

FORTRESS

The Long Way Home



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2001

It was Spring. Late April in fact, but at 30,000 feet with no operational heating, it might as well have been mid-winter. Chris Larabee, Captain in the US Eighth Air Force and B-17 bomber pilot, lifted his hands from the yoke and passed control of the aircraft to his co-pilot as he stuck his gloved hands in his armpits in an attempt to warm them. On his right, his exec, a Southerner by the name of Ezra Standish, quietly hummed a tune as he smoothly took over from Larabee. Looking out into the moonless night, Chris wondered again what the hell he was doing. It felt wrong to be flying at night; that was the British domain. He was used to flying raids in broad daylight relying on the aptly named Fortress' prodigious armament to keep him alive. Only this wasn't a raid. It was one solitary, unescorted Flying Fortress -- not even his own beloved Larabee's Lady -- but a nameless B-17 which had been specially modified, trading its traditionally awesome firepower for a fractional gain in speed. Not that it would have made any difference if they had been armed to the teeth, he mused, as not only had the weaponry been stripped to bare bones but he was operating with a skeleton crew. Just himself; Ezra, his co-pilot; Buck Wilmington, gunner and some time radio operator, who also happened to be his oldest friend; John Palmerston, the navigator -- and one passenger.

Standish glanced across at Larabee as he tried to coax some warmth back into stiffening fingers.

"So, do we have the privilege of knowing who our VIP is?"

Chris suppressed a smile. It had only taken Ezra several hours and five hundred miles to work around to asking the question that had so obviously been on his mind since the B-17 had lumbered into the air at the end of the runway back at Bassingbourn.

"Ask no questions..."

"...and you'll tell me no lies. "

"Got it in one!"

"A great consolation when the Krauts realise we're here and start shooting at us. If I'm going to go down in a blaze of glory I'd like to know why."

Larabee waved a hand indicating the utter blackness outside the cockpit.

"Gotta find us first." He flicked the toggle switch for the heaters on the off chance that his persistence might persuade something to spark into life, before continuing, "You know these Limeys just might have the right idea."

"You mean night flying?"

"Yeah, harder to hit when the bastards can't see you."

"Granted, Captain Larabee, but that's very much a double edged sword. I'd rather put my faith in what I can see with my own eyes than what all these," he gestured at the control panel in front of him, "are telling me."

“As long as we know where we are and there’s at least a few hundred feet between me and the ground I’m happy.”

“Okay. Agreed. So where are we?”

“A long way up...I hope.”

Both men turned as a third party entered the conversation and the familiar figure of Sergeant Buck Wilmington materialised between the two seats.

“How’s our guest, Buck?”

“Still with us.”

“I should hope so,” muttered Ezra quickly, “or I’ve been induced here under false pretences.”

“You volunteered,” pointed out Larabee, knowing full well that whatever Standish said he would have sacrificed his own mother to be included on the flight.

“Must’ve been out of my mind,” grumbled the Southerner, good naturedly, “Could be tucked up in bed now...”

“...with your favourite teddy bear,” completed Wilmington, in an attempt to bait the Lieutenant, “having wet dreams about playing out a perfect hand of poker.”

Standish raised an eyebrow. “I’d thank you not to publicly broadcast my nocturnal habits, Sergeant Wilmington. A man should have some little secrets.”

Larabee’s grin matched that of his friend at the co-pilot’s riposte and he was once again reminded as to why he had chosen Standish as his exec. In the six months they had been flying together he had not once seen the Southerner lose his equanimity and his barbed wit had often served to lighten a tense moment. On the other hand, he mused, Ezra could be the most infuriating of any of the crew and Chris had been tempted more than once to end an argument with his fist connecting solidly with the Southerner’s jaw, but so far he had avoided having to resort to that particular course of action.

“Hell, Ezra, you should know by now you have no secrets!” countered Buck, but by the enigmatic smile that appeared on Ezra’s face he would not have risked putting any money on the outcome. The sergeant instead peered out through the window into the void. “Jesus, it’s blacker than the devil’s asshole out there. Do you know where we are?”

