was a trained EMT with years of experience behind him! Now he was acting like a rookie. What was it that he had missed? His own heart was racing, almost keeping time with the fast and furious pace of his thoughts, he prepared himself for the chilling possibility that Ezra might just be arresting on him. God only knew what he had been through at the plantation, and he had steadfastly and stubbornly refused all attempts by Nathan to offer anything more than the most basic of first aid measures. He had respected Ezra's right to refuse but now he wished he had tried harder.

He felt for a pulse, murmuring softly, under his breath: “Don't do this to me, Ezra.” The carotid artery beating too fast but nonetheless strongly and regularly against his fingertips, confirmed that his heart at least was still pumping.

“Come on, come on, man, work with me here,” he urged, with quiet intensity, “Breathe.”

Working on instinct, he pressed both hands to Ezra's ribcage steadily applying pressure to compress the upper part of his chest and a few seconds later the Southerner tensed as he fought against the constriction. Just as Jackson was considering his options if Ezra went into full respiratory arrest, he finally bucked convulsively and gulped down a lungful of air with a sudden, explosive gasp.

Relieved, Jackson kept his voice low and even, continuing to coach Ezra: “Easy now. Just keep it slow. Come on, breathe deep.” But still Ezra was fighting for air, sucking in shallow, painful breaths, one hand guarding his badly bruised side, as if he would never be able to get enough oxygen into his lungs to satisfy the demands of his body.

His fingers still groped urgently for the door catch and with an unexpectedly solid shove that unbalanced Nathan and sent him sprawling awkwardly onto the floor, Ezra kicked open the door and tumbled out.

Jackson struggled to get up, annoyed and concerned in equal measure. “Son of a bitch!”

Vin quickly reached across the seat and grabbed Nathan's sleeve as he started after Ezra.

“No! Let him go.”

For a moment Jackson tried to shrug free.

“What the hell...?”

Tanner shifted forward, rising out of his seat, his grip tightening on the other man's arm. “I said, no!”

For a moment the two men traded equally determined stares, then Nathan shrugged and pulled his arm free.

“Your call, Vin.”

Tanner's face remained impassive as he glanced at the open door of the SUV. “I know it.”

Nathan sighed heavily and nodded, accepting but not fully understanding. “Call me if you need me. I'll be right here.”

“I know that too.”

He passed awkwardly in front of Jackson and followed the Southerner out of the vehicle.

Ezra had made it as far as the rear fender. Painfully doubled over, he had one hand braced against the vehicle the other wrapped tightly around his ribs, as he quietly threw up.

Vin held back, knowing that Ezra would not thank him for encroaching on his privacy at such a moment. So he waited, just long enough for the Southerner to stop retching, before he made his move. Even then he didn't rush, giving Ezra time to at least regain his breath if not his composure. He looked ready to fold but something told Vin that it would be a big mistake to lay a hand on him at this point; he was looking at a man already teetering on the brink and he sure as hell wasn't going to be the one to push him over.

Taking a slow, deep breath he stopped two paces away. Ezra had half-turned towards him and now leaned wearily against the Montero's bodywork but he still had the haunted look of a cornered animal.

“If you want me to go, just say the word.”

There was a moment where Vin thought he might do just that but gradually the tension seemed to leak away, like air escaping from a punctured tyre, and Ezra gave a slow, almost embarrassed, shake of his head.

“Just give me a minute. I'll be fine.”

Tanner eyed the other man critically.

“You don't say? Well, I reckon I know fine when I see it and you ain't even coming close.”

Surprisingly Ezra gave a short, humourless laugh as he closed his eyes and allowed his head to fall back against the Montero with a gentle thud.

“You could at least grant me the questionable dignity of pretence.”

Vin smiled faintly at the mild rebuke, irony robbing the words of any possible offence.

“Yeah, well, I call it as I see it and dignity kinda takes a back seat once you start blowin' grits,

Ezra.”

“Brutally honest to a fault, Mr. Tanner but sadly, true.”

He was trying hard but Vin could see the colour draining from his already ashen face and the sweat trickling freely down his face and neck; it would only be a matter of time before he crashed and burned. In two strides Tanner covered the distance between them and without hesitation grabbed the Southerner by the arms and steadied him against the SUV.

“And my honest opinion right now is that you've got about thirty seconds before you hit the deck. So, you wanna do this the easy way or the hard way?”

“What's the difference?”

“The hard way you hit the gravel and lose a yard of skin.”

Ezra smiled wearily.

“Would I notice?”

“Probably not, looking at the state you're in, but I reckon you should give it a miss anyway.”

“I think you might be right.”

Taking that as acquiescence Vin hastily adjusted his grip on the exhausted man and found himself shouldering a dead-weight as Ezra slowly collapsed against him. Drawing a long, deep breath, he slowly let it out in a silent expression of relief, murmuring to no one in particular as he started to move with his awkward burden: “Yeah? That'll be a first.”

He managed to open the tailgate with one hand and, slackening his grip on the barely responsive Southerner, guided him to sit on the rear bumper. Certain that if he released him completely Ezra would simply pitch forward and end up on the ground, he kept a firm hand on his shoulder as he tried to figure out his next move. Suddenly the Texan became aware of the expectant glances from the others who still remained in the vehicle, and Vin understood then that they were waiting for him to make a decision. With a sigh, he kneaded the back of his neck, feeling the familiar tightness that warned of a headache coming on, and wondering just when he'd been elected chief.

“Okay, let's take five.”

Ezra stirred, finally lifting his head and bracing one hand on his knee as the other continued to cradle his ribs.

“An overly optimistic estimation, wouldn't you say?”

“Figure of speech,” Tanner countered easily, “Anyway, don't reckon you want to hear what I'd say.”

“No,” Ezra pulled a face that was part-way between a smile and a grimace as he edged further into the back of the SUV, “you're probably right.”

Vin shook his head and reached for a bottle of water from the insulated cooler, which he uncapped and offered to the Southerner.

“Here, drink. It’s not twelve year old whiskey but it’s the best I can do for now and I swear as soon as we hit civilisation the first one’ll be on me.”

“Make that a double and it’s a deal.”

Taking the plastic bottle he raised it in a mock toast then drank slowly, and had it been the finest whiskey on earth in place of bland and tepid water he would still have been hesitant as the stricture in his throat, courtesy of his near-garrotting, made swallowing an exercise in masochism. He eased himself down to rest on one elbow with one knee raised and his heel braced against the cross-hatched tread of the rear bumper then, with a soft grunt, he awkwardly and abruptly completed the move to lie down. It wasn’t comfortable but it did ease the ache in his lower back and lessen the unpleasant feeling of sickening dizziness that still lingered like a bad hangover. God, he was tired!

“So, you wanna tell me what just happened?”

Vin’s directness caught him off guard and Ezra’s first instinct was to hedge but instead he found himself saying: “Couldn’t breathe.”

“Yeah, well I kinda figured that one out for myself,” answered Tanner quietly, “Scared the bejesus out of me.”

Ezra’s hand crept to his sternum and he rubbed absently at the centre of his chest, remembering, but it was gone now; no suggestion of the tight and crushing pain that had seemed to squeeze his heart in a vice.

Ditto.

He started to get up. The sense that Vin could see right through him was making him uncomfortable and he began to feel the vulnerability of being exposed to the Texan’s keen scrutiny.

“We should be going,” he murmured, although his heart wasn’t in it and he quickly found that there was a rift as wide as the Grand Canyon between the thought and the deed, and that the slight pressure of Vin’s hand on his shoulder was enough to prevent him from rising more than a few inches.

“Later.” Tanner spoke quietly but there was no mistaking that he was giving an order. He drew back the edge of Ezra’s open shirt with a look at the Southerner that almost challenged him to object and uncovered the rest of his chest - and the plum-coloured bruise the size of a fist low on his right side. “We’re not going anywhere ‘till Nathan’s had a look at you.”

“Vin...” he started, but the already weak protest died before he could even give it voice. How could he explain to the Texan that he just wanted to be left alone?

“Jesus, Ezra! Does it always have to be this goddamned hard..?” Tanner stopped abruptly, looking away from the Southerner to study the ground for several seconds and Ezra could almost see him

counting to ten in an effort to contain his emotions then, taking a deep breath, he looked up again and made eye contact. "You know," he continued softly, "Nathan told me this was my call, but it's not. It's yours. I don't know what they did to you and Buck back at that plantation, hell, I'm not sure I ever want to but I do know this: a band-aid and a quart of whiskey ain't gonna fix it. Now, if you wanna go on hurting all the way back to Cobán, throwing up every few miles and, in between, trying to throw yourself out of a moving vehicle then go right ahead, I won't stop you." His fingers tightened briefly on Ezra's shoulder and his serious expression thawed slightly, melting slowly into a wry smile. "But think on this. If you don't do it for yourself, at least think about doing it for me, because if anything happens to you before we get back to Cobán then Chris is going to bust my balls."

Ezra closed his eyes, not to shut the other man out but simply because he was too tired to keep them open any longer, and for a moment the pinched tightness around his mouth relaxed a fraction although it didn't quite rate as a smile.

"A convincing argument I grant you, but what's in it for me?"

His voice was tight and his expression closed but there was enough of the old Ezra in those few words to satisfy Vin that he just might make it.

Vin looked at him steadily for a moment and felt the same overwhelming weariness in himself that he could see in the bruised and battered Southerner.

"You get to go home."

Airway, breathing, circulation - the ABC of the paramedic was second nature to Nathan but as he looked at Ezra Standish he decided that abrasions, bruises and concussion were probably a more appropriate acronym. In fact there was absolutely no doubt in Jackson's mind that he was looking at a man who had been subject to a period of systematic abuse. His mind balked at the idea of Ezra being tortured but the injuries, although relatively minor in themselves, had been obviously inflicted over a number of days and were consistent with that scenario.

Now, looking at the pale and washed-out Southerner, he felt a stab of guilt that he hadn't tried harder when Ezra had so quickly dismissed him once he had dressed his broken finger. With Ezra, like an iceberg, there was always a lot more beneath the surface than showed above the waterline. He sighed and opened his med-kit. Somehow even with Ezra subdued and worryingly compliant Nathan could not help but feel that he might still be sailing into dangerous waters.

Nathan's fingers gently explored the knot of swelling above the resting man's left ear.

"You up to answering a few questions, Ezra?"

A careful nod.

"You took a big hit here. You lose consciousness?"

“Out cold.” He sounded as if it was hard work to put even those two words together.

“That’s the second concussion you’ve had in two weeks. You know that means you’ll be sitting it out on the bench for at least another six to eight weeks.”

“I can live with that.”

Nathan gave a slow nod of understanding followed by a quiet: “Yeah, I’ll bet you can at that.”

Ezra still nursed his ribs, left arm curled around his chest to support his right side and as Nathan started to ease his arm down he tensed, reluctant to let go, but after a moment yielded to the pressure. Jackson’s first reaction was to swear softly at the sight of the vivid dark purple haematoma that the Southerner had been guarding so protectively.

“Son of a bitch...” he didn’t complete whatever he had been about to say as he quickly checked the integrity of Ezra’s chest wall and within a few careful minutes of exploration located the tell-tale grating of a fractured rib under his fingertips.

Standish responded with a grunt of pain, blanching as the remaining colour drained from his already pale face, and rolled away from Jackson onto his injured side. For a moment Nathan thought he was going to either pass out or throw up but he sucked in a breath and held it as he broke into a cold sweat, then slowly released it again in a soft moan of pain.

“Jesus, man. You got a busted rib there! Why the hell didn’t you say something?” There was no anger in his words, just surprise and, perhaps, disappointment.

Ezra lay still for a moment, his cheek pressed against the carpeted floor, then in a voice barely more than a whisper he murmured: “No one asked.”

Half an hour later they were moving again. On the road to Cobán. Going home.

He was stretched out in the front of the Montero with the seat fully reclined, almost asleep. Still hurting, but at least now the ice pack wedged between his injured rib and the well-padded upholstery had taken the biting edge off that particular pain. The other hurts had faded into the background, at least for the time being and he was too exhausted now to care about maintaining appearances. Somehow once he had let go, once he had given up fighting and surrendered, it had been so much easier. Obviously friendship was like drowning, once you stopped struggling against it, it was a pleasant enough experience.

He slipped another degree deeper into the twilight of sleep and the voices around him became indistinct; a soothing hum of white noise at the edge of his awareness. Going home. It crossed his mind yet again that he didn’t actually have one but he was slowly coming to appreciate that home didn’t necessarily mean a piece of real estate. Home was more a state of mind. And, for the first time in his life, he thought he might just know where to find it.

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“Ezra.” The voice, quiet but insistent, unkindly wormed its way through the layers of his consciousness to summon him back from the depths of exhausted sleep. “Ezra. End of the line, man. Time to move.”

Momentarily disorientated and barely able to open his eyes let alone find the means to get his aching muscles to co-operate with anything more demanding, he considered the effort involved in moving anywhere and found the prospect of shifting from his current position filled him with dread. He nodded, but it was more an acknowledgement that he had heard and understood rather than any agreement that he would, or even could, comply.

He unfolded warily, bracing himself against the edge of the seat with one hand, and slowly levered himself up on one elbow. Pausing to take a guarded breath, he wondered just how he was going to go any further without screwing it up completely and falling spectacularly on his ass. And not necessarily metaphorically. Whichever way he looked at it any hope of holding onto his dignity was rapidly slipping away. Deciding to take a chance, he started to push himself up but immediately felt the strain in his shoulder and side that halted him in his tracks and forced him to quickly rethink his next move.

Before he could make the choice between giving up and going on, Tanner had taken a step forward and, with a discreet nudge between the shoulder blades, wordlessly given him the boost he needed to get himself up. The same sure hand then made a quick adjustment to put the brakes on his forward momentum otherwise, Ezra suspected, he might have truly fulfilled his earlier prediction of falling on his ass. The Texan had at least spared him that. Catching his breath he straightened with some difficulty and slowly lifted his head, answering Vin's watchful and knowing look with the briefest of nods. Not saying anything because this time, he understood, no words were necessary. What Vin, or anyone else for that matter, couldn't spare him was the simple reality of the moment. The absolute, undeniable truth, that he wasn't okay; and worse, the unshakable feeling that he never would be again.

Resting on a less-than-comfortable metal-framed examination table in less than ideal conditions Ezra was beginning to think he had been forgotten, and decided that any such oversight would suit him just fine. Although he had to admit that he found the slightly chaotic atmosphere of the place, so different from his previous experiences with hospitals, perfectly mirrored his own feelings and rather than being irritated by the noisy, bustling, confusion that seemed to reign, he was able to take refuge in it.

A quietly-spoken, grizzled and bearded French-Canadian doctor had examined him and taken as

much of a history as Ezra was willing to give, seeming to accept that he was not going to get the full story from his patient and not pressing for any more than was being offered. Guatemala was one of those places where it was often better not to ask too much or dig too deep. And Ezra already knew better than most that some questions should never be asked, just as some questions should never be answered. Apparently the doctor knew it too.

He also knew his job very well.

Now Ezra lay with his eyes closed, brain in overdrive, and so far beyond tired that he felt physically sick but at least it no longer hurt to breathe. The mildly unpleasant but highly effective procedure of injecting local anaesthetic into his chest wall had taken care of that and he was grateful for the relief it gave, yet he wasn't remotely comfortable. In fact, worse than the violent headache, worse than the broken ribs, and infinitely worse than the numerous other physical and psychological abuses he had suffered in the course of the past few days was the surety that he was not in control anymore.

As exhausted as he was he found it impossible to relax, unable to rid himself of the awful feeling of exposure, as if stripping off his clothes had also stripped away the last of his defences and left him completely vulnerable. Not a new feeling by any means, this was old territory revisited, but no less easy to conquer for being familiar.

He shivered slightly, cold in spite of the ambient temperature and the cellular blanket covering him, and his fingers strayed to the two broad strips of white adhesive strapping now supporting the right side of his chest from sternum to spine. This was not where he wanted to be. A bath and bed had been at the top of his agenda, but someone had dealt from the bottom of the deck and slipped him a deuce.

And here he was. Unresisting. Lying passively in his underwear, outwardly calm and accepting while beneath the surface his emotions churned, feeding on the suddenly all-too-accessible parts of his memory that he had spent the last eight months trying to erase. Finally, light-headed and sick with fatigue and no longer able to fend off the demands of his body for sleep, he drifted reluctantly into a fragmentary doze.

“Get another litre of Ringer’s started and keep pushing it! And where the hell’s that blood...?”

“Pressure sixty-six and falling...pulse one-forty...”

“Right, let’s get a tube down and let’s do this by the numbers! Goddamn it, I need that central line in NOW!”

“Jesus, speed it up folks, or we’re gonna lose him...Shit, can’t get a vein here. Any luck your side?”

“Nada. Going for a cut-down...”

“What’s his name? Anyone? This guy gotta name yet?”

“Yeah, uh...Ezra.”

“Okay, Ezra, can you hear me? Listen to me, Ezra! You’re gonna be fine, so you just hold on there.

Come on, man, breathe for me..yeah, that’s the way. Just stay with me now.”

Stay with me...

But he was falling. Fading. Losing the fight.

...The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you...The Lord is our shepherd and leads us to streams of living water...

“...the sacrament of his body and blood...the hour comes for us to pass from this life and join Him, he strengthens us with this food for our journey and comforts us by this pledge of our resurrection...”

No.

“You loved us to the very end and gave yourself over to death in order to give us life. For our brother Lord, we pray...”

No!

Propelled violently out of one nightmare only to wake in another as past and present seamlessly merged into a single, frozen, instant of dread, Ezra struggled to orientate himself and contain the panic and revulsion that now gripped him. Out of his sight a calm, measured voice continued to softly intone the liturgy and, even as he absorbed the fact that, this time, it was not meant for him, he was fighting hard not to throw up.

In a cold sweat Ezra slowly pushed himself up from the table to sit for several minutes with shoulders hunched and one arm hugging his chest as he tried, without success, to stop himself shaking. Biting back a groan he forced himself to complete the move, stiffly easing his legs over the edge of the table and needing to grab the metal frame to steady himself as he waited for his head to adjust to the sudden change in position.

Briefly, he closed his eyes and shuddered slightly as the prayers for the dying being uttered not five yards away reached their conclusion. A-fucking-men! Able to feel nothing but bitterness and a profound sense of resentment he made no excuses for the sacrilege and, suddenly tired of it all, he pushed aside the blanket and carefully eased himself off the examination table. He had no clear idea of what he was going to do, but the one thing he did know was that he could not stay.

He slowly got dressed.

No one was saying much. Larabee, taciturn at the best of times, had retreated into a brooding silence that even Vin was reluctant to encroach upon and knowing there was nothing more any of

them could do except wait did not make the waiting any easier. Josiah had already left, accompanying Hengst and a reluctant Lisa back to the same hotel they had checked out of earlier that day as soon as the exhausted teenager had been cleared by the doctor. The way Vin saw it a blind man on a runaway horse could have seen that Lisa wanted to stay and, given her obvious attachment to Ezra, it was a natural enough reaction but Hengst had been either oblivious to the fact or, for reasons known only to himself, had deliberately chosen to ignore it and they had left. JD had taken a walk, one of many in just the time that Vin had been there, and it was clear that he was too keyed up to stay in one place. It was also a measure of his concern that his usual irrepressible enthusiasm was glaringly absent and Tanner took it as a sure sign that the youngest member of the team had done some growing up in the last few days. No doubting that in this kind of work you matured fast.

The Texan glanced up and gave Larabee a gentle nudge as Nathan weaved his way through the disorganised confusion of the busy public area and headed towards them. Jackson was moving with purpose and had the kind of look on his face that warned Vin that they might not want to know what he had to say. Evidently Chris had picked up on the same signals and for just a fleeting moment Tanner saw something of the strain Larabee was under as his expression slipped just enough to show the man behind the mask of professional detachment.

“Buck?”

The question, couched in a single word and loaded as it was with doubt and apprehension, carried the full weight of Larabee's worst fears but it was obviously not one Jackson was expecting. He frowned as he looked from one man to the other.

“Buck's pretty out of it but hangin' tough; pumped full of pain killers and antibiotics but officially stable.”

“So where's the fire?” The edge in Tanner's voice reminded Jackson that he was there for a reason.

“Uh, it's Ezra. He's gone.”

“What the hell do you mean - gone?” If Tanner's voice had an edge, Larabee's cut like a razor.

“I mean he's not here. Seems he just upped and left.”

“Goddamn it, Nathan, Ezra can hardly stand how the fuck could he just walk out?”

Nathan's expression hardened as he quickly switched to defending himself as if Chris was holding him personally responsible for Ezra's actions.

“How would I know? This is Ezra we're talking about! In case you hadn't noticed he does whatever he wants.”

At that instant Vin was sure that Chris was going to lose it. Larabee was already on a very short fuse and Nathan had the look of a man who was ready to stand his ground; not a good combination under the circumstances. Tanner moved quickly, shouldering past Chris to smoothly put himself

between the two men before looking coolly from one to the other.

“Don’t much matter about the how. Right now I reckon we should be thinking more about the where and doing somethin’ about it.”

There was a moment of strained silence then Larabee sighed heavily.

“Yeah.” He rubbed a hand wearily over his face. “Jesus! Where would he go?”

“He’s not in the can and I’ve already checked right through ED,” offered Nathan, quietly, “My guess is he won’t stick around the hospital.”

Vin nodded thoughtfully. “Somethin’ must’ve pushed his buttons to make him take off.” He looked at Jackson evenly. “Remember how he was on the way in?”

Larabee’s head came up at that. “Something I should know about?”

“Ezra got a little sideways,” started Tanner, with a warning look at Jackson, “And with good reason after what happened at the plantation.” Then quickly changing tack: “How long’s he been gone?”

“Maybe ten , fifteen minutes, I think. My Spanish isn’t that good.”

“Okay, so let’s find him,” snapped Chris, “How far can a man get in an unfamiliar town, looking like a train wreck and with no money or plastic?”

“You don’t really want me to answer that, do you?” answered Vin grimly as he checked his watch.

“I’ll search out front.”

Chris nodded his approval. “I’m with you, Vin. Nathan, find JD and cover every inch of this place.”

“And if we find him?”

Chris hesitated then dropped his gaze and spun away, his voice tight.

“Just bring him home.”

Breaking into a jog, Jackson wordlessly peeled away from the two men to find Dunne and perhaps, if luck was with him, Ezra. Wheeling sharply in the opposite direction, Chris tapped Vin’s arm giving the signal that they too should be going.

“Mr. Larabee?”

Both Chris and Vin abruptly came to a standstill at the summons, although it was clear that neither man appreciated the interruption and were impatient to be off.

“Yes?”

“You’re with Mr. Bucklin Wilmington?”

The response was slower this time as if somehow his answer might affect the outcome.

“Yes.”

“Then I need to talk with you about making some arrangements.”

Chris was suddenly aware of Vin’s solid presence beside him and the fact that Tanner had a firm grip on his arm and he wondered if he shown some outward sign of the turmoil that now knotted

his gut and left him feeling as if he would sick up at any minute.

“Arrangements?” It took a minute for him to find his voice.

“Ja. I think that once Mr Wilmington is stabilised we must consider evacuation.”

Chris took a deep breath and the mental vacuum that had momentarily robbed him of the ability to think dissipated although the faint residue of nausea still lingered.

“Whatever it takes,” agreed Chris, “we have a plane on standby in Guatemala City...”

Tanner caught his eye and in a silent reminder that there was still a job needing to be done jerked his head towards the front entrance. A quick nod sent him on his way and any regrets that Chris had in being forced to abandon his part in the search for Ezra were mitigated by his confidence in the former Texas Ranger. If anyone could find Ezra he was sure that Vin Tanner could, and without any help from him.

The sun was already low in the sky as Tanner left the relative cool of the hospital building and stepped out into the lingering heat of day. Sweating freely within moments, he rolled his shoulders as his shirt clung uncomfortably to his back but he was less troubled by the oppressive closeness that so completely enfolded him than the immediate need to find Ezra. What worried him most was that Ezra might not want to be found.

He quickly focused on the area directly in front of him then slowly panned out with a hunter's eye. How far could the Southerner go in the space of fifteen minutes? He took his time, letting random images register before moving on, seeking the familiar among the unfamiliar. *How long is a piece of string?*

He almost missed him. Not because he was trying to be elusive but simply because he was not. Tanner stood and watched the man for several minutes before finally moving, without any suggestion of haste, towards him.

Ezra was sitting half-way down a short flight of stone steps, just one of many who had chosen the steps as a convenient place to rest and, leaning forward with his elbows on knees with head bowed, he seemed in no hurry to leave. After a moment's hesitation Tanner joined him, wordlessly lowering himself to sit on the same step but not close enough to crowd the Southerner. Not that Ezra looked as though he was going to bolt.

Neither man acknowledged the other and a few minutes of benign silence passed before Vin finally spoke.

“Think this is a good idea?”

Ezra continued to stare at the worn stone beneath his feet.

“Mr. Tanner. It would seem you are destined to be my keeper.”

He said it without any hint of sarcasm, a plain statement of fact no more, no less, although

whether the prospect pleased or grieved him Vin couldn't tell.

"Hell, I ain't nobody's keeper, Ezra, but I'd like to think of myself as a friend."

Ezra slowly turned his head, his expression guarded but a spark of what might have been surprise in his deeply shadowed eyes.

"So, no lecture on absconding from medical care?"

Tanner smiled briefly. "Guess I'll leave that one to Nathan." Then the smile faded as he met and held the Southerner's gaze, all trace of joking gone. "Reckon you've got your reasons. That's good enough for me."

For once Ezra seemed at a loss as to what to say, disarmed by the Texan's ready acceptance, and finally he dropped his gaze and again looked at a point between his feet.

"Thank you."

Silence crept between them once again until Vin stirred and slapped at a mosquito trying to feast on his exposed skin.

"Don't know about you, but right now I could sure use a long, hot shower, a bite to eat and a couple of beers then..." he stretched out his lean frame and rested an elbow on a higher step, "twenty four hours of uninterrupted sleep."

Ezra gave a little laugh.

"You certainly know how to lead a man into temptation."

Vin grinned.

"Temptation enough to haul your ass outta here?"

Standish looked sideways at the man now taking his ease on the steps beside him and after a moment of thought responded with a nod and a slow smile.

"More than enough, Mr. Tanner."

Tanner quickly pushed himself up off the step and turned to offer the weary Southerner his hand. He knew well enough that Ezra might reject any suggestion of help but he took the chance anyway. The hesitation was there and Vin could almost see him weighing up the options but pragmatism evidently won out over pride and he reached out to clasp the Texan's forearm, gratefully using the other man's strength to lever himself up.

Once Ezra was standing, Vin watched him critically as he discreetly massaged his ribs.

"You sure about this?"

"As I'll ever be, Mr. Tanner. Now I believe there was mention of a hot shower..."

It wasn't the Westin Camino Real. It wasn't even close. But as things stood the star rating of the accommodation was, for once, not uppermost in his mind and to give the charmingly rustic establishment its due the water was indeed hot. Or at least it had been when he first stepped into

the shower stall. Now it was decidedly cooler but still he couldn't bring himself to reach out and turn off the flow, instead he continued to lean with head down and both palms braced against the wall as the steady stream of water flowed over his shoulders and back, for no other reason than it felt good. And right now he didn't need any other reason, although he was sure his therapist could name a dozen, equally deep-rooted and analysis-worthy. With a sigh he finally straightened and reached to twist the faucet off. Fuck the analysis. It was enough just to feel clean again. To feel human.

The man in the mirror was a stranger and after a moment of looking at the hollow-eyed reflection he decided that he really did need that drink. Several in fact.

Standing naked at the washbasin he shaved. The blade was cheap and disposable but it did the job. Afterwards he tossed the blue plastic razor into the waste-bin and towelled the soap residue from his face and neck, pausing to look again at the man staring back out of the mirror at him. Cheap and disposable but did the job. *That's you alright isn't it, Standish?* Abruptly he turned away and, grabbing a fresh towel, wound it around his hips.

He needed sleep. But first he was going to check out the mini-bar.

Vin leaned back in one of the two armchairs set near the window in the small room and warily stretched out his injured leg. He had known all along that eventually he would pay for ignoring the warnings of both Nathan and his own body and he guessed the time had finally come. It hurt like a bitch. Still, he reckoned a torn ligament was small potatoes compared to Buck's two bullets. Tanner had never been shot and it was one experience he no desire to add to his portfolio, and although he had to admit that in his current line of work the odds of that happening were probably shortening rapidly, it was not a point he intended to dwell on. Hell, if that was to be his destiny then so be it.

He still wasn't sure that he had done the right thing in letting Ezra walk away from the hospital but he had followed his instincts and they had never before let him down. Ezra had taken some punishment and no mistake but right now he figured it wasn't a doctor he needed so much as some time and space to get his head around it all. Wasn't everyday a man faced his own execution and lived to look back on it.

He groaned inwardly as his cell phone buzzed demandingly from across the room where he'd left it on the nightstand to recharge in the only accessible power socket he had been able to find. Knowing it wasn't likely to be a call he could ignore he launched himself from the chair and swore softly as his knee gave way at the sudden additional strain he had put on it. In a quick and purely instinctive reaction he regained his balance enough to avoid the indignity of falling on his face and instead threw himself across the nearest bed to snatch at the still-buzzing handset with the

dubious grace of a wide-receiver recovering a fumbled catch.

In a single motion he flipped open the phone and hit the receive key.

“Tanner.”

Greeted by the silence of an already dead line, he threw the cell phone down in a gesture of frustration and awkwardly shifted his position in an attempt to appear less like a stranded whale.

“Well, well. What’s this, Mr Tanner? An impromptu demonstration of The Nutcracker? Though you might want to work on that *glissade*.”

The Texan’s initial response was a non-committal grunt as he manoeuvred with more speed than grace to finally sit on the edge of the bed.

“The nut crackin’s the easy part just never could get to grips with all that fancy footwork,” he retorted, seriously, then he gave a quick grin. “Or the tights.”

Amused, Ezra laughed softly as he started to walk across the room, slowly and with distinctly less vigour than usual but nonetheless still able to cover the distance with an economy of movement that Tanner had come to associate with the Southerner. Ezra never expended more energy than he had to but Vin guessed this time it was more a case of him having no energy left to expend.

He watched with interest as Ezra predictably homed in on the tiny but surprisingly well-stocked bar fridge, knowing it was unlikely that he was in search of a soda.

“If you want to eat, I can get something sent up.”

Ezra turned to lean with his back to the credenza where he had purposely lined up a half dozen bottles of assorted liquor and broke the seal on a miniature of vodka, briefly raising it in a salute before downing two thirds of the bottle in the first, long, swallow. With a contented sigh, he looked evenly at the Texan.

“Thank you, Mr. Tanner, but I believe I shall be drinking my dinner.”

He tipped the bottle again, draining it in the next mouthful, then carelessly tossed it into the waste bin even as he reached for the next miniature.

Vin watched as Ezra began the sequence again and then shrugged. “Hell, gimme a beer then. I hate to see a man dine alone.”

The pause was barely noticeable but it was there just the same along with the slight frown that was quickly erased by a cautious, almost disbelieving, half-smile. Vin knew that look. Ezra was weighing up the odds: to trust or not to trust. He sighed and reached out, gesturing for Ezra to pass the beer over; sometimes it felt like trying to win the confidence of a beaten dog. The analogy was a bit too literal to sit well with the Texan but neither could he ignore the reality of it and he was suddenly conscious of how easily he could blow any chance he might still have of getting close enough to the Southerner to make a difference.

A brown bottle emblazoned with a red and gold label sailed towards him and he easily snatched it

out of the air, turning it to read the label.

“Gallo?”

Ezra knocked back the equivalent of a double scotch and absently corrected his pronunciation as a second empty bottle followed the first into the trash. “Gallo. Said as a *y* not a double *l*. Means rooster.”

“I’ll remember that,” Tanner replied, lightly, as he reached into his hip pocket for his penknife and pried off the gold metal cap, “Might come in useful one day.” The way he said it left it in no doubt that he had no reason to believe that day was ever likely to come.

“Especially if you need a rooster,” offered Ezra, reasonably, then after a short pause in which he gathered up the remaining miniatures and moved towards the second bed: “Or another beer.”

Vin swallowed a mouthful of the ice cold beer and watched as Ezra cautiously lowered himself onto the bed opposite. In spite of the bruising that discoloured the Southerner’s skin in various shades of blue through to near black, his movements seemed to be easier. Tanner gestured towards Ezra’s chest with the bottle.

“How’s the ribs?”

“Still broken,” he replied with the slightly mocking half-smile that Vin was becoming used to seeing when Ezra didn’t want to answer a question directly.

The Texan leaned back and rested easily on one elbow still looking steadily at the other man.

“Okay, I’ll pay that one, now how about I run that by you again and you tell me something I don’t already know.”

Standish looked away and focused his attention on unscrewing the cap off another bottle; Vin thought it might be gin. Whatever it was Ezra seemed less inclined to finish it in one shot and instead settled for sampling it first. Vin wondered if perhaps gin was not to his taste, or maybe the couple he already had under his belt had gone a little way towards satisfying his immediate need for alcohol. Either way the Texan was relieved to see a subtle but definite shift in the Southerner’s mood. And now, rather than appearing evasive he just looked thoughtful.

Vin waited. He had handed Ezra an invitation, it was up to him whether he came to the party.

For a few moments Ezra said nothing and Vin might have ceased to exist as, staring but not seeing, he slowly and methodically rotated the tiny bottle in his hands, his introspection distancing him from the Texan as effectively as if a glass barrier had just been thrown up between them.

“Something you don’t already know?” His voice when he finally spoke was soft, but had an edge to it that did nothing to convince Tanner that the barrier had yet been lowered. “That, my friend, would not only fill a book but, from my point of view, might prove to be...imprudent.”

Vin shook his head with a gentle smile and took another drink.

“Imprudent? Jesus, Ezra! This ain’t Jerry Springer and you don’t need to go dragging any skeletons

out of the closet just yet, 'specially seeing as I got a few of my own I'm still keeping well hid. Ain't a priest neither so forget confession." He shifted back on the bed and eased his injured leg into a more comfortable position before continuing. "And, just so you don't get the wrong idea thinking I'm prying and should be minding my own business, I believe a man's entitled to deal with things any which way he can but, goddamn it, man, you came this close..." Vin held his thumb and index finger a millimetre apart. "...this close, Ezra, to that psychotic bitch putting a bullet in your brain, so don't try telling me you 're not feeling just a little rattled, 'cos I sure as hell am!"

Ezra sampled another quick mouthful of gin then looked straight at the Texan.

"Rattled?" He gave a short, bitter, laugh and extended his right arm, palm down, making no effort to disguise the slight but unmistakable tremor in his hand. "Define rattled."

Tanner sighed and looked steadily at the other man, taking in the all the little signs that together told their own story without Ezra uttering a word.

"You should get some sleep," he prompted finally, pausing to finish off the last of the Gallo, "Doc at the hospital give you anything to help? Pain-killers? Sedative?"

"As you'll recall I made a rather premature exit," Ezra had the grace to look sheepish as he admitted the fact then touched the strips of adhesive tape on his right side, "although the good doctor did perform a most welcome nerve block before I took my leave."

Vin nodded slowly.

"Well I guess that answers my question about the ribs. So how long's that going to last? And what happens when it wears off?"

Ezra put aside the now empty miniature of gin, setting it on the nightstand with studied precision.

"I'll cross that bridge when I come to it." He randomly selected another and, with a lopsided grin, twisted the cap off a bottle of brandy. "For now I'm working on perfecting my own method of anaesthesia."

"Yeah, I noticed, but is it working?"

Ezra took a brief sip of the raw spirit, his expression becoming reflective.

"Truth is too simple for us: we do not like those who unmask our illusions'."

"Sounds like the Feebie mission statement," joked Vin, as he toyed with the bottle in his hand, swirling the last inch of liquid in the bottom but with half an eye still on the Southerner.

Ezra laughed, a brief yet mellow sound of genuine amusement as he cautiously swung around to lie on the bed, awkwardly rearranging the pillows to make himself more comfortable, before finally settling back; the closest to being relaxed Vin had yet seen him. With a sigh he set the brandy aside, the bottle clinking gently against the others on the nightstand as he put it away from him, and closed his eyes.

"I was certain I was going to die today, Vin, and that really is the plain and simple truth." He might

have been saying he had considered which socks to wear for all the emotion he let show in his voice.

“Well, I'd be lying if I didn't admit to that same thought crossing my mind at least once today.”

Tanner answered softly.

“Better a thought than a bullet,” murmured the Southerner, as he shifted one hip to ease further onto his side.

“I gotta tell you it was a close run thing,” admitted Tanner, choosing his words carefully, “Lucky that Velasco had a rifle on board.”

“Lucky indeed, but in this case I'm inclined to believe the luck is more attributable to the fact that there was a marksman on hand to pull the trigger.”

“Almost didn't,” confessed the Texan uneasily after a quick pause in which he finally emptied the last of the Gallo, “Weapon I'd never used before or had time to centre...odds were I'd take you out just as easily as her.”

Ezra's eyes opened at that, and Vin wondered if he had made a mistake; that in admitting his reluctance he might have lost any of the ground he had already gained with the other man but he just gave a bemused smile.

“So why did you?”

The moment was indelibly burned into his brain and it came back to him in a rush that left him feeling sick to his stomach even now and when he spoke he found it difficult to keep his voice steady.

“Because I knew when she put that gun to your head that she wasn't bluffing. She really was going to do it and then...well, then the odds didn't matter any more.”

He suddenly pushed himself up off the bed and, no longer bothering to hide the fact that his knee was troubling him, limped across to the refrigerator and helped himself to another beer. For several minutes neither of them said anything and Vin became aware for the first time of the sounds outside the room; voices in the street, faint music, the distant blast of a car horn, but they were somehow different and found himself wishing he was back home, with Guatemala - and its memories - far behind him, then Ezra broke the spell.

“I can still feel it. Still feel the gun at my head.”

The candid declaration was so unexpected that Vin turned slowly, not sure what to say. As a rule Ezra was not a man who revealed much about himself and even less about his feelings, but he was spared the need to make any reply as Ezra continued: “And, as grateful as I am for the outcome, I will never forget the sound of that one, single, shot as long as I live.”

Tanner tried to imagine what Ezra must be feeling but found he couldn't, simply because he had no experience on which he could draw for comparison, but he guessed “rattled” didn't quite cut it.

“Do you know what it's like to hear a priest saying the last rites for you?”

Vin shook his head, puzzled by the sudden change in direction but understanding from the tightly controlled emotion in Ezra's voice that, although he didn't, the Southerner almost certainly did. What the significance of it was, he had yet to find out.

“It's...” he paused, looking for the right word, and gave a grim smile that managed to convey a whole range of emotions, none of which was humour, “...disturbing.”

Vin waited. Whatever it was that he was wanting to get off his chest he needed to do in his own time.

“Perhaps a lack of faith diminishes the effect, but when you're bleeding out, when you're absolutely sure that your next breath will be the last one, it's the most terrifying thing you could hear.” His eyes slid away from Vin as if the confession embarrassed him. “It's terrifying because it tells you that you're losing the fight; that you're really dying.” He sighed, a heavy, tired, sound that suggested painful memories. “And that everyone around you knows it too.” He gave a self-conscious laugh. “As you'll appreciate, in a hospital that's not a reassuring sign.”

Vin eyed the Southerner critically. He knew he was being trusted with something, he just wasn't sure what.

“New Orleans?”

“New Orleans. Less than a year ago I was doing everything I could just to stay alive, six months later I was doing everything I could...” he hesitated for just a second then raised his head and met Vin's gaze again, “not to.”

Vin nodded slowly. It explained a lot. “Things change, Ezra.”