“Somewhere over Germany I guess.” Chris touched the mic to his throat. “Hear that, Palmerston? Buck wants to know where we are.”

“All you need to know, Sir, is that we’re fifteen minutes from the drop zone. For now maintain this heading.”

“Thank you, Lieutenant. Out.” Larabee switched off his transmitter. “Smug bastard.”

“So why all the secrecy, Chris?” questioned Buck, as he squatted easily between the two pilots, supporting himself on the seat backs.

“Because, Sergeant Wilmington,” responded Standish before Larabee could speak, “The premise behind such a strategy with regard to clandestine operations is that you cannot be induced to divulge information which you do not, in fact, possess.”

Buck deliberately looked back at Larabee feigning incomprehension before repeating himself.

“So why all the secrecy, Chris?”

The Captain laughed, knowing Buck took any opportunity to score off the Southerner and delighted in affecting a dumb bovine expression whenever Standish chose to exercise his vocabulary.

“What you don’t know, you can’t tell.”

Ezra threw a sidelong glance at the gunner. “I believe I just said that.”

“No offence, Ezra, but I prefer the abridged version.” Buck stood up. “Now I reckon I should be getting our passenger ready. I think we’re almost at his stop.”

His ‘stop’ was deep in the heart of the Third Reich and while the three airmen had joked about the mystery of their location, all of them had been flying sorties long enough to know that they were more than five hundred miles from base which put them well within reach of Berlin. For the crew, flying straight into the monster’s waiting maw without guns, bombs, and fighter escort let alone the safety of a combat wing of other aircraft to protect them, was a peculiarly unsettling experience. At the back of everyone’s mind, behind the adrenaline charged rush of the moment, was the fervent desire to deliver their payload and get the hell out of unfriendly skies while they still had the cover of darkness as a shield.

The banter had ceased between the two pilots as they approached the target area, eyes strained for any signal that would indicate the drop zone, neither one wanting to have to go around again. It might be as black as pitch and more than enough to conceal the huge bomber from prying and predatory eyes but the unmistakable roar of the four Curtiss-Wright radial engines was impossible to ignore. Instead it was an early warning system that neither of them could do anything about and which left them vulnerable to detection the longer they remained over the target.

“Two o’clock.” Ezra rapped out the sighting, immediately drawing Larabee’s attention.

The night was once again black.

“You sure?” The look of silent censure from the Southerner made Chris wish he had not spoken so quickly or thoughtlessly. “Sorry. Antsy.”

Standish smiled, acknowledging the older man’s ready apology. “Yeah.”

A light flashed, on-off, a mere wink before being swallowed again by the night and Larabee eased the B-17 onto a new heading. They may not be dropping bombs this time

around but being on target was no less important. He wondered briefly who was risking life and limb this far into Germany to aid their passenger and he mentally saluted the men and women of the SOE. Touching his throat microphone he signalled Buck in the rear of the plane.

“Three minutes.”

“Gotcha.”

Larabee shook his head at the casual response from the gunner. So much for protocol. He moved one hand towards the button that would give Wilmington the green light when they were over the drop zone and allowed his thumb to hover a fraction above it. Feeling the yoke lighten marginally in his right hand he knew that Ezra was shadowing the controls, his touch sensitive and unobtrusive enough to take up the slack without taking over. A good exec. Larabee had flown with none better but he still found it hard to believe that two men as different in outlook and personality as himself and Ezra Standish could work so effortlessly together in the cockpit. Out of the cockpit was not always the same story but either way he was not complaining. He had found a good crew and his sole ambition was to get through the war with himself, his crew and his plane intact. The probability he knew was low but he would gladly take every day as it came and give thanks at the end of it until....

“Target confirmed. Go.”

Larabee's thumb pressed the button and he returned his hand to the controls, again feeling the merest change as Standish released his share of the load. He held the craft steady waiting for the all clear; no tell tale shift in weight to alert him to a successful drop with this payload. After what seemed like an eternity Buck's voice came through his earphones.

“Clear! Now let's get the fuck out of here.”