Ezra started to reach for the unfinished bottle of brandy, then changed his mind and, instead, let his hand rest on his chest.

“Today, at the hospital, I ...panicked. And do you know why?”

Vin shifted his weight, leaning against the bench to relieve some of the pressure on his knee, knowing he wasn't expected to answer.

Ezra sighed. “No, of course you don't. It was a priest.” His words were starting to slur, either from exhaustion, alcohol or, more likely, the combination of both. “A priest offering extreme unction - the last rites - a prayer for the dying. And I didn't want to.” He laughed again. A hard and bitter sound. “And I lost it, Vin. I really, really lost it. It was New Orleans all over again and I had to get out.”

The Texan was surprised at the self-loathing in his voice. Here was a man who had just been taken to the brink of extinction, had been within seconds of having his life summarily taken away on someone else's whim, and he was still punishing himself for some reason known only to himself. Tanner couldn't begin to guess what was going on in his head, but he did know that he was over-

tired and over-stressed and that he was fast heading for a crash landing.

“Ezra, you've just been held hostage for three days and tortured by a crazed psychopath who was ready to blow your brains out. The fact that you're still standing is a fucking miracle, and I reckon 'losing it' is a natural reaction. Jesus, man, give yourself a break...”

Vin stopped and took a deep breath, aware that Ezra was probably not in any state to respond to reason. He was almost certainly on the verge of collapse.

Ezra waved a hand as if all that was inconsequential.

“Damaged goods, Vin,” he spoke softly, then turned away presenting his back to the Texan as he tugged the pillow under his head, suggesting that as far as he was concerned the conversation was over.

“You really need to get some shut-eye,” urged Tanner, himself starting to feel the effects of utter exhaustion. “Trust me, things always look a whole lot better after you sleep on 'em a while.”

The Southerner was silent for a few minutes and Vin began to think that he had finally succumbed to the sleep he so desperately needed, but as he pushed away from the bench and moved to retrieve the phone meaning to call Chris, Ezra spoke again.

“Last week Hengst offered me a job, Vin. If the offer's still open I'm going to take it.”

Chris glanced at his watch again, more out of habit than need, and yawned expansively. It had been a long day and looked to be stretching into an even longer night but sleep was not likely to be an option for him, at least not in the foreseeable future. Buck, on the other hand, was deeply asleep.

Stretching cramped and aching muscles he slowly rose from the straight-backed wooden chair and made a slow circuit of the room feeling every bit a middle aged man; not a feeling he enjoyed. Maybe it was time to think about doing what Orrin Travis was always urging him to do and surrender the operational side of the business to focus on a more strategic role. He sighed and leaned one shoulder against the wall as he looked out of the small window into the thick, velvety blackness of the night.

He had sent Nathan and JD back to the hotel more than an hour ago and, to their credit, they had gone without too much of an argument although neither had made any secret about the fact that they weren't happy about leaving. There had been a tense moment when he thought that they would openly defy him, JD had the tenacity of a terrier when he set his mind on a particular course of action, but after a heated but thankfully short exchange they had grudgingly seen reason. He sighed again and rubbed the back of his neck. At least when he'd been in the army he didn't have to justify his decisions - and they didn't answer back.

He didn't turn at the soft sound of the door being gently opened. He was used to the nurses coming and going quietly and efficiently about their business. In fact the regular intrusions, with the familiarity of routine, had themselves become reassuring.

"*Hola*, Señor Larabee."

The voice although pitched low was unmistakable and Chris turned his head just enough to look over his shoulder and acknowledge Velasco's arrival with a weary smile.

"Lieutenant." He hadn't given much thought to Velasco since he had taken the detective's car and accelerated away from the *finca* many hours before but somehow it seemed right that he should be here now. Chris was under no illusions that without his help the outcome would have been very different but he was not a man to dwell on what might have been, he had learned the hard way that there was nothing to be gained from doing that. Dealing with the here and now was difficult enough. "Long day, huh?"

Velasco moved further into the room, his steady gaze taking in first, the man in the hospital bed, then the dark ruby drops of blood rhythmically forming and dripping into the chamber of the IV line, before settling on Chris.

"As you say. And not yet over."

Larabee inclined his head in the barest nod of agreement before turning back towards the window.

"So, how soon can we leave?"

Velasco gave a typically Latin shrug and sank his hands deep into his pockets.

"There is no obstruction to you leaving Cobán. Any of you. You are all free to go."

Chris twisted to face Velasco, his expression wary.

"Just like that? What's the catch? What about a trial?"

"There will be no trial." He paused, then sighed heavily. "Things are done differently in Guatemala, Chris." The lieutenant sounded apologetic and, although his face betrayed nothing, there was an unmistakable note of regret in his words.

Larabee looked evenly at the detective.

"Now, why does that make me feel just a mite uncomfortable?"

Velasco shifted his stance and, looking away, directed his gaze at the floor.

"That, Señor, is because you are an honourable man."

"And you're not?"

"Perhaps once," he answered slowly, "a long time ago. But now? Less so."

"You know something, Estéban? When we met for the first time - just this morning - I don't know which one of us trusted the other less. I'd like to think we've learned something since then."

Velasco sighed.

"You and me. In many ways we are not so different. And in another place we might have been col-

leagues.” He gave a short, rueful, laugh, “Who knows, perhaps even friends? But we come from different cultures...” He stopped abruptly and shook his head. “Señor Larabee, you do not know me. And if you did, I think perhaps you would not wish to.” He started to turn away, then paused and gestured to the still figure in the bed. “Your friend? He will be alright?”

Chris, caught off guard by Velasco's sudden switch to Buck's welfare, took a moment to gather his thoughts before he could answer. He rubbed his eyes. God, he was tired.

“Uh, he's stable. Still needs surgery. The guys here just cleaned his leg up and pumped him full of blood and antibiotics.”

“So, what is the plan? You will be transferring him...?”

“Goddamn right I will! Soon as I can figure the quickest way to get us from here to La Aurora. Company jet's all ready to go and once we have the all-clear we can be back in Boston in under five hours.”

Velasco nodded slowly.

“Ah, yes. That is probably for the best. I can suggest some excellent private facilities in Guatemala City but I can understand your reluctance to remain in Guatemala any longer than is necessary. And as you already have an aircraft at your disposal...”

Chris raked his fingers through his hair, feeling as if he had insulted Velasco.

“Sorry. Didn't mean for it to sound like that. I reckon we all just want to get the hell out of here and go home.”

The lieutenant smiled but there was no humour in his eyes. “Please, don't apologise. Guatemala is full of people who would rather be elsewhere. Most are not so fortunate in being able to do so.”

Reaching into his pocket he took out his pen and a business card, quickly scribbling something on the back before handing it to Larabee. “A helicopter charter company. They specialise in medical evacuations and can have you at the airport in thirty minutes. It's expensive but I really don't think that is an issue for you, is it, Señor Larabee?”

“I'll put it on the expense account.”

With a hint of a smile Velasco slowly shook his head and turned to leave.

“*Adios*, my friend. Should we meet again perhaps it will under better circumstances.”

“So,” ventured Larabee, cautiously, “we really are free to go? No paperwork, no interviews, no statements...?”

Suddenly serious the detective shook his head.

“Believe me, Chris, the case is closed. Go home.”

Velasco's hand was already settling on the door handle when Chris's voice stopped him.

“Just one more thing, Estéban...”

“*Que?*”

“You might need these.”

The keys to the Audi sailed across the room in a silvery arc towards the detective. Snatching them out of the air, he pocketed them and, with a quick grin and a final “*Gracias*”, he was gone.

“Hey, Lieutenant! You might wanna check the gas. I drove the last three miles on empty!”

Chris could hear the sound of the detective laughing softly as he walked away.

“I’ll put it on the expense account.”

Wakefulness tiptoed elusively around the edges of his consciousness, just out of reach but raising him to a level of awareness where pain was able to reach slyly through the haze of sleep to prod him with spiteful barbs that became increasingly harder to ignore. Groaning softly he shifted restlessly, trying to delay the inevitable, before finally yielding and grudgingly opening his eyes.

It took a long time for him to get his bearings and make sense of anything then, prompted by the insistent pain in his right thigh, he remembered. It took several more seconds for his brain to engage fully and start making the right connections, and even then he felt an unsettling sense of detachment as he tried to fill in the gap between his last memory and where he was now.

“Hey there. ‘Bout time you made an appearance. Thought I was gonna have to pull an all-nighter.”

He didn’t need to look, he knew the voice as well as his own, but he turned his head anyway.

Not two feet away on a hard wooden chair sat a hollow-eyed Chris Larabee, leaning forward, elbows on knees, looking straight at him with a bored expression on his face as he toyed with a much-folded piece of paper in mobile fingers that were in continual motion. A sure sign that Chris was strung out.

“Looks like y’already did, pard, and then some.” It came out as little more than a whispered croak, and he was surprised at how much energy it took. He licked his lips and swallowed; tried again.

“Don’t look none too sparklin’ from here.”

Larabee’s face relaxed into a tired smile.

“Long day.”

Buck sighed deeply and cautiously shifted his weight to his left hip to relieve some of the pressure on the base of his spine.

“Ain’t that the truth!”

Chris folded and creased the paper again but his eyes were on his friend and partner.

“I’m sorry, Buck.”

For a moment Wilmington thought he’d missed some part of the conversation. The way he felt it was a definite possibility. “Uh, come again?”

Larabee continued to fold the paper in progressively smaller halves, a controlled expression of his inner turmoil.

“I screwed up. Made a mistake in taking us to Tikal by road.”

“Yeah, I guess you did at that,” answered Buck, quietly and earnestly, after a moment of thought, “but it ain't your first mistake and it won't be your last.”

Chris suddenly snorted a laugh. “Well, thanks for the vote of confidence. Makes me feel a whole lot better.”

Wilmington slowly lifted his hand and waved it dismissively, finding even that small movement hard work.

“Ah, cut the crap. Fuckin' up is all part of the deal; we've both been around long enough to know that.” He sighed, waiting a beat before mustering the energy to continue, already feeling drained by the short exchange. “Trick is, not to do it too often. Anyway, just remember I'm the one Crazy Connie suckered then shot me with my own gun. Twice!”

Chris shook his head slowly, his face for once openly showing mixed feelings of dismay and regret. “I didn't know.”

Buck rubbed his eyes with his free left hand, his right being effectively tethered by an IV line that he had already found was a mistake to disturb. Of course he didn't know. There was a lot he didn't know.

“Guess we've all made a few mistakes on this one, pard.”

“Yeah, tell me about it.” The chair scraped on the bare floor as Larabee wearily stood up and stretched before moving, with a stiffness that betrayed cramped and aching muscles, to stand beside the bed. “So, how you feeling?”

Wilmington took a moment to consider the question, critically eyeing his friend, before answering with a weary but defiant grin.

“About as good as you, I reckon.”

Chris dug his hands into his pockets and slumped into a round-shouldered slouch.

“Getting too long in the tooth for all this, Buck; you and me both.”

“I seem to recall you singing that same tune five years back.”

Chris smiled at that.

“I know it, and we ain't gotten any younger!”

“No, and by the looks of it no smarter either.” Buck shifted restlessly, grimacing as the movement triggered a savage spasm of pain in his injured leg. “But you gotta see the upside, Chris; we're still both here to bitch about it and in this game that's about as good as you can get.”

“Yeah.” Larabee looked up then and sighed. “Can't argue with that.”

Buck couldn't remember when he had seen him looking so tired and drawn. This was Chris with his guard down; an uncommon sight even for Buck.

“Chris, whatever you might be thinking now, we did good. All of us. Didn't exactly turn out the way

we planned but when does it ever?" He paused, the effort of maintaining the conversation more taxing than he could believe possible. "But the way I see it we came here to keep Hengst and his little girl safe. Now, correct me if I'm wrong, but we did just that and just 'cos we got hammered doing it don't make it a bust!" He managed a strained smile. "Just call it an occupational hazard." Larabee fixed bloodshot eyes on Wilmington,.

"Occupational hazard, huh?" He distractedly massaged the back of his neck. "You know what's scary, Buck? Sometimes you actually talk sense..."

"...But this ain't one of 'em?"

A slow smile crept across Chris's face and he reached down to grip Buck's hand in a tight squeeze of unspoken affection.

"Good to have you back, Buck."

It was after midnight when Chris finally made his way back to the hotel. Getting a cab from the hospital seemed more trouble than it was worth and the idea of calling one of the team out to fetch him didn't even factor into the equation so, he had walked. He had also reasoned that Cobán was a small town; the possibility of him getting lost was real but unlikely, the possibility of him being accosted was equally real but even more unlikely considering his current frame of mind and the Bersa tucked in his waistband. In short, the option of going on foot was an acceptable risk - and, more to the point, he had needed some time out.

The streets were steeply inclined reminding him a little of San Francisco. But without the bay; the bridge; Fisherman's Wharf; Chinatown; and the cable cars. He saw few people, and those he did see gave him the distinct impression that they cared neither for who he was, or what he was doing walking the streets of Cobán, alone, late at night. And that suited him just fine.

He was physically tired but in spite of the aching muscles and the steadily increasing pressure of a headache building behind his eyes, his mind was locked in overdrive. There was now no reason to stay in Guatemala and nothing to keep them from leaving. Except perhaps the logistical nightmare of getting nine people, including one in need of urgent medical evacuation, back to Boston. The Gulfstream was still sitting on the tarmac at La Aurora and, while he was no expert, he already knew that runway at Cobán airport was too small to accommodate the big executive jet and he wasn't 100% sure that the aircraft could be flown with one pilot anyway. Which brought him to Ezra.

Still waters.

Waters that for someone like Ezra ran so deep no matter how far you plumbed the depths, you were never likely to touch bottom. The fact that the Southerner had quit the hospital so abruptly

and without a word to anyone had worried him. So, Ezra was a grown man and capable of make his own decisions, but this was also a man who had been taken hostage, brutalised and come within a trigger-pull of being executed. With that kind of shit going down it didn't matter what kind of man you were, that had to mess with your head, and Ezra was already carrying more baggage than most people would accumulate in a lifetime. What effect the last few days might have on Ezra he couldn't begin to guess, and it was a sure bet that the Southerner wouldn't be too quick to tell.

He sighed, suddenly too tired to think straight anymore. Like Buck said: comes with the territory. It took him longer than it should have but even accounting for the occasional navigational faux pas it was just fifteen minutes before he started recognising familiar landmarks and turned off the main Avenida. Not too long after that he found himself in front of the well concealed black mesh gate that marked the main entrance to the *posada*. It wasn't exactly home but right now it was all there was and at that moment it was as welcome a sight as his own apartment and, better yet, it had 24 hour service. And he needed a drink.

Communicating with the night clerk proved interesting but after some creative exchanges the clerk finally threw up his hands in surrender and showed Chris the register. Four rooms were bracketed under the name Josiah Sanchez but the desk attendant had been unable to tell him just who had been allocated each room, so he would have to take pot luck. At least he knew they were all on the second floor.

Following the wooden staircase to the upper storey he tapped softly on the first of the four rooms he came across and waited. He doubted that anyone would be sleeping too soundly after the day's events but he didn't want to end up rousing the entire floor.

The door was slow to open, and when it did it was a cautious few inches giving him no immediate clue as to who might be on the other side, but Chris would have been disappointed if it been any other way. Staying sharp in this business meant staying alive.

"Hey, Cowboy. You made it." Vin Tanner's soft Texan drawl welcomed him before the door had even opened enough to bring him into view. "How's Buck doing?"

Chris moved past Vin into the small room, keeping his voice low. "Awake. You know Buck. Takes a lot to keep him down." He gestured to the sleeping Southerner. "Ezra?"

Tanner made a rocking motion with his hand palm down and Chris nodded, understanding.

"I tried to call..."

Vin leaned against the bench top and folded his arms.

"Yeah, sorry. I was kinda busy."

Both men fell silent for a moment. Too much to say and no easy way of saying any of it.

Chris looked around for a place to sit, opting for the foot of the unoccupied bed for want of anywhere better, and leaned his elbows on his knees.

“So what happened?” He kept his voice pitched low.

Vin gave a slight shrug.

“Guess he doesn't handle the whole hospital thing too well, and something about last rites.”

Chris's frown was a huge question mark but Vin shook his head. “Don't ask.”

Larabee didn't but filed the information away. This wasn't the right time to pursue it, but very soon he would be looking for some answers. Chris didn't like surprises but he liked secrets even less. Especially secrets that might one day come back and bite.

“Is he okay?”

“Depends what you mean by okay.”

“Vin!” The warning was there. He was in no mood for games.

Tanner merely held up a hand and shook his head.

“Hey, Cowboy, don't shoot the messenger. You asked me and I'm telling you straight, there ain't no simple answer!” His voice was still low but the intensity had racked up a notch. He sighed and plunged his hands into his pants pockets, breaking eye contact to look away from Larabee and at the floor. “I think we've lost him, Chris.”

“What the hell does that mean?”

“He's gonna take up Hengst's job offer.”

“He told you that?”

A quick but definite nod from Vin was as good as a sworn oath.

Chris massaged his forehead, feeling the tightening band of pressure around his temples ratchet to the next level. Maybe that was the only answer he was going to get from the Southerner. And it was one he didn't want. Shoulders slumping as the full weight of his own exhaustion descended on him he breathed a barely audible: “Ah, fuck!”

He had been asleep. Now, in his first waking moments, he felt a sense of disorientation and detachment that came close to panic, yet his innate sense of self-preservation dictated that he remain still, relying on his senses to guide him before he committed to any action. Slowly his brain sorted the random data into a more cohesive and meaningful form and as each piece fell into place his memory came flooding back. Along with the pain. Neither were welcome.

Without lifting his head from the pillow and not fully awake he blinked slowly, observing his surroundings through one half-opened eye. There was a soft murmur of sound that grew into the familiar cadence of speech which although indistinct was oddly comforting. These were voices he knew, muted and pitched low, yet not out of any desire for secrecy but because someone was sleeping. Because he was sleeping.

He was still in the position he had been in when sleep had finally overtaken him, minutes after he'd

turned his back on Vin and shut down any further conversation between them, and whether he'd been there ten minutes or ten hours he had no way of knowing. Moving, he knew, was going to be something he'd regret but he did it anyway; a gentle roll of his shoulders to give him some other view than the bathroom door. He tried to avoid making any sound but he couldn't fully contain the groan that escaped, unbidden, as the movement triggered successive waves of pain that started in his skull and ended somewhere near his navel.

The low hum of conversation stopped and he felt a momentary flash of paranoia that they had been talking about him, then found to his surprise that it didn't worry him. If nothing else in the last weeks he had learned that neither man would say anything behind his back that they wouldn't say to his face.

"You okay, Ezra?" Tanner spoke softly and Ezra felt the lightest touch on his shoulder. "Anything I can get you?" There was a brief pause and Vin lowered his voice a notch. "And no, I haven't got that quart of whiskey yet so don't ask."

Ezra worked some moisture into his mouth.

"Pity." He took another breath and tried, without any degree of success, to find a comfortable position. "Have to charge interest."

He heard Chris's gentle laugh although Larabee himself was out of sight.

"Don't think we've got anything to worry about, Vin. He sounds just fine to me. Now let him sleep; he deserves it."

Vin hesitated then gave a nod of agreement and Ezra got the feeling that he really had no choice in the matter. Chris Larabee had spoken. Not that he was in any position to argue; he could barely keep his eyes open.

He was already starting to drift before Vin even started to move but as the Texan started to rise from where he had been crouching beside the bed Ezra reached out and touched his sleeve.

"Buck?"

Vin stopped mid-turn to look back but not before he had exchanged a meaningful look with Chris that suggested both surprise and approval, but it was Chris who answered.

"Buck's gonna be fine, Ezra." Between one blink and the next Ezra found the two men had seamlessly changed places and it was Chris who now squatted where Vin had been. "Nothing, he tells me, a couple of weeks R & R won't cure." His face relaxed into a tired smile. "You did good, Ezra. Real good. Now get some rest. I'm gonna need you and that silver Spanish tongue of yours come daylight to see us all home."

Ezra's brain was still cautiously sampling Chris's words and he wondered if perhaps in his current state of exhaustion he had misheard. *You did good.* Meeting Larabee's steady gaze he hesitated just a moment before giving a slow nod.

“You can count on it, Mr. Larabee.”

“Yeah,” Chris answered quietly, “I know I can.”

The day had not started well. After a restless night Chris had woken tired and irritable only to be greeted by the unwelcome sound of rain. Then, when he had jerked back the drapes, there had been the even more unwelcome sight of a low cloud ceiling, and he didn't need anyone to tell him what that meant to his plans for a quick and clean extraction. He had sworn then and it was taking all his self-control not to vent frustration on anyone who came within range, but he held it in check and instead maintained a formidable scowl while managing to exude the suppressed energy of a caged mountain lion.

Breakfast was over but they had stayed in the restaurant for the sake of convenience. It had quickly become an informal debriefing but Chris had kept a close rein on the extent of the discussions. It was a natural response for the team to unwind a little but there were limits as to what Larabee would allow in front of a client.

Ezra had been the last to join them and no one had begrudged him that concession but still, there had been an awkward moment as he had walked into the restaurant where the conversation had trailed off and no one seemed to know how to start it off again. That moment had been salvaged by none other than Manfred Hengst who had risen from his chair and with a respectful bow of his head and a welcoming smile had indicated the chair next to him, inviting Ezra to sit. His daughter had been less constrained, flying from her own seat in a blur of movement to launch herself at the bemused Southerner.

“Ezra!”

He rocked at the impact and, just for an instant, looked slightly embarrassed as Lisa hugged him in an enthusiastic and emotionally charged clinch, before he overcame his initial hesitation and, with a warm smile gathered her to him and returned the embrace.

“Lisa, I do not believe Ezra wishes to add more broken ribs to the ones he already has, and I think perhaps he would like to breathe again...”

The girl drew back although she knew her father was having a joke at her expense.

“Did I hurt you?”

The Southerner quickly denied it and, sliding one arm around the teenager's shoulders, moved to join Hengst but not before taking a moment to acknowledge Chris with a brief nod as he passed.

It was not lost on Larabee that Hengst had greeted Ezra with the warmth of a father receiving a long lost son. The German certainly had cause to be grateful to the Southerner and it was not a debt that he was ever going to be able to easily repay, so his reaction was understandable but

Chris had no doubt that Hengst was in headhunter mode, and he wasn't sure that he could compete. He absently turned his cup in precise but purposeless circles as he kept his gaze fixed on the German businessman, and watched with growing unease as Hengst shamelessly courted the Southerner.

"What do you think, Cowboy?"

Chris sighed and turned his attention to Vin who was leaning back with his chair balanced on two legs looking perfectly relaxed as he chewed on a toothpick

"Bout what?"

"Have we lost him?"

Chris shrugged.

"Maybe. But he's a free agent, Vin. If that's what he wants then there's nothing I can do to stop him."

Tanner's snort was a clear indication that he thought otherwise.

"That's a crock, Larabee and you know it. Fact is, you're probably the only one who can. Guess the question is, do you want to?" He stood up, his posture slouched and buried his hands in his pockets.

"Gonna get things moving along here - pack up the SUV. This weather's gotta clear soon. Best be ready for when it does."

The Texan moved off without waiting for any response leaving Chris to chew on his words and Larabee got the impression that Vin didn't much care if he digested them or he choked on them. Shaking his head, and with the ghost of a smile hovering around his lips, he glanced around the room. Time to get these boys home before they all mutinied on him.

He flicked a glance back to Hengst's table and, catching Ezra's eye, beckoned him over with a quick movement of his fingers. The signal was received and obviously understood and, without hesitation, the Southerner smoothly excused himself and crossed between the two tables, to sit down in the seat Tanner had just vacated.

"You rang, Mr. Larabee?"

"What are the chances of flying in this weather?"

Ezra glanced out of the window and raised an eyebrow.

"Depends how suicidal you are."

"Ezra!"

"Okay, it's possible. Risky, but then this place is notorious for a low ceiling and poor visibility. It's the terrain; sits in a ..."

"Thanks, Ezra. The only word I needed to hear was 'possible'." Chris let his gaze linger a moment on the livid bruise around the Southerner's neck, clearly visible at the open neck of his shirt. "You okay?"

The question seemed to come as a surprise and he took a moment to answer.

“I think the appropriate and official terminology is: as well as can be expected.”

Chris smiled. Ezra definitely had the gift of understatement.

“Pretty crappy then?”

Ezra's answer was accompanied by a crooked grin. “That would be the more informal way of putting it.”

“Well, sorry to do this to you, but I need you to do something for me.”

“Just promise me it doesn't involve using more than one group of muscles at once.”

“Ezra, believe me, this is what you do best and I can guarantee it will be painless.”

“Really?” he drawled, softly, “And what might that be, Mr. Larabee?”

Chris laughed and pulled a card from his shirt pocket.

“Talk. Very convincingly and in Spanish. I need you to get these people to do an emergency extraction asap.”

“Buck?”

“All of us. Whatever it takes to get us out of here. We're going home, Ezra. And the sooner the better.”

Ezra checked the business card and grinned. “In that case, give me half an hour.”

Chris nodded. “You got it.”

“And a blank cheque..?”

Larabee stood up and with an indulgent grin patted Ezra on the shoulder.

“How good are you at whistling Dixie, Ezra? 'Cos here's your chance to find out.”

Ezra glanced at the business card Chris had handed him and turned from the handwritten details of the helicopter charter company on the reverse to the embossed face of the heavy, linen-finished card. Estéban Velasco. Ezra was not a believer in coincidences and he wondered what had prompted the SIC detective to offer his personal details to Chris Larabee. If the lieutenant was giving out his private phone number then it was for a good reason. The Southerner thoughtfully tapped the edge of the card against the table, instinct telling him that there was much more to Velasco than met the eye. His initial impression of the man had been positive and with Ezra that was what counted. First impressions. Often the first thirty seconds of an encounter could tell him all he needed to know about a person and instinct, coupled with long experience, gave him an uncanny ability to accurately gauge their intentions. He seldom made a wrong call.

Of course there was always the exception, and New Orleans had been his own particular nemesis; a rare but serious error in judgement. He had failed to follow his own cardinal rule of trusting no one and he had paid the price. Shafted. Slowly and carefully he retreated from that avenue of

thought. This was not the time. There was still work to be done and getting the team out of Cobán and on the road home paid better dividends than facing demons from the past.

He pushed away from the table, pausing briefly to catch his breath at the sudden crushing tightness in his chest but able to ignore it now he understood its cause. Strained intercostal muscles, it seemed, produced chest pain much like angina which could be excruciating - a fact to which he could readily attest - but the doctor at the hospital had assured him that, as distressing as the resultant pain was, it was simply muscle strain and nothing to do with his heart. Allowing himself a tiny smile he rose cautiously from the chair. At least physical pain was transient.

“Everything okay, Ezra?”

Nathan, seemingly appearing from nowhere, had neatly insinuated himself between Ezra and the exit to the dining room and the Southerner's natural response to brush him off with a suitably acerbic response that would keep him at arm's length for at least the rest of the day, but this wasn't the first time he had been asked that question today and something told him that it wasn't going to be the last. He had two choices open to him now; he could fight it, or he could surrender graciously and accept that perhaps not everyone had a hidden agenda. For a split second he wavered, then his expression relaxed.

“I'm fine, Nathan,” he said, softly.

Jackson looked at him keenly focusing on the bruising around his neck before making eye contact again.

“You just take it easy, okay?” He reached into his pocket and brought out a small box. “And you might need these...” Ezra stared at the all-too-familiar rectangular box that Nathan was offering as his voice droned on only half-heard. “...talking to the doc...said you forgot your prescription when you left the hospital.”

Vicodin.

Ezra automatically raised his hand to take the box of pain-killers, hesitated, then slowly let it fall back to his side with a shake of his head. *What the hell was he thinking?*

“How about you hold onto it for me, Nathan? If I need it, I know where to go.”

Jackson nodded and rested his hand on Ezra's shoulder an unexpected gesture, for which the Southerner was not entirely prepared, of not only of camaraderie but also understanding.

“You just make sure you do that, now, you hear?”

Ezra inclined his head a fraction, a cryptic smile just lifting one corner of his mouth.

“You have my word on it, Mr. Jackson.” He glanced beyond Nathan to the doorway. “Now if you'll excuse me, I have given Chris my word that I can successfully procure a rapid extraction from this Godforsaken wilderness within the next half hour, and I would be loath to disappoint the man.”

Jackson stood aside with a sweeping motion of his arm and ushered Ezra towards the door leading

to the reception area.

“Never let it be said that Nathan Jackson stood in the way of progress.”

“Indeed not.” Ezra took a step forward, his eyes lively with mischief. “And especially not Mr. Larabee’s.”

Both men shared a conspiratorial grin as they exited into the reception area.

Twenty minutes later Ezra put down the phone at the reception desk and rubbed his eyes; his temples were thumping with a headache that rated at least a 6.5 on the Richter scale and the time he had spent on the phone had only increased his awareness of the constant droning in his ears which had only marginally improved in the interval since Connie had fired the SIG only centimetres from his ear. He considered himself lucky that his eardrum hadn’t been perforated but, on the downside, the very real possibility of permanent hearing impairment was hardly a positive outcome from his point view.

As good as his word, he’d set the wheels in motion but those same wheels would be rolling over them like a juggernaut if they didn’t move fast. A 12-seater helicopter would be at the Cobán airstrip in less than an hour; that had been the easy part. Orchestrating Buck’s transfer from the hospital to the airstrip and into a chopper, and from there to La Aurora and the Gulfstream, had been an exercise in patience, diplomacy and straight-out conniving that had taxed even his extensive catalogue of skills. But it was done. And he was done in.

With a sigh he pushed himself away from the counter but stopped mid-turn as the partially obscured headline on the front page of *La Hora* caught his eye. *Secuestrado...* He snatched up the folded newspaper and with a snap of his wrist opened it up at the front page: *Secuestradores traídos a la justicia* - Kidnappers brought to justice. Scanning the close-printed text flowing around a poor quality, yet still striking, image of a smiling Connie Van der Schoor that left him feeling as if someone had just kneed him in the groin, he quickly read through the copy.

“What makes you so sure that it would be a mistake for Ezra to go work for Manfred?”

Chris was leaning easily against the rear fender of the Montero, arms folded across his chest, as he watched the younger man secure the last of their sadly depleted gear in the back of the vehicle.

Vin slammed the tail-gate shut and then manoeuvred past Larabee to open the driver’s door and pop the hood, busying himself with the minutiae of routine but necessary tasks.

“If you have to ask that, then you just don’t understand, and nothing I have to say will make a difference.”

“Try me.”

The Texan withdrew behind the hood.

"I ain't playing this game, Chris, so just forget it."

"Come on, Vin, you've got to admit that it's a great job; good conditions, good pay. Most guys working close protection spend their whole lives looking for just this kind of assignment..."

"Would you take it?" Vin's voice was quiet but intense as he moved out from behind the shadow of the raised hood to challenge Chris. "Is that what you're looking for? What you think Ezra's looking for? A gravy train? The easy option?"

"No, it's not," admitted Larabee, his tone reasonable, "but I'm thinking if I was in Ezra's place it would be looking a mighty fine proposition right about now."

"Yeah, but that's just my point. This ain't the time to be making a decision like that."

Chris gave a tired smile.

"Maybe not, but it's still his decision to make, whatever you and me might think about it."

Vin shook his head and retreated again behind the raised hood.

"Guess we just ain't seeing things the same way this time, Chris."

"Well, well, what's this? Dissension in the ranks?"

Both men came to attention, heads swinging around in unison at the interruption, exchanging an uneasy look as the subject of their conversation strolled towards them, and wondered how long the Southerner had been within earshot. Chris thought he looked pale and even more drawn than when he spoken to him earlier and although his tone was relaxed, light-hearted even, Larabee couldn't help but think he was finessing. Something was wrong.

"Any luck?" Chris deliberately avoided answering Ezra's opening question, countering instead with one of his own.

"Luck, Mr. Larabee, is the result of tenacity of purpose."

"Okay, then how tenacious were you?"

"Do you want the good news or the bad news first?"

"Ezra! Enough already with the twenty questions. I'd like to get home this side of Thanksgiving if you don't mind..."

"Right. The good news then. ETA for the helicopter is 11:55 and, barring unforeseen circumstances, we should be setting down at La Aurora by 12:40 at the latest. The Gulfstream will already be fuelled up and ready to go as soon as we are."

Chris grinned but the grin quickly faded as he glanced at his watch.

"Hell, that's going to be cutting it fine. There's Buck to..."

Ezra calmly raised a hand and smoothly interrupted before Larabee could protest further.

"All taken care of. The ambulance will meet us at the airstrip at 11:45 and I've already arranged for the hospital here in Cobán to liaise with Massachusetts General. I also took the liberty of speak-

ing with the good Doctor Travis just in case there was a communication breakdown and something got lost in translation.” His expression became cunning and he smiled wryly before continuing. “Oh, and by the way, Mary sends her best wishes and wants to know why you haven't called.”

There was a brief interval of silence in which Chris looked acutely uncomfortable before Vin rescued him by choosing that moment to slam the hood shut and, struggling to keep a grin off his face, effectively avoided making eye contact with Larabee by switching his attention to Ezra instead.

“So what's the bad news?”

Ezra opened the newspaper he had been carrying, allowing it to unfold to display the headlines.

“We made the front page.”

Frowning, Vin reached out and took the paper from Ezra's hand although there was little chance of him making any sense of it. Equally curious Chris moved to stand beside him, taking in the boldly printed, but meaningless, typeface and the grainy photo beneath before looking back to Ezra, his expression tightly controlled.

“What does it say?”

“The headline reads: Kidnappers brought to justice.”

“And the rest?”

“Well, to cut a long story short and editing out the excessively wordy and self-congratulatory propaganda, it seems that our little band of kidnappers are no more. Shot and killed by police 'while trying to escape lawful custody'.”

Vin's face registered a disbelief that was closely mirrored in Larabee's expression.

“What? All of them?”

“So it would seem.” The tone of Ezra's voice reflected his own measure of scepticism. They had all been in the business long enough to read between the lines. “A convenient development, don't you think, gentlemen?”

Chris looked as if he had swallowed something unpalatable.

“It sure explains a few things.”

“Like what?” prompted Vin, handing the newspaper back to Ezra.

“Like Estéban coming to the hospital last night and telling me there was nothing to stop us leaving; suggesting the helicopter charter; saying there would be no trial.” *Things are done differently in Guatemala, Chris.* “He wants us out of here...”

“I reckon that's a given,” agreed Vin, “but is he looking to save his ass...or ours?”

“Moot point, I think, Vin,” offered Ezra, seriously, “either way, we need to be gone sooner rather than later. There's a chance that this could become a political football, and forgive me if I'd rather not be at the centre of an international incident.”

“He has a point, Chris. This ain't a place I'd be choosing to be detained and I'm getting a real bad feeling about this whole thing. Chris?”

Larabee had only been half-listening to the two men, his mind sifting through his conversation with Velasco the previous night. *Guatemala is full of people who would rather be elsewhere. Most are not so fortunate in being able to do so.*

“I need to talk to Velasco.”

Vin flicked a quick look at the Southerner, saying nothing but throwing the ball into Ezra's court nonetheless.

“Do you think that's wise,” ventured Ezra, “given the circumstances? After all Lieutenant Velasco is currently an unknown quantity. Are you so sure of him?”

“I can't just cut and run. Estéban was trying to tell me something last night and I just didn't see it.” He shook his head; an expression not only of denial but also of doubt and uncertainty. “I thought I had the guy tagged.”

Ezra fixed his gaze on the older man, his own expression giving nothing away, but although he spoke softly his voice betrayed a hint of emotion that somehow infused his words with a bitter sense of irony. “An easy mistake to make, Mr. Larabee.”

Chris slowly raised his head, a man recognising, and accepting without rancour, the thinly veiled reference to his own limitations, and returned the other man's challenging stare with interest.

“Yeah, I guess we all make a wrong call once in a while. Trick is to not make a habit of it.”

Standish dipped his head as the ghost of a smile crossed his bruised and pale features. Larabee had his own unique way of putting things in perspective that didn't go unnoticed by the Southerner.

“Indeed. Now perhaps if I could suggest making a move...and soon? Vin, if you would be so kind as to gather our little flock together..?”

“Consider it done,” affirmed the Texan with a nod, “but what are you planning on doing while I'm playing sheepdog?”

“Me?” Ezra carefully folded the newspaper back into its original creases with studied precision before aiming an arch look at Chris. “I intend to spend the short time we have left doing my level best to get in touch with our friendly SIC detective, Lieutenant Velasco.”

Vin nodded, approving.

“Sounds like a plan.” He shot a quick glance at Chris as he started to move off. “Keep it frosty, pard. We're not in Kansas anymore.”

“Thanks for the warning,” answered Larabee, his expression deadpan, “I'll be sure to watch out for those lions and tigers and bears.”

“Well, just mind that you do. It doesn't pay to piss people off around here, especially the cops; it can get you dead.”

Chris sobered.

“Yeah, point taken. Why d'you think Ezra here's gonna be doing all the talking?”

Vin continued his slow walk towards the posada his parting words, as dry as Texas dust, muttered just loud enough for the two men to hear.

“Maybe 'cos he's the only one who can speak Spanish?”

“...Sí. Sí, entiendo. Gracias.....No se preocupe, no importa. Adios.”

Ezra quickly ended the call and sat for a moment without speaking, considering his next possible option, before finally confirming another dead end with an apologetic shrug to Larabee.

“Same story. *Inasequible*. Not available. Out of the office. Doesn't know when he'll be back at his desk. Didn't want to take a message.”

Chris thoughtfully chewed his lip, slowly pacing out a few steps before doing an about face and walking back towards the Southerner.

“Why do I get a bad feeling about this, Ezra?” He put one foot up on the Montero's front bumper and rested an elbow on his raised knee. “His cell phone is diverting to voice mail, his home number is out of service and he can't be reached at work. What does that tell you?”

“Well there's always the possibility that he's a busy man who's forgotten to pay his phone account...or,” he hurried on, as Chris shot him a look that would stopped a charging bull in its tracks, “he's gone to ground. And, given the current situation, I think the latter is more than likely.”

“But why? Who's he hiding from?”

Ezra unconsciously placed a hand over the right side of his ribcage, and changed his stance to relieve the nagging ache that even the nerve block could not completely eradicate.

“Have you considered that he may have no choice?”

“Between a rock and a hard place,” agreed Chris, “and getting squeezed from both sides.”

“Or, as Vin so succinctly put it, is he just covering his own ass?”

Ezra shifted again and Chris, noticing the Southerner's growing discomfort, suddenly straightened bringing an end to the speculation.

“Well, looks like we'll never know; we're out of time. For good or bad, Velasco's on his own.”

“Never a good place to be,” murmured Standish quietly, and Chris could appreciate how it was that Ezra could so readily empathise with the Guatemalan detective.

The timely reappearance of Vin and the others relieved Chris of the obligation to make any kind of response but he wondered if Ezra still thought of himself as being on his own. There was no arguing that had been the case in the past but he had hoped that given time the Southerner might be able to find a place within the team. Well, he had his share of demons and no mistake, and Chris would

have bet his last dime that even those had multiplied in the last few days, but he also knew that there was nothing he could say to the Southerner that was worth a damn, whatever Vin might think. He had always been a firm believer in deeds rather than words and he could only hope that, at the end of the day, Ezra would get the right message. Hell, he didn't want Ezra to hitch his horse to Hengst's wagon any more than Vin did, but he needed to be sure that if he was going to stay on at InterSept that it was for the right reasons and, more importantly, because he wanted to, not because Chris Larabee had put pressure on him.