Chris knew as Captain he should have reprimanded the gunner but instead he smiled and activated his own mic.

“Amen to that.”

They had been lucky. Chris would have called it a milk run but he knew better than to count his chickens. The mission was never over until he had three wheels safely touching solid ground; preferably on a runway, all at the same time, still attached to the aircraft and in the same county. Ezra had once said that he considered any landing he walked away from to be a good one and he was beginning to subscribe to that same philosophy himself. The longer the war dragged on, the more missions he flew, the more he wondered just how long before his number came up. Somewhere the law of averages came into effect and as he steadily lost crew and aircraft the understanding of his own mortality became more acute.

A bloom of flak exploded immediately in front of the Fortress and Chris tightened his grip

on the yoke as the nose was thrown up by the shock wave of the detonation. The sky around the B-17 filled rapidly with blossoming anti-aircraft fire and intersecting shafts of light searching to pin point the lone aircraft, while tracer arced through the darkness in a pyrotechnic display that would have been spectacular had it not been so deadly. Larabee steadily pulled back on the controls lifting the mighty bomber higher, hoping to gain enough height to avoid being caught in the powerful beams of the searchlights and feeling the familiar thrill of combat as his blood pounded through his veins. So much for a milk run.

They had been so close. Almost free and clear but now, approaching the border between Germany and Holland, the waiting guns had finally found them and were steadily hammering them. A single bomber, unprotected by a formation, attracting the concentrated firepower of every gun as the searchlights swept the sky in a determined effort to locate the intruder.

"Hey guys!" he heard Buck yell from the waist section, "We get the message! We're leaving already!" Then a yell of pain and: "Ahh, Jesus Christ! Now that's fucking personal."

"Buck? Buck, answer me!"

A hissed curse and then: "I'm fine. Just winged me. I'm okay."

Standish suddenly released his controls as the yoke swung uselessly in his hands, and glanced across at Larabee.

"That's me out of the game, " he breathed, "It's all yours Chris."

Larabee swore, fighting to get the big machine to respond, but it was obvious they had taken a critical hit. Damn! He had flown half way across Europe on two engines with daylight showing through the fuselage and part of one wing and his tail shot away before, and now he was being brought down by some pissant ack-ack battery straddling the Dutch-German border. The nose dropped and he braced himself to pull it up again, feeling the slackness of the control column as he alternately coaxed and forced it to do his bidding but knowing that the stricken Fortress was dying in his hands. Maybe today was the day his luck finally ran out. Chris Larabee, your number is up.

"Ezra! Get back with Buck. Make sure he's okay. We're gonna bail, right? John? Bail out! That's an order. Do it now!"

Standish hesitated just a split-second before leaving his seat then scrambled to obey, understanding a direct order when he heard one, but pausing for just a moment before exiting the cockpit.

"Don't be a hero, Chris."

Larabee didn't bother to turn, instead started setting switches and reaching to activate the auto pilot in the scant hope it would engage and give them enough time to get clear.

"No goddamn fear of that, Ezra. This ain't my plane! Now get!" He ripped off his headset and throat mic and with a quick look at the utter blackness ahead, the searchlights and tracer

now behind them, he wheeled to follow his co-pilot raising his voice as he moved down the plane.

“Bail out! That’s an order! Bail out, now!”

They had bailed out. In the end only three of them. Palmerston had not responded and, risking his own life, Chris had gone back and dived into the bombardier’s compartment only to find the navigator already dead. With no time left to get back to the others in the waist, he had made his own escape from the hatch in the nose, hoping to God that Buck and Ezra had followed his orders.

Chris watched the billowing canopy of first Buck’s then Ezra’s parachute open below him before he pulled his own ripcord and heard the reassuring snap and rustle of the unfolding silk as it blossomed above him and dramatically slowed his own rate of fall. The darkness he had earlier been so grateful for he now cursed as he plummeted earthwards with no light to guide him and no real idea of where he might land. Damn it all, they had been so close! Almost home. All the way to the Dutch border before the sons-of-bitches had finally found them, pinning them in intersecting beams of light and exposing them to the anti-aircraft guns that had immediately opened fire. So close.