Wordlessly Ezra returned Chris's cellphone as the six remaining members of the group gathered around the SUV effectively putting an end to any further discussion between the two men, though Larabee got the impression that the interruption had been equally welcomed by the other man. With no more to be said he gave a simple nod of thanks and pocketed the Motorola, turning his attention to the more immediate logistical dilemma of loading eight people into a seven-seater vehicle and getting them underway with the minimum of drama in under ten minutes.

Just eight and a half minutes later the Montero rolled away from the *posada*, heading towards the airport and the first leg of the journey home.

Ezra stared out of the front passenger side window as the big 4WD turned off the main road, following the signs to the airport. He had said nothing during the brief trip but the others had more than made up for his lack of conversation in the continuous lively exchange of banter that had been generated initially by JD having been relegated to sitting on the floor, squeezed into the last remaining space available between the third row of seats and the coachwork. Even Lisa had been drawn into the joke, teasing him in the way a kid sister would score points off an older brother and Ezra had felt a certain reassurance in the absolute normality of her actions. She needed that; needed to just be a teenager again.

It was raining again but it had eased to a constant fine drizzle and, although the sky was overcast and grey, the cloud ceiling had lifted enough to dispel any fears he might have had that the planned extraction could yet be compromised by the perversity of the local weather. Now, if everything else would just go according to plan, they would be leaving Guatemala within the hour.

Feeling sick to his stomach he closed his eyes and wondered if maybe he had been a little premature in refusing the pain killers Jackson had offered; God knew he could do with them now. But that was one demon that he couldn't be sure he truly had beaten and it would be all too easy to surrender himself again to its seductive charms, even if it was wholly justifiable. *Fucking déjà vu.*

The sudden and acute sense that he was being watched made his scalp prickle and, unable to either relax or get comfortable, he opened his eyes again and shifted restlessly in his seat. To his left, in the driver's seat, Chris was eyeing him sceptically.

Somethin' wrong?" slurred Ezra, tiredness accentuating his Georgia drawl.

Larabee's focus momentarily switched to the road ahead and then smoothly fastened on Ezra again.

"If you're gonna throw up, give me some warning, okay?"

"Worried about the security deposit, Mr. Larabee?"

Ezra tried to sidestep any further speculation as to the current state of his health with an attempt at humour but Chris was not about to be put off and, although he kept his voice down, there was no way to mistake either the underlying passion, or the absolute sincerity, of his words.

"No, goddamn it, Ezra, I'm worried about you."

Caught off-guard by the directness of Larabee's admission, he found himself suddenly at a loss for a suitable comeback so he opted for instead for the safety of silence and let Chris, who obviously still had more to say, continue.

"How long you planning on hanging tough, huh?" Larabee paused to shift down a gear and negotiate a bed-rock-deep crater in the road before going on, keeping his voice low and conversational.

"Cos from where I'm sitting you don't look like you're gonna get too much further before you fold."

"Fold?" Ezra gave a short laugh. "Oh, I can assure you I folded some time ago."

"Still on your feet though."

"Yes, well, I was never very good at the part where you're expected to cash in your chips."

Chris shook his head and smiled as he focused again on driving, down-shifting easily through the gears as he slowed and steered the SUV onto the airport access road.

"Yeah, I can see that."

"Besides," added Ezra softly, "if you plan on ever leaving this charming little Central American backwater, you need a second pilot to get the plane off the ground. Which means you need me, preferably firing on all cylinders."

"Goddamn right!" Larabee shot another quick glance at the Southerner. "You gonna be up for it though?"

Ezra shifted uneasily, fighting nausea as he broke into a sweat, suddenly feeling unpleasantly clammy in spite of the airconditioning.

"Better bank on it, Mr. Larabee, or we won't even be getting off the ground." Face suddenly draining of colour, and he fumbled for the door catch. "Now, if I can prevail upon you to stop the car, I really am going to throw up."

The familiar *chop-chop-chop* of whirling rotor blades could be heard long before the twin-engined helicopter broke through the cloud cover at around a thousand feet, descending slowly and hovering over the airfield for several minutes before finally manoeuvring into position for landing, while on the ground the arrival of the forty-foot Eurocopter Dauphin was greeted with mixed feelings.

Flanked by an exuberant JD on one side and a more subdued but nonetheless excited Lisa on the other, Vin Tanner watched as the red and black craft with the Aviatca logo gently made contact with the ground, settling on its suspension as the engine cut back to idling speed and the rotors gradually began to slow.

“Pretty neat, huh?” grinned Dunne, turning from the rush of air generated by the spinning blades and shouting over the noise to be heard.

Vin looked from the helicopter and back to JD, his expression reflecting his dubiousness.

“Yeah, kid. Great.”

The younger man gave him a quizzical look then, as the reason behind the Texan's lack of interest suddenly dawned on him, he gave a disbelieving shake of his head.

“Man, you've really gotta get over this flying.....thing...!” He let the last word hang, warned by Tanner's frosty stare that perhaps it might not be the best course of action to continue with that particular thread.

With a slight shake of his head that, from Vin, said much more than a dozen words ever could he shouldered past Dunne and, favouring his injured leg, walked slowly back towards the SUV, leaving a baffled but contrite JD to ask of the world in general: “Hey, what'd I say?”

Chris Larabee had watched the Dauphin come in but had sent Ezra and Nathan to meet the crew and deal with the final preparations. Now his attention was on the airport entrance and, as Vin came up beside him, he gave only a cursory glance towards the Texan before resuming his surveillance of the main access road.

“Everything okay?”

Tanner shot a wary glance at Larabee and made his reply a non-committal: “Why wouldn't it be?”

“Well, I can think of a whole lotta reasons, but I reckon number one on the list is sitting right over there. Right?” He jerked his thumb in the direction of the helicopter then, taking his eyes away from the road, he looked earnestly at the younger man who had still not made any attempt to answer. “You gonna tell me I'm wrong?”

Vin leaned his back against the grille of the Montero and managed to look relaxed as he shoved his hands into his pockets.

“No. You're not wrong.”

Larabee followed Tanner's suit, lounging easily against the big 4WD, and sighed heavily. “Jesus, Vin! So, flying scares the crap out of you! Why keep beating yourself up over it?”

“Because I feel like a goddamn jerk!”

A ghost of a smile crossed Larabee's face.

“Yeah, well we've all been there. More than once.” He looked away from the Texan and stared thoughtfully off into the distance for a few seconds before going on. “Look, you're a good man,

Vin. Okay, you might not be able to get in a plane without puking your guts out, but I ain't seen you back away from it neither, even knowing you're gonna go through the same shit every time. Ain't no shame in that; fact is, in my book that takes grit. Truth is we all got flaws and I reckon at the end of the day that the best we can do is to find a balance that we can live with." He looked suddenly uncomfortable as if he had said more than he wanted to and, with a hard shove, pushed himself away from the SUV. "Now, where the fuck is that ambulance?"

Vin looked with apprehension at the heavy skies overhead, which looked ready to unleash more rain at any minute, then to the darker clouds gathering ominously on the horizon, and silently seconded Chris's impatient appeal. It was enough that he was going to have to take to the air twice in one day, the last thing he wanted added to that already gut-twisting ordeal was a brewing storm and until Buck was safely on board no-one was going anywhere. He shivered although the air was still warm and felt the first uncertain flutter of anxiety in his belly. So, where the fuck was that ambulance!

Nathan Jackson had been keeping an eye on Ezra, even before Larabee had so conveniently paired them together as the welcoming party for the medivac team. He was under no illusions as to why Chris had sent him with the Southerner to greet the Aviatca crew and it wasn't because he had anything to offer in the way of either linguistics or PR, that was Ezra's mandate after all, or even because he had been a medic himself; it was because Chris was worried. Jackson was worried too but he knew it wouldn't serve any purpose to tell Ezra that; the man was plain stubborn when it came to taking advice and Nathan had no intention of getting the Southerner offside this time. He had already made that mistake once.

Jackson didn't know what had gone down at the *finca* but he had seen enough physical evidence to make some educated guesses and the one thing he was sure about was that Ezra wasn't going to willingly share the experience with anyone, least of all Nathan Jackson. But he knew he was looking at a man who was walking on a razor's edge and if he fell, someone would have to be there to catch him. Ezra might not want his help but he might yet need it. And he was going to be right there when he did.

The Southerner had been talking at length to the man Jackson assumed to be the pilot and, while Nathan spoke a few key words and phrases of tourist-level Spanish, the rapid exchange between the two men left him completely on the sidelines. Yet, he needed no translation to understand that the pilot was agitated and his gesture towards the menacing cloud bank in the distance was clear enough. The weather was closing in and they needed to be gone. Ezra wound up his dialogue with the pilot with a congenial slap to his upper arm that served to both end the conversation and urge the man into action, which Nathan took to mean that an understanding of some sort had been reached.

“Everything okay, Ezra? He didn't seem none too happy.”

“Nor would you be Mr. Jackson with a storm front moving in and the risk of being grounded if everyone isn't on board and ready for take-off in the next twenty minutes.”

“But Buck's not here yet...”

“Precisely. In the meantime might I suggest that you round up and press-gang all hands to assist with the baggage and then see everyone safely on board.”

“And what about you?” asked Nathan, with a quick look towards the waiting helicopter, “Cos if I had any say you'd be strapped on one of those stretchers in back there along with Buck...”

“We all have our fantasies,” murmured Ezra under his breath, before smoothly continuing: “I need to talk to Chris.”

Nathan hesitated, then nodded.

“I'll see to it.” He watched as the Southerner prepared to move off, bracing and taking a deep breath before he started to walk away. “And you take it easy. We still got a way to go yet.”

But Ezra's only response was to smile and keep walking, leaving Nathan with no ready comeback and no other choice but to start getting people and luggage loaded into the Dauphin.

It wasn't a long walk, a little over 60 feet, but to Ezra it suddenly seemed endless and he stopped half way to catch his breath under the pretext of watching an incoming single engined Cessa, battling a vicious cross-wind that had gusted out of nowhere, make an uncertain approach followed by an imperfect landing that had the Southerner cringing in anticipation of imminent disaster. Marginally recovered he took his eyes off the Cessna, now taxi-ing along the runway and surprisingly still in one piece, and started towards his goal again. The Aviatica pilot was probably being generous in allowing even a twenty minute window; if the front kept moving at the rate the met report had, by all accounts, predicted they would barely make it off the ground before the storm was on them. Wind sheer was already going to make it a tricky take-off; crosswinds and helicopters was never a good mix.

But Larabee, as the Southerner discovered soon enough, was in no mood to listen to any hiccup in his plans.

“Twenty minutes? You're joking, right!”

“Is this the face of a man who jests?”

Chris drew a deep breath and held it for a moment raking a hand through his hair, as he visibly struggled to control his emotions, before he spoke again, his voice tight. “It'll take us that long to get Buck loaded into the chopper, for Christ's sake!”

“I'm just the messenger, Mr. Larabee, but the bottom line is that he won't wait. If he does then there's the risk that the storm will be on top of us and then, I'm afraid, no one will be going anywhere because this airport will be closed to all air traffic.”

“You think he’s kosher? Not just hanging out to squeeze us for an added fee - danger money or something?”

Ezra jerked his chin in the direction of the darkening skies to the north-east.

“See that? In less than half an hour that front will be ripping through this little burgh and believe me when it hits you either want to be anchored firmly to the ground or far and away. I’d say he’s kosher.”

Thinking, Larabee shoved both hands deep in his pockets and gnawed on his lip before looking straight at the exhausted Southerner.

“Tell me, how much am I paying for this ‘service?’”

Ezra looked keenly at the other man, trying to figure his angle, and not sure which direction Larabee was going to take.

“Five thousand dollars an hour.”

Off to one side he heard Vin give a low whistle, but it wasn’t the time to explain that chartering aircraft at any time did not come cheaply or that Ezra himself did not consider it to be an excessive amount for the service rendered.

“Five grand, huh? An hour! Well I’d say that just about buys me the right to call the shots here, don’t you think?” He didn’t wait for an answer but it was obvious that he didn’t require one either.

“We’re gonna be leaving this god-damned place today and, I’m telling you now, we’re gonna be leaving with Buck!” He turned quickly to Vin and gestured to the SUV. “Get this sucker unloaded, now! Dump everything right here. You and me are going for a little drive.” Wheeling back to Ezra he stabbed a finger in the direction of the Dauphin. “And that chopper stays right there on the ground until I fucking well say it goes! Got it?”

Ezra nodded once, his face a mask of studied indifference.

“I shall be sure to relay that to the pilot, Mr. Larabee.”

“You do that!”

As Larabee did an abrupt about-face and jerked open the driver’s door, the Southerner spared a moment to trade a meaningful glance with the Texan whose answering shrug signalled his complete agreement; when Chris had a rattler up his ass you just didn’t argue.

Lisa Hengst watched the lean Texan walk away, aware of the sudden friction between the two men although she wasn’t completely certain of exactly what JD had said that would account for Vin’s sudden departure. Whatever it was that had created the conflict between them seemed to be unintentional as the young bodyguard looked confused.

It wasn’t that she didn’t like JD; he was funny and he was cute. He was also closer to her in age than any of the others, but he wasn’t Ezra. He seemed to feel awkward around her and treated her

more like a little sister than a teenager who already almost matched him in height but whatever she thought of him, he now seemed to have been given the task of watching over her. She understood why, but it didn't make it any easier for her to adjust.

She sighed. Things had changed. There were undercurrents of tension that she didn't fully understand and everyone seemed more secretive and on edge. She hadn't decided yet if the fact that none of the bodyguards had shown the least sign of relaxing reassured or unsettled her. And, in spite of having JD with her, she felt very alone. Without really thinking about what she was doing, she slowly scanned the area, not looking at anything in particular but constantly searching for any sign of the Southerner.

"You okay, Lisa?"

Dunne was looking at her curiously and she realised that she was on the verge of crying. Quickly swallowing the threatening tears she gave him what she hoped was a reassuring smile and nodded.

"I did not sleep very well," she lied, "I'm just a little tired."

JD didn't look convinced but at least he didn't pursue it either. Instead he put a gentle arm around her shoulders and with a quick, comforting hug, indicated that they should walk.

"Come on, let's go see if we can find out what's happening before we both die of old age waiting here for someone to tell us."

Her opinion of JD moved up a notch when she understood that he was steering them away from the SUV, away from where her father stood chatting to Josiah, and instead angling towards the helicopter. She could see Ezra, shadowed by Nathan, in a huddle with the two charter pilots and she cast a hasty glance back at her father; he might not approve if he thought she had made a nuisance of herself by seeking the Southerner out, but he was too deep in conversation to notice.

JD looked round, sensing her hesitation, and followed her gaze but didn't alter his stride.

"What's up? Your Dad giving you a hard time?"

She hesitated for just a moment, her need to confide in someone overcoming any sense of disloyalty to her father.

"He tries to protect me. Sometimes too much. But this time...he tries also to protect Ezra, I think."

JD gave a short laugh.

"From what - you?"

She looked earnestly at the young man beside her. "I think maybe...from himself? Father wants very much for Ezra to work for him and he tries to give him some time and...room. He says I am not to worry him."

Dunne nodded although to Lisa he didn't look convinced.

"Kinda makes sense. Ezra's..." he paused, "well, Ezra's been through a rough time."

"I know, JD." Lisa stopped and gave the bodyguard a sad look, not surprised that he didn't understand. "I was there. I saw."

JD looked as if he had taken a bite of something that was too hot to swallow but manners prevented him from spitting it out. She kept walking giving him time to find what it was he wanted to say; if he ever found it at all. She was getting used to the fact that no-one knew what to say to her when she talked about what had happened. It didn't matter. None of them would ever understand.

"Hey, JD!" Nathan came striding across the grass, "You want to give me hand to start loading up here? You too Lisa. Seems we don't have as much time as we thought."

Lisa's gaze drifted from Jackson to follow Ezra's progress towards the 4WD. Time? She was beginning to think that there would never be enough of it to make things right again.

"Come on, honey," urged Jackson, gently, "We gotta move, there's a bad storm coming."

She obediently followed the big, dark-skinned, bodyguard but kept close to JD; sometimes she felt like a very little fish in a very big ocean.

Ezra looked at the mound of luggage Vin had hastily ejected from the SUV and deposited unceremoniously on the ground before he and Chris had burned rubber and disappeared. None of it was his, so his interest was purely logistical. His personal effects now consisted of the clothes he stood up in which, thanks to the good will of the hotel manager not to mention the foresight of a certain Texan, had at least been cleaned, pressed and mended - and his SIG which, even now, nestled at the small of his back, holstered discreetly inside the waistband of his pants; not exactly comfortable but definitely reassuring.

With a sigh he turned, ready to make the return trek to the Dauphin with Larabee's explicit instructions for the pilot which, he suspected, would be received with no small amount of resistance. Still, he hoped that the man would listen to reason without him having to resort to threats at this stage of the game. Not only did it go against his principles to question another pilot's judgement regarding the safe operation of his craft but, more importantly, it would take energy he just didn't have to argue the point. Of course, making demands with menaces of the duly appointed captain of an aircraft probably constituted an act of piracy even in Guatemala, although he very much doubted that the social or legal niceties would be of much concern to Chris in his current frame of mind. He gave a wry smile. What the hell, the way he felt right now, he didn't much care either. Whatever it took, that helicopter was going nowhere without Larabee's say so and if that meant persuasion of the 9mm hollow-point variety then so be it.

"Cavalry's here!"

Ezra slowed to a halt after only a few yards as JD closed in on him and enthusiastically announced the arrival of Nathan's impromptu assemblage of would-be baggage handlers.

“Well, the pack mules at least,” agreed the Southerner, tongue in cheek, then with a quick glance that took in the remainder of the group: “No offence.”

“None taken,” murmured Josiah, then with a feral grin, “This time.”

“Hey, Ezra, where’d Chris go in such a hurry?” asked JD, carefully extricating his computers from the stack of assorted bags and cases. “I thought we didn’t have much time.”

“Precisely, JD, and as we’re still missing a member of our party, Mr. Larabee decided it would be prudent to make a final call for passengers.”

Dunne paused and looked across at the Southerner.

“He went to look for Buck, right?”

“Didn’t I just say that?”

“No!” Indignation.

“Well in that case, he went to look for Buck,” answered Ezra, dryly, “Is that better?”

Laughing, Josiah and Nathan shouldered most of the remaining gear between them while an obviously amused Manfred Hengst, appreciating the lighthearted banter, picked up the last couple of bags not already claimed.

“Better quit now, JD,” advised Nathan, helpfully, “No point in digging that hole any deeper.”

JD shrugged, letting the good-natured ribbing roll over him.

“Whatever!” He straightened with difficulty under the weight of the heavy equipment and started to move off.

Unable to be of any assistance to them Ezra instead moved quietly up beside Lisa, who had been standing to one side waiting to see if the four men had left anything for her to carry, but the ground was now clear.

“Hello, Stranger.” He slipped his left arm around her shoulders and gave a quick hug. “Everything okay?”

Twisting her head to look up at him, she nodded.

“But I will feel better once we are away from this place.”

He sighed heavily understanding the sentiment.

“I’m with you, Darlin’.” He glanced to the north-east and the plum-coloured sky as the wind suddenly gusted, snapping the windsock to rigid attention and flattening the grass along the runway edges. “The sooner, the better.”

“Ho-ly shit!” Braking hard and fighting to keep the big SUV under control as it slewed to a halt in a squeal of tortured rubber, Chris shook his head in a weary gesture of denial and disbelief. “This just gets better and better.”

Beside him Vin gave him a calmly accepting shrug and got out of the vehicle. With no other option,

Chris killed the ignition and did the same.

The way ahead was blocked; the road strewn with glass and debris. A collision of some kind.

Abandoned, a motorcycle lay on its side, engine silent, oil and gasoline pooling beneath it. Further along, a decade-old, once-white Explorer, grimy and mud-splattered, was half off the blacktop and canted at a thirty degree angle, its front wheels up to the axles in a drainage ditch.

The Texan walked slowly forward and critically viewed the road ahead, the possibility that it might be an ambush making his scalp prickle. If this was for real, where the hell was everyone?

“Whad'ya think, Chris? Could be a set-up.”

“Yeah, maybe.” He didn't sound convinced. “But that banged up old Ford over there looks a lot like what passes for an ambulance in these parts and it's pretty much in the right place at the right time. Could be we've found just what we came looking for.”

Vin shot a dubious glance at the battered sports utility.

“You think Buck might be in there?”

After a few seconds hesitation Chris started forward.

“Guess there's only one way to find out.”

Vin followed, still wary but mindful of time slipping away.

“*Ayúdeme! Ayúdeme, por favor!*”

Tanner's hand was half way to the holstered Browning at his back before the man had completed the first word of his plea for help, and although the Texan checked himself just as quickly his intent had been unmistakable. The man froze, eyes cast down as he held both hands forward, palms out, in a universal gesture of appeal; he wasn't looking for any trouble.

Or wanted them to think he wasn't.

“What'd he say?” asked Vin, relaxing but not dropping his guard entirely, as he eyed the nervous Latino.

“Don't know,” answered Chris, equally at a loss, “but whatever it was he was being polite about it.” He jerked his chin to indicate the far side of the crashed vehicle. “Take a look. I'll check in back.”

With a quick nod of affirmation to Chris, Vin signalled for the Latino to go ahead of him. Genuine accident or not, he wasn't ready to be that trusting.

Larabee wasn't so sure himself that the whole scene wasn't some elaborate ruse staged to catch a couple of unsuspecting travellers, and had it been anything other than an ambulance nose down in the ditch he may have driven on regardless, but he had to find Buck and that meant checking every possibility.

He pulled on the door catch but it took a second, more forceful, tug to make it yield and the door swung open just as the first fat drops of rain started to fall.

“Well, hallelujah! 'Bout time y'all bothered to check on the patient. Now, would someone mind telling me what the fuck is going on?”

“Nice to see you too, Buck.”

A pause.

“Goddamn! Chris?”

“None other.” Larabee leaned into the back of the Ford and glanced around the sparse interior, making a point of eyeing the tilted stretcher and Buck's awkward position, then with a sigh looked earnestly at his friend. “Good job I came.”

Wilmington struggled against the gradient to push himself up on one elbow and grinned through the fatigue and pain showing on his face.

“Good job you did.”

At the business end of the Dauphin's cabin Ezra listened calmly to the Aviatica pilot who, after already having waited out the initial twenty minute deadline, was becoming increasingly agitated by the ongoing delay. The Southerner's status as a fellow-pilot, and a Spanish-speaking one at that, afforded him a measure of respect that might otherwise have been absent but soon push was going to escalate to shove and when that moment came, Ezra knew it was going to get messy. But for the moment, he listened; he made all the right noises with just the right degree of understanding and empathy and, at the end of it all, he repeated the same thing: we wait.

He resumed the watching that went so naturally with the waiting and tried to ignore the growing discomfort in his side. While no stranger to the size limitations of various aircraft, he had never before been obliged to negotiate the confines of one with broken ribs and it was one experience he wasn't eager to repeat. Piloting the Gulfstream was something he didn't even want to contemplate; that was a bridge yet to be crossed and for the moment he had problems enough without looking for more.

The weather was closing in fast now. Rain assaulted the windshield exploding in noisy splatters as it struck the unyielding perspex and Ezra could feel the power of the gusting wind as it buffeted the stationary helicopter. In another ten minutes the issue would no longer be getting the pilot to stay on the ground, it would be convincing him to take off. He shifted his position and with his left hand surreptitiously reached for the holster at his back. Satisfied that in spite of his splinted finger and the added strain on his injured ribs he could backdraw without too much difficulty if he had to, he relaxed again. Now, where the fuck was Chris and that goddamned ambulance?

The continued strain of waiting had created a tense and expectant hush in the cabin. Even JD had retreated into an uneasy silence, although his eyes darted constantly between Ezra in the cockpit and the open port-side door manned by an equally on-edge Nathan Jackson. The only one who

seemed remotely comfortable was Josiah who was leaning with one forearm against the bulkhead, ignoring the rain that pelted through the open hatch and patiently looking out across the windswept airfield as if time was of no consequence.

“Incoming.”

The single, quietly spoken word sent ripples of silent energy through the helicopter, like a pebble dropped into the still waters of a pond and, although no one spoke, there was a sense that everyone on board had taken a collective breath but still awaited the confirmation that it was safe to exhale.

Ezra leaned forward into the space between the two Aviatca pilots and watched the approach of the fast-moving Mitsubishi as the driver abandoned the pavement to cut across the grassed outfield in a direct line to the helicopter. He waited even now, a restraining hand on each crewman's shoulder, acutely aware that the simple act of the Montero returning did not automatically warrant the green-light for take off. Without Wilmington on board, they would still be going nowhere. A hundred yards out the headlights flashed rapidly; two long bursts and a short then three more long, the same sequence repeated over again: G...O...G...O...

As a smile oozed onto his face Ezra released his grip on the two pilots.

“Gentlemen, start your engines.”

The actual words may have meant nothing to the two men but the intent was crystal clear and there was no need for any further urging from the Southerner as the pilot nodded just once to the second officer before leaning forward to switch on the main power and initiate the start up sequence.

Ezra pushed himself up from the crouch he had maintained too long for it to be comfortable and edged back to give the pilot some space, but he didn't move far. He needed to be sure that there wouldn't be any sudden change of heart from the pilot if things started to get a little hairy. There was also the inarguable fact that he was just about done in and as far as he was concerned his next, and only, move was going to be when he buckled into his seat for take-off. He just hoped he'd have the energy to get out of it again once they arrived in Guatemala City.

The rotors were already turning, ponderously at first but rapidly gathering momentum, as Larabee swung the Montero in a tight 180 degree arc before throwing the big SUV into reverse, and backing up to the Dauphin.

Ducking low under the sweeping carbon fibre blades Sanchez and Jackson ran to meet the still moving vehicle, only managing to avoid the spray of wet earth from the wheels as the tyres bit deep into the grass under hard braking by some fast footwork and a last minute change in direction. The SUV had barely come to a stand-still before Chris had launched himself from the driver's seat and was barking directions at the two men, but his words were swallowed by the gusting wind

and the noise of the twin turbines powering up. Before he had a chance to repeat himself the rear door swung open and Vin jumped from the back, thrusting a large paper sack at Nathan with one hand as he leaned over to rub his knee with the other, softly cursing before he straightened up again.

“Stuff to see Buck through to Boston,” he yelled, by way of explanation, adding with a sly grin, “Though he’s already flyin’ high enough not to need the chopper!”

Nathan nodded and spared a moment to check the sack; pain meds, dressings, a half litre flask of saline, more than enough to maintain both Wilmington’s health and comfort on the flight back. Unorthodox perhaps, considering he had no official paramedical status in Guatemala but he wasn’t about to argue either the ethics or the legalities of the situation, his only concern now was getting Buck safely loaded into the Dauphin.

“So what happened to the ambulance?”

The Texan gave Jackson a sidelong glance before leaning back into the SUV and taking hold of the stretcher.

“Long story.”

“Well, you’re here now,” replied Nathan agreeably, knowing that the details would come later when they had the luxury of time, “So best get this show on the road.”

Moving the wounded bodyguard out of the 4WD became an exercise in teamwork under pressure that pushed patience and tempers to the limit as frustration rose in direct relation to the time it was taking to complete the process. Although the two rows of passenger seats had been collapsed to accommodate this latest test of its people-carrying capability the SUV had never been designed to carry a stretcher and getting Wilmington out proved more of a challenge than getting him in had been. But Tanner was right about one thing; Buck was definitely feeling no pain.

Already conscious of the seconds ticking away the four men worked quickly in the driving rain that within minutes had soaked each of them to the skin, spurred on by the worsening weather and the urgent chopping beat of rotors now spinning at maximum revs as the Dauphin reached full power.

“Hey, Chris! Wanna help us out here?”

A distracted Larabee, obviously focused on something other than moving Buck, accepted Nathan’s quiet but brisk reprimand without a word and immediately turned his attention back to helping Vin manoeuvre the head of the stretcher out of the Montero.

“What’s up, Cowboy? Getting a mite antsy?” Vin kept his voice low.

Chris gave a casual shrug but avoided looking at the Texan as he adjusted his grip on the metal frame of the stretcher and with a sharp tug finally hauled it free of the Montero.

“It’s nothing.”

“Yeah, and next you’ll be telling me you ain’t been lookin’ over your shoulder ever since we started

back with Buck on board.”

“Just a feeling,” admitted Chris reluctantly, after a moment of thought, “Like an itch I can't scratch.”

“Think we got trouble coming?”

“Don't know about trouble but I'm pretty sure we picked up a tail.”

Vin dismissed the natural urge to look over his own shoulder.

“Well, don't matter now,” he reasoned, “Couple more minutes and we're gonna be outta here.”

The conversation was abruptly terminated by a blunt invitation from Nathan to: “Quit talkin' and start walkin'!” to which the two men instantly and guiltily responded, concentrating for the next few minutes on making a dash to the waiting helicopter.

Taking directions from an uncharacteristically authoritarian but impressively efficient Jackson, loading the injured bodyguard took less time than any of them imagined but it was still a frustratingly time-consuming operation and as the minutes ticked away the tension mounted. From the cockpit Ezra calmly reminded them that they needed to be gone, his voice tightly controlled but still betraying the urgency they all felt.

So wet it no longer mattered, Chris stood hunched in the lee of the Dauphin, although it offered little protection from the elements, while Nathan made final adjustments to secure the stretcher. Meanwhile, he waited. And watched. Unable to rid himself of the uncomfortable feeling that they were under surveillance, he continued to scan the approaches to the helipad.

It was moving slowly. So slowly that Chris almost missed it. A dark SUV, reduced to the same monochromatic greyness as its surroundings by the mist and rain, crawled ponderously along the main access road. Someone less suspicious might have accepted its reduced speed as a response to the rapidly deteriorating visibility but Chris was already on high alert and he didn't believe in coincidence. Gaze fixed on the slow-moving vehicle, he barely noticed Tanner tap him on the shoulder; his signal to board. For several heartbeats he stood transfixed as the SUV turned off the road, rolled several feet across the grass then halted, sitting like some predatory beast staying just out of range, its headlights - like two luminous eyes - aimed straight at the Dauphin. And between the lights a row of four interlinked circles.

He knew that car; had driven it. The Audi.

Velasco.

“Jesus!”

Larabee started forward, a sudden jolt of adrenaline kicking his body into overdrive but a hand gripped his shoulder from behind.

“Chris! Time to go!”

He shook his head.

“I need five minutes, Vin.”

Tanner's grip tightened.

“What the hell...Chris! We ain't got five minutes.”

Larabee hesitated then tried to shake free of the Texan.

“Vin, see the Audi? That's Estéban over there. He was the one tailing us!” He knew he sounded frantic and the need to shout over the noise of the wind and the scream of the turbines gave him an air of desperation that he didn't intend. “I need to close this out, Vin. Right now, before it's too late.”

“It's already too late, Chris,” yelled Tanner, “You hear me? We wait any longer and you'll have all the time you want to talk to Velasco - and maybe his pals downtown too! Hell, you don't even know it's him.”

“He's right, Chris.” Nathan agreed, quietly supporting the Texan. “Wait any longer and it's not only Buck's life you're putting on the line!”

Larabee's shoulders slumped in sudden surrender. Conceding the cold, hard truth of their words, he yielded to both the pressure of Tanner's grip and the weight of his responsibility as team leader and, grasping the Texan's extended hand allowed himself to be hauled on board, turning his back on the Audi and hoping he wasn't turning his back on a friend.

As Tanner slammed and secured the door, Larabee dropped heavily into the nearest seat with barely enough time to fasten his seatbelt before the helicopter lurched unsteadily into the air. After hovering uncertainly for several beats, struggling to find lift as the pilot battled the vicious cross-wind, the Dauphin suddenly swept upwards, yawing sharply to port before powering forward and rapidly gaining height to finally defy gravity and soar skywards.

Looking out of the side window a thoughtful Larabee watched the Audi grow progressively smaller as the ground fell away beneath the helicopter then, as the helicopter heeled over in a gut-swooping turn to the left, he saw the headlights of the SUV flash in quick repetition before it turned in a wide U and slowly drove away, red tail lights glowing through the mist.

He was not sure if what he had just witnessed was intended as a salute or a farewell but one thing he was sure of was that Lieutenant Estéban Velasco was still alive and well.

For now.

He could only hope that the detective stayed that way.

oooOOOooo

“Gulfstream N107VS cleared to the Boston airport as filed...”

Ezra had never been quite so relieved to hear the magic words that granted permission to start a

flight as he was now. Perhaps he was less adventurous than he once was but, in spite of Lieutenant Velasco's assurances to Chris that they were all free to go, he couldn't rid himself of the feeling that at any moment the slow-moving cogs of bureaucracy and internal politics would finally mesh and someone would start asking awkward questions relating to InterSept and its part in rounding up the kidnapers. He wasn't proud of the fact that he'd killed two men - hell, one was no more than a kid really - in cold blood, but he had no regrets about either. You played the hand that you were dealt, but spending his immediate future detained for questioning in a Guatemalan jail was definitely not on his agenda.

"Roger, cleared to Boston," he acknowledged evenly, repeating the controller's instructions back to him, *"Initial altitude five-thousand feet, departure on 120.4 and squawk 6501, Gulfstream November-107-Victor-Sierra."*

The weather was still a problem with visibility down to three miles under a two thousand foot broken cloud ceiling and although the rain had eased it was still a steady and continuous downpour. With the wind a brisk fifteen to twenty knots at sixty degrees and conditions worsening Ezra could confidently predict a bumpy ride.

"Gulfstream N107VS your Read-back is correct, contact ground 121.34 for push and start."

"Roger, one-two-one decimal three-four for push and start, Gulfstream N107VS."

Ezra braced himself and took a deep breath before shifting his weight in the seat but no matter how guarded his movements he could not avoid either the deep ache of bruised muscles or the unpleasant grating of his fractured ribs. Still, he reasoned, if Chuck Yaeger had managed to be the first man to fly faster than the speed of sound with a couple of broken ribs then flying a business jet, especially from the right hand seat, should be a piece of cake.

He slipped easily into the familiar routine of pre-flight procedure switching radio frequencies as he was referred to the various controllers that would see the plane from ground clearance through start-up and taxi-ing to final departure. Beside him in the pilot's seat, an affable Scot by the name of Max Stewart, took the conn leaving Ezra to the less demanding duties of second officer; a role that, for once, he was more than satisfied to take.

The whine of the twin jet turbines starting up never failed to awaken something deeply primal in the Southerner and today was no different; again he felt the pulse-quickenning surge of anticipation that accompanied the sound as Max fired up the two Rolls-Royce engines then, with push and start complete, started to taxi the sleek jet as Ezra, relaxed and calmly efficient, relayed the instructions from the tower.

As the Gulfstream nosed forward towards the single runway Ezra spared a thought for Vin. The helicopter flight had been white-knuckles all the way running before the storm front but although the Texan had sweated through an intense twenty minutes of turbulent flight he had avoided his

worst fear - the indignity of being air-sick. With any luck Max would be a good enough pilot to even out some of the inevitable bumps and spare Tanner any spells at driving the porcelain bus this trip.

“Guatemala tower, buenos dias, Gulfstream N107VS holding short runway 19.”

Ezra waited for the tower to give the go-ahead for the jet to move up into position on the runway.

“Gulfstream N107VS, after departing Taca 320 position and hold 19.”

As the departing white, blue and red liveried Grupo Taca Airbus ahead of them in the queue lined up for take-off Ezra briefly acknowledged the ATC instructions and set the transponder before starting the final checks, while Max nosed the Gulfstream in behind. The short runway, situated in the middle of the city's urban sprawl and flanked by buildings on one side and a ravine on the other, was probably not the worst in the world but Ezra was prepared to bet that it came pretty close. He certainly didn't envy the Taca pilot his job. After several long minutes the 320 was off and rolling. With one eye on the big jet as it lumbered down the runway straining to gather the speed to break free of the ground, Ezra patiently waited for their own take-off clearance which would only come once the Airbus was well away.

“Gulfstream N107VS winds 060 at 15 knots, cleared for take-off runway 19.”

“Copy winds, cleared take-off runway 19, Gulfstream N107VS.” Just twenty five seconds later the jet was in the air and climbing steeply to its initial altitude. From the co-pilot's seat the smiling Southerner clearly and quietly confirmed their status: *“Gulfstream November-one-zero-seven-Victor-Sierra airborne.”*

As the jet levelled out several thousand feet above a cloud-obscured Guatemala Chris finally began to relax and with a deep sigh reclined against the padded leather of the generously proportioned seat. He was beyond tired and he couldn't even remember the last time he had truly rested. It wasn't really an option even now but until they were clear of the adverse weather that was currently buffeting the small aircraft he, along with everyone else aboard, would be forced to stay put. He knew he should appreciate the opportunity to chill out, even for just a short time, but there were still so many questions for which he had no answers, too many missing pieces in the jigsaw, and he just wasn't the kind of man to tolerate leaving any loose ends.

He desperately wanted to talk to Buck, to find out exactly what had gone down at the *finca*, because he knew he would never get anything from Ezra except bare bones; a clinical account stripped clean of all but the most salient facts and totally devoid of emotion. Yet, at that moment, Chris feared more for the Southerner than he did for the man who had been his closest friend and confederate for more than a decade, and Buck himself was to blame...*you gotta know they messed him up...Jesus!*

Wilmington's words had stuck like a thorn in his flesh and his thought then had been that Ezra was a

man would rather break than bend, now he wondered if perhaps he had, finally, been broken and the possibility sent him to the dark and haunted places in his own mind. Larabee couldn't fault the Southerner's performance; the man might be a bit of a maverick but he had done all that could be asked of a bodyguard and more, yet he couldn't help thinking that maybe he had made an error in judgement by putting Standish in the front line too soon. The man had barely survived New Orleans - thrown to the wolves in an undercover op gone dangerously wrong - and now he had been mauled once again by a different but no less savage wolf pack. He closed his eyes and breathed deeply, consciously reining in the mounting sense of frustration. Goddamn it, if what Vin had said was true he was about to lose a good man but he still wasn't as sure as the Texan that there was anything he could do to change that. Or, more to the point, if he should even try.

Ezra was a difficult man to figure. The Southerner had been dealt a lousy hand - a losing hand - yet he had stayed at the table and bluffed his way through what was always going to be an unwinnable game like a pro. Who could really blame him for throwing in his cards and walking away from the table now? In this game you had to know when it was time to call it quits but in spite of all the signs something told Chris that Ezra might not be ready to fold just yet. The sixty-four thousand dollar question was whether Ezra knew that.

He was abruptly roused from his quiet reflection when, without warning, the jet hit an air pocket and dropped in a gut-swooping loss of altitude that left Chris with the unpleasant sensation of having temporarily parted company with his stomach until the Gulfstream hit denser air and resumed level flight once again. In the seat directly opposite him Tanner swore and gripped the armrests as he reflexively braced himself but his colour was still pretty good and, although he still looked apprehensive, the Texan seemed to be holding up well enough.

Afew seconds later a familiar voice came over the intercom, easy, measured, relaxed, and very Southern, calmly relaying their current speed and altitude, prevailing weather, ETA and reminding everyone of the need to remain seated with seatbelts fastened until advised otherwise. From the tone of his voice Chris knew with absolute certainty that, even as he made his apologies to his passengers, he was smiling. *Bastard*. He was willing to bet that at that particular instant Ezra Standish was possibly the only one on board who was enjoying himself.

Vin shifted uneasily in his seat; a man definitely not enjoying himself. And yet another casualty. Larabee already knew he was going to be counting the cost of this one assignment in manpower for some time to come. Buck would be off the active list for weeks, Vin was going to need work on his knee sooner rather than later if he was going to be anything more than a desk jockey and Ezra was out of the picture whichever way he chose to look at it. The only difference in his case was going to be whether it was temporary or permanent; either way he would be another man down. He sighed again; no wonder the insurance premiums were so goddamn high.