It had been a fluke, a lucky hit, but it had brought them down. Not immediately, thank God, at least he had managed to gain them a few miles before having to give the order to bail out. He had hated doing it; it went against the grain to abandon his plane but his priority had to be men not the machine. He now wondered if he would have been so ready to let go if he had been piloting his own craft with a full crew. No matter. There was no going back on that decision.

Palmerston was dead. He was not a friend, in fact he had not spoken to the Lieutenant more than half a dozen times but that did not stop him mourning the loss of yet another American airman. Buck had been shot but from what he had said nothing too serious. Still, worth a purple heart. He smiled in spite of the fact that he was plummeting towards occupied territory, with the prospect of spending the duration as a prisoner of war a very real danger. Wilmington already had a Bronze Star but he was forever bemoaning his lack of the purple and white ribbon on his chest, claiming it was a sure fire winner with the girls. That was Buck all right. Never let it be said that Wilmington didn’t have his priorities right.

Ezra had come to the conclusion that he preferred the fact that he was unable to see the ground rushing up to meet him, at what he knew to be a far greater rate than it felt to be, as he drifted down through the night sky, suspended from the rigging of a fully deployed parachute. The closer he got to the ground, the greater the sensation of speed and suddenly

he understood far too clearly that practicing a jump from a static wire in a barn was no substitute for the real thing. He chanted a silent litany in his head: *relax, relax, relax*, not wishing to add a pair of broken legs to his catalogue of experiences if he should make a bad landing. Bend, tuck and roll, he reminded himself. *Shit, where the hell was the ground?* At least after Ploesti his plane had gone down in the drink. Wetter but softer. This was the first time he had been obliged to step out of a plane at twenty-five thousand feet and he was still debating the virtues of the exercise when the quality of the air rushing past his ears subtly changed, and he realised with a lurch of his stomach that his connection with terra firma was about to be re-established.

He hit the treetops first, smashing through dense foliage as he descended, instinctively raising his arms to protect his face as the branches whipped past, and expecting any moment to be impaled on a tree branch. His now uncontrolled descent was abruptly terminated as the chute caught in the upper reaches of the fir and he was brought to a savage and gut wrenching halt that jerked the harness forcefully between his legs and sent a jolt of white-hot lightning through his lower abdomen. He grunted with the pain of it and swore beneath his breath. *Goddamn!* Wriggling within the harness, he wondered just how far he was off the ground while he tried to ease the pressure of the webbing cutting sharply into his crotch. He would have considered himself lucky but he wasn't sure that castration was any compensation for not breaking a leg.

With a sigh of resignation he forced himself to relax and listened intently as he swung gently from the tangled lines. Chris and Buck had to be somewhere close. They had all jumped within seconds of each other and he had seen their parachutes but then he had become preoccupied with his own well being as he tried to convince himself that the billowing canopy overhead would indeed see him to a safe landing. A snap like a pistol shot, a rending of silk, and he dropped another six feet, his descent again abruptly terminated as the material caught and held a little further down the tree. He closed his eyes sucking in a deep breath and waited until the pain in his groin had subsided once again. Feeling too vulnerable, and convinced that his fall must have been heard in Berlin let alone anywhere closer, he reached for the release catch and prayed that he was not too many feet from the ground.

Buck silently cursed the gunner who had brought them down; even more the bastard whose shot had winged him. It had hurt like a bitch at the time but it had gradually settled to a dull throbbing and he figured there was less damage than there could have been. Whether the bullet was still in there he had yet to find out. There had been no time for even the most basic first aid as the Fortress had started to go down, and it had been every man for himself once Chris had ordered them to bail out. At least it seemed to have stopped bleeding.

He made a conscious effort to keep his legs together and his knees bent, ready to fold the instant his feet touched the ground, which by his calculations was not too many seconds away. The ground was nothing but a black expanse with some subtleties of light and shadow but he had no idea what type of terrain he was going to land in. He hoped to God there were no trees; or houses; or cattle; or...