Restless but unable to move, he leaned a little way into the aisle and looked down the length of the plane. The Gulfstream was divided into three separate compartments, the first two sections seated four passengers in each and the last section, nearest the tail, was fitted with two single seats and a three seater lounge. At the moment the lounge was doubling as a berth for the injured Buck and Nathan, having reverted to his former role of medic with practiced ease, was now belted into one of the two club-style seats on the opposite side of the central aisle and Chris decided that if Jackson's relaxed expression was anything to go by Wilmington was doing just fine.

Mannfred Hengst and Lisa sat in the centre section with Josiah and JD for company and, in spite of the turbulence, the four of them chatted amiably enough seemingly untroubled by the roller-coaster ride. In spite of her age he guessed Lisa was already a seasoned traveller and Hengst probably spent as much time on airplanes as he did behind a desk; as for JD he doubted that something as ordinary as a little turbulence would make any impact whatsoever on that irrepressible nature of his and as for Sanchez... well Josiah was just Josiah. Imperturbable. If there was anything at all that ruffled the former marine then he had yet to see it. There was something reassuring in the absolute normality of the scene and he found some of the tension drain out of him as he settled back and finally allowed himself to appreciate the fact that they were, without question, going home. Then, senses blanketed by the pervasive and constant background hum of the jet's twin engines, he surrendered at last to fatigue.

Ezra stared thoughtfully out of the cockpit window at the now clear sky and, far beneath, the blue expanse of water that was the Gulf of Mexico as the jet crossed latitude 23.5° - the the Tropic of Cancer. On the starboard side lay Cuba, to the north-west the coast of Texas and two hundred and fifty miles to north, the Miami coastline. In under an hour they would be back in US airspace and making the thousand mile run up the east coast to Boston.

They were cruising at 41,000 feet and the airspeed indicator was touching 460 knots; a 25 knot tailwind meant they would be touching down at Logan in around three hours. They had finally left the storm clouds behind as they had cleared the Yucatan peninsula and the forecast was for clear skies all the way to home base. Stewart had already switched to autopilot and was perfectly capable of handling the rest of the flight without any further input from the Southerner. They had already agreed on the game-plan; Ezra would return to the controls for the landing at Logan and in between Max would call him if there was a need. In truth, there was nothing now to keep Ezra from leaving cockpit. Except his own disinclination to move.

He enjoyed the seclusion of the flight deck; he liked the fact that his purpose there was clearly defined and he liked even more the degree of control. But, once he made the effort to leave his seat, once he hit the release on his harness and finally made the move to abandon his place at the

controls to join the others, he would be committing himself to a path from which there would be no turning back. There were decisions that still had to be made and the unavoidable questions to face for which he was not even sure he had the answers, yet he knew that no matter how much he delayed now there was no escaping the inevitable. However difficult, this was something he had to do and holding off wasn't going to make it any easier. It was not only time to move - but time to move on.

Without haste he freed himself from the safety harness and contemplated the least strenuous way to get out of his seat and off the flight deck. Under normal circumstances it was an awkward manoeuvre, but these were not normal circumstances and, taking into account his fractured ribs and the sundry other afflictions acquired since his last spell in the cockpit, he didn't expect it to be either easy or painless.

And he was right, but in all it took barely half a minute and turned out to be less of an ordeal than he had anticipated. He remained standing in the entry alcove for a moment to allow the pain in his chest to subside, and to give himself some time to compose himself. After all, he didn't want to look like something the cat dragged in, even if he felt like it. *Appearances are everything, darlin'. Yes, mother.*

He hadn't noticed that the forward lavatory was engaged but a moment later, the door slid back and a pale and sweating Vin Tanner emerged, narrowly avoiding a collision with the Southerner more by good luck than intention. Ezra quickly stepped back but for a moment the two men gripped each other in a parody of an affectionate clinch, the way two old friends meeting might briefly embrace.

Ezra looked steadily at the Texan.

"First time up to the plate?" he asked, with a sly smile just touching his lips, as he gestured with a jerk of his head towards the toilet Tanner had just left.

"Yeah," he admitted slowly, his embarrassment evident, "Probably not the last though."

"No," agreed Ezra, "I can probably guarantee that. You look like crap."

"Thanks!"

Ezra released his grip on the Texan and gave him a light and friendly tap on the upper arm.

"I believe I detect a distinct note of insincerity there, Mister Tanner."

"You don't say?" Vin's eyes fixed on the other man and he grinned. "Well, seein' you mentioned it, reckon I ain't the only one looking like crap." A second later his grin faded and his grasp on Ezra's arm tightened fractionally. "You doing okay, Ezra? I mean, last night you were...you were kinda, you know...aw, hell!"

The Southerner ducked his head and smiled, well aware of what the Texan was trying so awkwardly to express.

"I'm fine." The Texan didn't seem convinced so he added, softly: "Really."

Vin waited a beat, accepting if not wholly believing, before slowly and deliberately looking the Southerner up and down.

"Well, I gotta tell ya, Ezra," he murmured, bending his head a little closer as if revealing some great secret, "You still look like crap."

The Southerner laughed then; a quiet sound but nonetheless genuinely appreciative of Tanner's sense of humour and timing. After a few moments he raised his head he looked steadily at the other man. "Thanks, Vin."

Tanner, recognising the sincerity in Ezra's tone instead of the retaliatory sarcasm he expected, gave a quick nod before finally turning to walk away. "Anytime, pard."

Ezra stood and watched as the Texan moved back to his seat. From anyone else he would have considered it as nothing more than a platitude; from Vin Tanner he was willing to take it as a promise. It crossed his mind that perhaps if he'd had someone like Tanner, or Larabee, or even Wilmington to watch his back in New Orleans things might have turned out differently. Perhaps...

Perhaps nothing.

He hurriedly closed the door on that fantasy. He had never been one for fairytale endings anyway. Right now, he had just over three hours and a hell of a lot of talking to do. Taking as deep a breath as he dared and ignoring the sudden flutter of nervousness that rippled through his belly, he squared his shoulders, stepped down into central well of the aisle, and started to walk along the main body of the plane.

To find Chris still in his seat came as something of a surprise; to find him asleep beggared belief. Chris Larabee was simply one of those men who was always right there, tireless and constant, beavering away at the business end of whatever was going on and, for some reason, to find him sleeping was to catch a glimpse of the human element that was more often than not hidden behind the requisite screen of governance demanded of any figure in authority. And while Larabee's position in the catbird seat gave him the privilege of command, it also meant he got to shoulder the greater part of the burden of responsibility and Ezra was able to appreciate that the last few weeks hadn't exactly been a cakewalk for Chris. In fact today, seeing Chris so completely at peace, was probably the first time he felt envious of him.

He moved on. Larabee was not the man he needed to talk to right now.

Neither was Hengst, but as he passed he aimed a wink at Lisa and it was enough that he was able to make her smile. He would be back soon enough to talk with her father and he hoped that she would still find reason to smile once he was done.

"Hey, Ezra." Nathan glanced up from a magazine he was reading and watched keenly as Ezra carefully eased himself into the seat opposite him. "Ribs still vexing you? Maybe it's about time you

thought about taking some of those pain-killers.”

The Southerner sighed, considered the offer, and gave a slight shake of his head.

“Nerve block's wearing off, “ he admitted, grudgingly, “but I'll pass all the same. Wouldn't want to risk losing my license for flying under the influence of a narcotic now, would I?”

Nathan initially looked sceptical, as if he was sure that for some reason Ezra was hedging, but after a few thoughtful seconds he gave an understanding nod and with a smile gestured across the aisle to Wilmington.

“Reckon Buck's the expert on that right now.”

Buck's eyes slid open almost on cue.

“And I can highly recommend it,” he slurred, cautiously shifting his weight onto the opposite hip, “though I got a bigger pain in my ass than in my leg.”

Ezra looked evenly at the man stretched out on the bank of three seats and his expression relaxed into an artful smile.

“Now why does that not surprise me?” he drawled, playing the moment for all it was worth.

Jackson laughed richly. “Sounds about right to me.”

“Yeah, yeah,” mumbled Wilmington, dismissively, as it slowly dawned on him what the two of them were suggesting. “That's real funny.” Then added with a grin that instantly robbed the insult of any offence: “Sonsabitches.”

In the lull that followed Nathan was quick to excuse himself, aware of a subtle, unspoken exchange between the two men that he suspected was likely to become an uncomfortable and embarrassing silence if he remained. Standing, he ducked to avoid hitting his head on the low ceiling and dropped the magazine he had been reading into the now empty seat.

“If you guys'll excuse me, I reckon it's about time I stretched my legs.” He took a quick look at the flask of intravenous fluid hanging above Wilmington's head and fractionally adjusted the flow rate before he left them to walk forward. “Call me if you need anything. I'll be up front.”

The silence continued for a few awkward seconds after Jackson had left before Buck finally shot a long look at the Southerner.

“Man, take my advice and stay away from mirrors!”

Ezra raised an eyebrow at the dubiously helpful warning. Trust Buck to actually say what anyone else would only think.

“Thanks for the tip. I'll bear it in mind.”

Wilmington continued to study him for a few more seconds before finally pressing on.

“So, Miss Congeniality busted your ribs, huh?”

“Just one or two,” admitted the Southerner, through the vaguest hint of a sardonic smile, “enough to get my attention.”

“She was some piece of work alright,” Buck mused, and Ezra noticed that his hand had strayed to lightly rub at his injured leg.

Wilmington shook his head slowly, his expression tight. An expression that told Ezra that he was thinking, and with thinking came remembering. Ezra leaned back in the chair and waited. He knew all about remembering. He also knew that there were some things that should be bound in chains, weighted down with concrete, dropped into the deepest ocean and never allowed to surface but he doubted that Buck was the kind of man to go along with that.

“Well, for my part I shall be eternally grateful for our Mr. Tanner’s timely spanner in Miss van der Schoor’s works.”

Buck laughed softly.

“Guess that’s one way of putting it.” He shifted again and settled back against the pillows supporting his head and shoulders, focusing his gaze on the ceiling. “Close, huh?”

Ezra didn’t fight the memory this time, without effort the panic and dread of the moment flooded his thoughts and he heard again the sharp crack of the rifle shot through the whoosh of blood thundering in his ears as he fought for the air to keep breathing. On reflection he found it ironic that he, who had deliberately courted death so often in the months since New Orleans, should have been so reluctant to yield when the time came. He had no logical answer for it other than the simple reality that at some point he had made a decision that the future could only be better than his past. In short, he hadn’t been ready to let go, and he found himself wondering if his need to always be in control extended to the need to control even his own exit from the world. His therapist would have a field day with that one; if he ever dropped his guard enough to allow her to dig that deeply into his psyche.

“Ezra?”

At the sound of Buck’s voice he zipped up that particular piece of baggage and hauled his attention back from the recent past to the immediacy of the present; he wasn’t sure yet which was the more uncomfortable.

“Close?” he answered slowly, before responding with an uncharacteristically diffident smile. “Yes. It was close.”

Navigating carefully through the Southerner’s words Wilmington responded with a measured look but whereas at one time he would have been scathing in his criticism of Ezra’s evasive ambiguity he now thought he could better appreciate where he was coming from - if only because they’d travelled part of that road together. In the end he just nodded; for some things words just weren’t enough.

“Sure feels good to be going home,” he sighed, steering the conversation into what he hoped were safer waters.

Ezra stretched his legs out and crossed them at the ankles.

“If you can call a hotel room home.”

From anyone else it might have sounded sombre, from the Southerner it was a statement of fact, no more, no less.

“So, back to Beacon Street?” ventured Buck.

He was surprised when Ezra shook his head.

“Checked out. Getting back early complicates things a little.” Then the wry grin was back. “In around three hours time I shall officially join the ranks of the homeless.”

Wilmington grinned, taking his cue from Ezra.

“Yeah, the only homeless guy on the streets with a designer wardrobe and a Platinum Amex card!”

Ezra’s eyebrows lifted marginally as he looked down at his borrowed and mended shirt, and the never-to-be-the-same Hugo Boss trousers for which he no longer had a matching jacket.

“Would you believe it if I told you that what you see here is just about everything I have left of what I brought with me to Boston?”

“Living out of a suitcase, huh?”

“You could say that,” admitted Standish, warily.

“Man, that sucks! You been in Boston how long..?” Buck mulled it over; did the maths. “Jesus, if that ain’t fast tracking to max out your plastic!”

Ezra looked evenly at the other man, letting him speculate while his expression made sure that Wilmington would never know how close he was getting to the truth.

“Hey, listen up, Ezra, I got an idea...”

The Southerner gave a mocking smile, interrupting before Wilmington could finish.

“Indeed? The Boston Rescue Mission?”

Buck laughed, disregarding the Southerner’s sarcasm.

“Hell, no! Those places have standards,” he quipped, “I was thinking maybe...well, seeing as I’m gonna be laid up in hospital for a while...I mean, my apartment’s gonna be sitting there empty so you might wanna think about staying over at my place. You know, just to give you a chance to sort stuff out, find a place of your own...” He trailed off suddenly becoming self-conscious as he waited for some kind of response from Standish, adding candidly after a few seconds: “No strings.”

Ezra experienced a split-second of raw panic. If he had expected anything at all from Wilmington it had not been the curve ball that he had just thrown him; a curve ball coming so far out of left field that it slammed into him with enough force to take his breath away and momentarily unbalance him. By the time he had regained his equilibrium and composed himself enough to actually take on board and consider Buck’s proposal, Wilmington was talking fast, hastily trying to fill the sudden, uneasy, lapse in conversation.

“It's not Beacon Hill that's for sure, fact is it's a condo out in Revere and it backs onto the T, but it's a ten minute ride to the city and it's right across from the beach, looks out over the ocean...”

“Sounds good,” murmured Ezra softly, “Thanks.”

“...sauna and pool too,” continued Buck, missing the Southerner's quiet acceptance in his eagerness to sell him the idea, suddenly convinced that Ezra would find the suggestion laughable and at the same time wondering why it should bother him, “Course, it has the added attraction that I won't be around to cramp your style...”

“Buck...”

“But it's there, and for what it's worth it's yours if you...”

“Buck!” Ezra repeated patiently with just the hint of a smile. “You can stop the sales pitch now; I already said yes.”

“...want it.” Wilmington trailed off weakly as Ezra's words finally registered, his expression betraying his surprise that the Southerner had accepted the offer but at the same time clearly pleased that he had. He awkwardly reached out across the space between them and offered his hand. “Okay, it's a deal!”

Ezra, mindful of his ribs, slowly leaned forward and grasped Wilmington's outstretched hand in brief but solid shake.

“Thanks.”

Buck slumped back against the pillow and closed his eyes, that brief exertion having spent his remaining energy reserves.

“No problem,” he muttered, “Hell, what are friends for if you can't help each other out once in a while, huh?”

Ezra looked away and carefully ran his thumb back and forth along the crease in his pants, suddenly lost for words. He was glad Buck didn't expect an answer because, for once, he didn't have one. In truth, the kind of generosity that Wilmington had just displayed was foreign to him. He came from a very different world; and he was only now beginning to understand just how different. With a sigh he leaned back and studied the resting figure across the aisle trying to work out just when - and why - the dynamics between them had shifted.

Mistrust, deceit, subterfuge, betrayal, were all tools of his trade - those he recognised and understood; in his line of work you didn't make friends you cultivated contacts - and then you used them. The concept of friendship for friendship's sake, of being a team player - and all that went with it - was a new ball-game for him, and now it was a question of whether he was willing to accept the rules and then take that ball and run with it.

No strings? Like hell.

Five minutes later he was leaning over the wash basin in the aft toilet sluicing his face with cold

water. Shoulders hunched as he gripped the edge of the metal basin, he slowly raised his head to stare at the pale reflection looking back at him. After a few seconds of close scrutiny he sighed, grabbed a handful of paper towels and quickly dried himself off.

Buck was right. He should stay away from mirrors.

Not only did he look like he'd gone ten rounds with Oleg Maskaev, he felt like it.

Listlessly he crumpled the damp paper towels into a wad and threw them into the waste hatch, then turned and unlatched the door. He needed coffee.

Mannfred Hengst was waiting for him. The tall, blond, businessman rose from his seat effectively blocking the aisle as Ezra moved back down the plane and with a nod ushered him into the seat opposite his own.

“Come. Sit.” Hengst was never a man to waste words but although his delivery was clipped and direct, his tone held unexpected warmth.

Ezra sat and took a long swallow of the strong coffee that an obliging Josiah had brewed for him. The burly ex-marine, having taken over the galley, had seemed an unlikely candidate for flight attendant but Sanchez had only laughed when he had jokingly suggested a possible future career change and countered with a knowing look and a dryly philosophical: “Everyone has their secrets, Ezra.”

Indeed.

Now Ezra set his cup down on the small table that divided them and waited. Hengst obviously wanted to talk and from his experience with the man, he would not waste any time with idle conversation. So, he was taken by surprise when Hengst, after looking at him for some time, opened with: “My daughter is worried about you.”

He spoke in German, and Ezra wondered if it was because he felt more comfortable using his native language or whether it was his way of keeping the conversation between themselves; either way it worked for him.

“I’m...I’m fine,” stammered the Southerner, caught off guard by the reference to Lisa and not entirely sure how he should respond.

Hengst smiled and said gently: “Then perhaps you will tell her that and allow both of us some peace of mind.”

“I will,” agreed Ezra quietly, with a smile. He could easily imagine Lisa being as forceful in her own way as her father.

Hengst paused for a moment, his blue eyes fixed firmly on the Ezra.

“Lisa told me what happened.”

Ezra swallowed, feeling a flutter of apprehension in his gut.

“Everything?”

Mannfred sighed and nodded.

“Yes. Everything.”

“Then she probably can tell you more than I can,” he replied softly, but with an edge to his voice that warned of his reluctance to discuss it.

“Please,” continued Hengst, hastily, “I am not asking that you should revisit what is obviously a difficult and traumatic time for you. I only wish to tell you that I will be forever grateful for the sacrifices you made to ensure Lisa’s continued safety. I know it cannot have been easy for you but my daughter is the most precious thing I have, and...and I thank you.”

Ezra lowered his gaze and gave a crooked smile.

“I’d say it was a pleasure, but I would be lying.” He looked up again, his expression sobering. “I’d like to think that I did my job. That I did only what had to be done.”

The other man nodded slowly.

“From what I understand from Lisa, you did much more than that, my son.” He leaned back with a sigh and crossed his legs. “And now to the less altruistic question of business. The offer I made to you in Guatemala City still stands; so now I am asking that you consider it once again and I would be honoured if you would agree to come to Frankfurt and work for the Hengst Corporation...” He hesitated for just the briefest second before continuing. “Not merely as an employee but as a part of my family.” Mannfred smiled cautiously. “What do you say?”

Chris had surfaced with a guilty start, aided by a quick shot of adrenaline that jerked him rudely and unceremoniously out of a deep sleep, kicked his heart into double-time then just as rapidly dissipated and left him feeling heavy-headed and lethargic. With a jaw-cracking yawn, he had released his seat belt and stretched expansively wondering just how long he had slept. A quick check of his watch through gritty eyes told him he been out of it for more than an hour and he slumped back in his seat with a heavy sigh, not quite sure if he felt better or worse for his unscheduled power nap.

“There’s the face of a man in need of caffeine if ever I saw one,” boomed the familiar voice of Josiah as Sanchez materialised somewhere near his left elbow, appearing with the uncanny timeliness of a storybook genie ready to grant a wish and, not surprisingly, with a steaming cup of coffee.

Larabee shifted to sit squarely in his seat and rubbed his eyes as he responded with a laconic: “Got that IV?”

Josiah held the cup out in front of Larabee.

“Trust me, this will do the trick; my own secret brew, the Sanchez special.”

Chris smiled tiredly as he took the coffee.

“Hidden talents, Josiah? Don't recall seeing barista on your resumé.”

Sanchez shrugged and began with mock wistfulness: “A long time ago, in a place far, far away...”

“Yeah,” sighed Chris, wryly, “I think I was there myself once.”

With a shake of his head, Josiah slapped him lightly on the shoulder and started to move off.

“Take my advice, Chris: think less, drink more.”

Larabee waved him away and sampled the hot coffee, appreciating the strong, bittersweet, flavour as he leaned back and looked around the cabin, allowing himself a few moments to get his thoughts together. His gaze flitted randomly from seat to seat in a reflex action as natural to him as breathing but before he had completed even a single sweep he found his attention abruptly drawn to an animated and smiling Manfred Hengst. Not that he had any problem with the wealthy businessman looking either relaxed or happy - he had every right to be; in fact, given the potential outcome of the kidnapping Chris was thankful to still have a satisfied client at the end of it all. What he wasn't about to be thankful for was Hengst poaching one of his team.

Vin had warned him. Now seeing Hengst and Ezra together, deep in conversation and so obviously relaxed in each other's company, he recognised the truth of it; he really was about to lose the Southerner. And he had done nothing - was doing nothing - to stop it.

Chris sighed heavily and hunched forward with his elbows on his knees, slowly rotating the cup of coffee in his hands as he looked steadily at the carpet between his feet. *Fuck!*

Snippets of conversation drifted back to him but, unsurprisingly given the two men involved, they were speaking in German. He gave a brief shake of his head and couldn't resist the wry smile that crept onto his face. So typical of the Southerner to be able to maintain that level of secrecy while talking openly in an aircraft full of his peers. *Gotta hand it to you, Ezra; you're one of a kind.*

“I'd offer you a penny for 'em but I'm guessing you couldn't give 'em away.”

Chris glanced up as Tanner dropped wearily into the neighbouring seat and with a sigh stretched out his lean frame.

“You guessed right.”

“So, no sweet dreams either, huh?”

Larabee took a mouthful of coffee then looked steadily at the Texan.

“Not exactly. How 'bout a real bad one?” He jerked his chin in the direction of Manfred Hengst.

“Ah.”

“That's it?”

“What do you want me to say? I told you so?”

Chris stared down the cabin again, his eyes fixed on Standish. “Be a start.”

“Hell, no! You want a whippin', you do it yourself.” Vin shifted in his seat, his voice mellowing.

“Anyway, what happened to: 'it's his decision to make'?”

Larabee sighed. "It is. And I stand by that. I just hope it'll be the right one."

Tanner looked keenly at the older man, his eyes narrowing as his expression became serious. "Yeah, but for who?"

The two men turned as at that moment, a little further down the plane, both Hengst and Standish got to their feet exchanging a solid handshake that the German, suddenly drawing the Southerner towards him, turned into a brief embrace.

With a bitter smile Chris quickly switched his gaze back to the coffee in his cup addressing, but not making eye contact with, the Texan.

"Well, I think it's safe to assume that Ezra's made his decision, don't you?"

"First Officer to the flight deck."

The calm but crisp, Scots burr of the pilot's voice came abruptly over the intercom, a three second burst of sound that for all its brevity generated a ripple of expectation through the cabin. After almost four hours in the air it was the signal that they were nearing the end of the journey and the prospect triggered a sudden wave of movement as people stirred from the torpor that long distance flight seemed to so readily induce.

Chris saw a hand reach across the aisle and touch Ezra briefly on the shoulder, rousing the Southerner from a sleep that he had fallen into a scant hour ago. That he had permitted himself even that small concession had been a surprise to Larabee but, he had reasoned, by then he had probably finished dotting the 'i's and crossing the 't's with Hengst. Before that he had spent more than an hour sitting with Lisa and he had to concede that Ezra was a natural with kids; and for the first time he was forced to grudgingly admit that he was the ideal choice of bodyguard for the German. Furthermore, it was the only time he had seen Ezra look so completely at ease and he had an idea that he had been granted a rare glimpse of the man behind the mask. Now, as Ezra the pilot, smoothly rose from his seat and started to make his way forward Chris struggled with the thorny question of just why then, he should feel such a strong sense of betrayal.

For a moment he was tempted to take some kind of action. To stand up and block the way; stop the Southerner in his tracks and...do what? Ask him why? Or say what he should have said yesterday...that morning...two hours ago? Larabee quickly turned his face to the window and let Ezra go by without uttering a word, knowing that he had already left it too late to say anything at all - except perhaps goodbye.

"Herr Larabee? Chris? May I...?"

Chris had been too lost in his own thoughts to notice that Hengst had quietly approached in Ezra's wake and was standing patiently in the aisle waiting for permission to sit. Scrambling out of a

slouch he quickly gestured to the seat opposite and waited for the other man to begin but Manfred leaned back and looked intently at him for several seconds, just long enough for Chris to start feeling uncomfortable, before he smiled.

“You are a fortunate man, Mister Larabee.”

A furrow appeared briefly between Larabee's eyes. Fortunate was not exactly the word he would have chosen to describe how he was feeling at that moment and with anyone other than Hengst he might have argued the point, but for the moment discretion won.

“Fortunate?” he repeated, “In this line of work I consider myself fortunate just to get back home at the end of a job.”

Hengst smiled recognising the irony in Larabee's words.

“Quite. Yours is definitely an occupation filled with peculiar hazards.” He mused over that for a few seconds and then continued: “Or perhaps I mean hazards peculiar to the occupation.”

Chris smiled then.

“I think you were right the first time.”

The German laughed.

“Maybe so.”

After a few seconds of silence in which he seemed to be contemplating his next words, Hengst leaned forward with an uncharacteristic display of nerves as he twisted the heavy gold band on his finger.

“I have a confession to make.”

Chris kept his gaze fixed on the other man and waited.

“It has been no secret that I have wanted Ezra to come work for me. And, as you are probably aware, I first approached him about this maybe two weeks ago while we were still in Guatemala City. I am not normally given to the 'head-hunting', but this time I made an exception. What happened after, with Lisa's kidnapping and then her safe return, only made me more determined to have this man as part of my team.” He gave a tiny smile. “I wanted to tell you that today I put forward the offer again.”

“Yeah, I kinda guessed that.”

Hengst tilted his head slightly and frowned at Larabee's frosty tone but he continued: “And today I found that there are still some things that even my money cannot buy.”

It took a few seconds for Chris to process Hengst's last words then he sat forward, his expression morphing quickly through bemusement to understanding.

“You're telling me Ezra's not...he didn't...?”

Hengst slowly shook his head.

“No.”

“But...you and Ezra,” he paused, having difficulty matching what he believed with what he was being told, “I saw you both...”

“Ah! The handshake, yes? You thought there was an agreement between us?” Hengst leaned back with a sigh. “A misunderstanding, Mister Larabee. I can see where you might be led to believe...but no, Ezra refused my offer. The handshake? That was my way of wishing him well, no more.” He smiled gently. “There are a number of things that remain beyond value; family is one, true friendship is another, but there is also a third, and that is trust. Believe me when I say that all the money in the world is not enough to buy that. And this is why I say you are a fortunate man, Chris.”

He rose while Chris was still trying to separate logic from emotion and come up with a response that didn't make him look like an inarticulate jerk.

“But be warned.” Hengst gave a feral grin. “The offer is still open.”

Larabee ducked his head, hiding a modest smile.

“I'll keep that in mind.”

Hengst held out his hand.

“Thank you, Mister Larabee. You have not only my thanks but my utmost respect.” He half turned and looked over his shoulder and down the length of the aircraft. “These are good men you have here - a good team; you should be proud of them.”

Chris gripped the German's hand in a tight squeeze and nodded appreciatively, his expression becoming serious.

“I know. And I am. Just don't tell them that!”

It was close to seven in the evening before the Boston skyline came into view, individual buildings rapidly becoming recognisable as the Gulfstream progressively lost altitude in preparation for its landing at Logan airport. The sun was already sitting low in the western sky, bringing the multi-storey towers of down town into sharp relief and casting long shadows over the familiar cityscape, as the jet banked smoothly over the harbour and, lining up with the main runway, began its final approach.

Larabee did not count himself as being a sentimental man but this was one homecoming where he could not deny a profound sense of both relief and elation as he looked down on the spectacular panorama of metropolitan Boston. He had lived in the city for less than a year but he had pushed out enough roots to stop him from moving on and he guessed that he could call it home; at least for now. And right now it felt pretty good to be coming back.

From the flight deck Chris could hear intermittent snatches of conversation, the jargon of pilots that seemed to push the extremes of minimalism as they spoke in bursts of technical shorthand

that was at once familiar yet, for the mostpart, meaningless. Around him the airframe seemed to shudder slightly as airspeed bled perceptibly away and unseen mechanisms lowered and locked wheels, adjusted flaps and electronically executed a sequence of actions that would ultimately set the aircraft up for a perfect landing. At least mused Chris, his grip on the armrests tightening involuntarily as he looked out of the window and watched the runway rushing up to meet them, that was the theory.

The wheels touched with a single, hard, bump and then the engines were roaring in reverse thrust to slow the plane, although there was little initial sensation of slowing as the jet continued to hurtle down the runway for several hundred yards before gradually easing to an ambling roll and turning off the main runway.

Chris gazed out of the window and followed the painted markings on the ground wondering how the hell the pilots followed the confusing array of solid and broken lines, numbers and arrows with such apparent ease, while rubbing shoulders with massive commercial airliners themselves ponderously taxi-ing to or from runways, while all around them the bustling activity of air traffic continued without interruption. Whatever the secret Max and Ezra were clearly right at home in this playground as the Gulfstream continued to meander unerringly through the maze of taxiways and, ten minutes later, came to a gentle halt at their final docking point.

By the time the seatbelt indicator winked out, the reception committee had arrived and were waiting on the hardstand. As a medical evacuation flight they not only had priority landing status but they were greeted like VIPs, complete with immigration and airport officials as well as the waiting ambulance and medical staff. With a deep sigh Chris turned away from the window and rose slowly from his seat. He knew the drill. With any luck they would be processed without too much delay but, as always, there would be the inevitable challenge over handguns to deal with, endless questions to answer, permits to produce, and all it took was one smart-ass official to start dicking them around and it could turn into a very long night.

It took several more minutes for the craft to power down and the pilots to complete the final checks before Max finally released the door locks and lowered the air stairs and Chris emerged from the Gulfstream into the pleasantly warm air of a Boston summer evening.

Alone in the cockpit and in no rush to abandon the flight deck Ezra leaned his head against the back of the seat and let out a long, slow sigh as he closed his eyes and waited for the plane to empty. The moment the Gulfstream had come to rest on the hardstand he had been overtaken by a numbing sense of lethargy, and the full weight of the exhaustion he had been fighting for so long finally descended on him in a crushing wave of weariness. After a few minutes he reluctantly stirred and, without haste, stowed his headset before finally releasing the harness. Yet still he

made no move to leave his seat and the disturbing reality facing the Southerner was that he wasn't sure that he even could.

"You coming, Ezra?"

Roused by the gentle pressure of a hand on his shoulder and Jackson's voice as it filtered into his consciousness, he tensed as he struggled through a moment of disorientation before he realised with a sudden pang of dismay that he had drifted off.

"Uh, yeah. Yeah. Coming."

He squeezed his eyes shut and massaged the lids with his thumb and index finger, giving himself a few seconds grace at least to cover his confusion and summon the courage to finally move.

"The others are gone, Ezra. There's just you and me."

There was a quiet reassurance in Nathan's voice that made the Southerner turn and look the African-American, not sure if he might be reading something into Jackson's words that, in fact, wasn't there. Instead he saw a measure of warmth and understanding that he could not possibly misinterpret, and he knew that the next move was up to him.

He dropped his gaze and a hesitant flicker of a smile marked his unease.

"These cockpits are a bitch to get out of," he admitted guardedly, carefully shrugging out of the confining shoulder straps and bracing himself to stand.

"I can see where it would be," agreed Nathan with a nod, then with a smile added: "And that's without a couple of busted ribs."

Ezra made a snorting sound that was half laugh, half grunt as he held his right side with his left hand and tried to launch himself from the seat without inflicting too much pain on himself.

"You got that in one!"

"Here. Take my hand. Least that way you got something to hang onto."

His hesitation lasted no longer than it took for his tired brain to process the fact that Jackson had extended his hand and was waiting for Ezra to grasp it. With a nod he reached out and Nathan's reassuringly firm grip closed quickly around his outstretched palm and, with thumbs linked in a solid clasp, helped the injured Southerner out of the cockpit and off the flight deck.

Finally letting out the breath he had been holding Ezra, still nursing his ribs, straightened as far as he could until the renewed pain in his side abruptly brought him up short and he was forced to keep leaning on Jackson for support.

"Thanks."

With a knowing look Nathan's face creased into a grin.

"Not as bad as you thought, huh?"

Ezra was not sure if he meant getting out of the cockpit or the uncharacteristic lapse in allowing himself to accept a helping hand, and he suspected that was exactly how Nathan intended it to be,

but it was not an issue; in either case the answer was the same.

“No,” he admitted, with rueful smile, “Nowhere near as bad.”

Jackson stooped and, frowning, looked more closely at the Southerner, skin the colour of putty beneath the bruising and abrasions marking his features.

“I’d ask if you’re okay but you’d lie to me anyway so I won’t waste my breath, but I’m telling you straight now, Ezra, you don’t look so hot and I think it’s a bad idea for you to be taking yourself off to some hotel for the night. If you’ll take my advice - and that’s all it is, advice - you’ll think about hitching a ride with Buck to the hospital, even if it’s just to get another nerve block.”

Ezra looked out of the air door and across the hardstand to where Buck was being efficiently loaded into the waiting ambulance, a thoughtful expression on his face. The brutal and honest truth was that Nathan was right, he was in bad shape and he could go on denying it as much as he wanted but the bottom line was that he was hurting badly. Stubborn he might be, but a masochist he was not; neither was he a fool. It was time to stop acting like one.

He aimed a sideways look at the man beside him.

“I get to fast-track out of here, right?”

Jackson looked puzzled for a moment then realising that, as always, the Southerner had an eye out for the main chance, laughed softly.

“You sure do. Priority clearance and VIP treatment all the way.”

Slowly, Ezra started walking forward and, ducking to clear the upper edge of the door, moved out onto the air stairs.

“Where do I sign?”

Shaking his head and laughing softly Nathan followed the Southerner out of the Gulfstream but, unlike Ezra who was making his way slowly towards the ambulance, he paused at the foot of the air stairs to take a deep breath and let the reality sink in. They were home.

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The late June sun blazed out of a brilliant blue sky, its rays reflecting off the windows of the city’s high rise buildings and sending the temperature at sidewalk level soaring into the low-seventies.

Across the river in Cambridge the traffic was busy even at mid-morning but he was lucky enough to brazenly slip the late-model BMW into a parking space under the nose of the original claimant who was struggling to line up his SUV for a reverse attempt on the newly vacated spot. He tolerated the abuse hurled at him from the other vehicle without retaliation as he calmly walked away from his new toy; it was worth it just to have gained a premium spot on his first pass. True, he could have parked in the undercroft where he had his own allocated space, but when you were driving a

seventy thousand dollar seven series BMW what was the purpose in hiding it in an underground garage? Besides, he reasoned, he wasn't planning on staying long.

He paused on the steps leading up to the multi-storey building and, taking off his sunglasses, slipped them into the breast pocket of his shirt. It was a plain, unprepossessing, building that he had seen for the first time just five months before.

He remembered the day well. It had been a cold, blustery day and he had felt the chill through to his very bones. Today, the icy blast of winter was just a memory and while the heat of the day - hot by Boston standards - was a far cry from the languid warmth of Savannah and the sultry heat of New Orleans, it would do him just fine. For now at least.

The elevator hummed quietly as it rose to the seventh level and as the door slid apart with a pneumatic hiss opening straight onto the spacious lobby of InterSept, he found himself smiling. Five months ago, Chris Larabee had thrown a lifeline to a man drowning in the horror of his own existence; a man chewed up and spat out by system that had used him up and tossed him away like something rank and rotten. And for them he had almost died. For a moment his good humour evaporated; almost a year down the track and the bitterness still rankled.

“Ezra!”

The Southerner's smile returned in full measure as Chris Larabee crossed to meet him the moment he walked through the sliding glass doors emblazoned with the company logo and into the suite of offices.

“So they let you out, huh?”

“Monday,” he confirmed with a grin, “Said I'd freeloaded long enough.”

It wasn't true. He'd signed himself out.

Larabee gave him a sceptical look. “That's not what I heard from Mary Travis.”

Caught out Ezra winced but he kept smiling. “You know how these medical types are. I feel fine.”

The other man eyed him critically then nodded.

“You sure look better than you did a couple of days ago.”

“I rest my case.”

Chris shook his head and laughed. “Just don't make a habit of pissing Mary off. She's a real ball-breaker.”

Ezra raised his eyebrows and shot a sideways look at his boss.

“That sounds like the voice of experience.”

Larabee flushed and turned away, shifting some papers unnecessarily on the desk and hastily diverting the conversation to safer ground.

“So, how much sick time did you get?”

“A month.”

“Got plans?”

Ezra sat on the edge of the desk.

“You mean between resting up and finding somewhere to live?”

Chris's grin was back.

“Well good luck with the apartment hunting; probably take you a whole month to get a place.”

The Southerner toyed with a paperclip.

“I might have a deal lined up. An old friend...”

Larabee shook his head in bemused awe.

“Don't know how you do it, Ezra. I reckon you could fall in horseshit and still come out smelling like roses.”

Ezra just smiled sardonically. “It's a talent.”

An awkward silence followed and he focused on bending the paperclip into a complex shape, avoiding looking at the blond man. Finally Larabee sighed and looked directly at him.

“And?”

“What makes you think there's an 'and'?”

“It's a talent.”

“Touché,” he murmured softly, then: “And...I'm going back to New Orleans.”

Larabee slowly put down the folder he had picked up.

“Something you wanna tell me?”

Standish shook his head, as much to say he didn't understand it himself as a denial.

“It's just something I have to do, Chris.”

“Could be a big risk you're taking,” he countered seriously.

Ezra shrugged. He knew it.

Larabee chewed his lip thoughtfully.

“You want someone to go with you? Watch your back? I can spare Vin.”

The Southerner ducked his head, as surprised as he was touched by the unexpected offer.

“I...thanks, but I need to do this alone, Chris.”

A nod told him that Larabee understood. He might not agree but he would respect his decision.

“I want you to check in every day - morning and night, okay?”

Ezra nodded feeling a swell of emotion that seemed to fill his chest and prevent him from speaking.

“And if you miss a check in,” he continued, “I'll be down there myself on the next flight, understood?”

This time Ezra smiled.

“Yes, boss.”

Larabee's expression lost its hard edge and but he levelled an intense look at the younger man.

"I don't want to lose you, Ezra. So you stay frosty down there, you hear."

Ezra slowly got to his feet and held out his hand.

"I'll do my best."

Chris quickly came forward to shake hands and quickly pulled him into a brief clinch before stepping back to arms length with his hand resting on Ezra's shoulder.

"Promise me one thing..."

Standish tilted his head, silently inviting Chris to continue.

"..That I'll see you back here, ready to start work, in a month's time." He grinned, adding in a lighter tone: "You only get to freeload for so long around here."

Ezra gave a crooked smile.

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

With that Chris released him and turned his attention to the contents of the folder on the desk.

"Give my regards to Bourbon Street."

Ezra lifted a hand casually acknowledging the request as he started to walk away but stopped as Chris called out again.

"And Ezra..."

"Mr. Larabee?"

"Watch your back."

With a nod he turned and walked through the sliding doors, crossing quickly to the elevators and leaving Chris Larabee and InterSept behind.

As he left the building and stepped back into bright sunlight, he paused on the steps to slip on his sunglasses before continuing down to the sidewalk. With a smile he fished in his pocket for his keys and headed for his car thinking as he did how good it felt to be, for once, not drowning - but waving.

Yes, indeed, Mr. Larabee. I will be back.