He hit hard, a jarring contact with solid earth that sent shock waves up both his legs in spite of his anticipation of the landing. His right knee cracked as he twisted and rolled, then quickly scrambled to his feet hauling on the shroud lines and starting to gather up the yards of silk that threatened to pull him once again off balance as the breeze tugged at the still inflated canopy. Hitting the release mechanism he shrugged his way out of the harness and started to fold up the parachute, wondering whether to leave it or make some attempt to hide it.

A distinctive thud and a familiar voice cursing roundly, announced that Chris had landed not too many feet away and Buck counted himself lucky that the pilot had at least managed to avoid crashing into him. He found his knee was already tightening up and he guessed he had wrenched it in the awkwardness of landing, but when he tested it he could still weight-bear and it was not unduly painful. Just another minor inconvenience to make life that much more difficult.

"Chris!" he hissed, "You okay?"

Larabee was gathering up his own chute when Buck finally pinpointed his exact location and looking around to find the third member of their party.

"Where's Ezra?"

"Beats me."

The two men paused to scan the immediate area but there was no sign of the Southerner. Chris swore softly and struggled to maintain a hold on the parachute bundled in his arms.

"He jumped before me so he should be down. Can't be too far away."

"Yeah," agreed Buck, then more doubtfully, "But which way?"

It was no use. The harness release was jammed. *Hell!* Standish stopped struggling as the ominous sound of creaking timber focused his attention with a jolt on the possibility of yet another unwelcome and uncontrolled fall. With as little movement as possible he reached for the penknife in his pocket and, after a brief struggle during which he almost let the knife slip from his grasp as he tried to open the blade, he started cutting the webbing.

The ground was not as close as he would have liked and fortunately not far enough to break his neck, but just as hard as he expected. For a moment he lay stunned and winded,

struggling to breathe then, reminded of the throbbing pain between his legs, he rolled onto his side and curled up with a quiet moan. He was a pilot; it had never been part of his plans to become a paratrooper. It had certainly not been any part of his agenda to end up in occupied territory and the idea of spending the duration in a German POW camp did not appeal to him in the least. Which meant he had to move; and soon. It would help, he decided, if he didn't feel like throwing up.

"Ezra?"

The Southerner would never have believed how thankful he could be to hear Buck Wilmington's voice hissing at him through the trees from less than a dozen feet away but his response, as he tried to suck air back into his lungs, was less forceful than he intended and, he was sure, half an octave higher. It was enough.

Wilmington scrambled through the undergrowth, quickly followed by Larabee and the two men crouched over the still gasping co-pilot.

"Christ, man! What the hell happened to you?"

"You okay, Ezra?"

Standish jerked a thumb upwards.

"Long drop," he managed, at last finding his voice.

Both men looked up at the just visible pale smudge that was the remains of Ezra's parachute still tangled in the tree.

"Bad luck! Any damage?"

"Not that concerns you, Sergeant." He allowed himself to be helped to his feet, straightening slowly and brushing the debris from his uniform to disguise the fact that it was difficult for him to stand upright. "However, since you ask, I don't recommend having one's downward momentum brought to an abrupt halt in mid-descent while wearing a parachute harness."

Understanding dawning, both men winced at the mental image, their sympathies with the Lieutenant, until finally Wilmington laughed softly.

"And here I am thinking those were swollen glands in your neck. Sir."

Standish shot a sidelong glance at the gunner that would have cut diamonds, and even without looking he knew Larabee was grinning.

"Very funny. Now if you don't mind I think it would be wise to put some distance between ourselves and this place before we are obliged to become unwilling guests of the Third Reich."

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Chris let his head roll with the blow, not resisting, wishing Ezra's words had not been

quite so prophetic. Even so his jaw snapped together so he bit down on his tongue and felt hot blood spurt into his mouth. Wrong answer obviously. He shook his head and kept his eyes on the floor, not wanting to telegraph to the German officer his anger which in his experience would only invite more abuse. He was a prisoner of war, and while he knew that what was happening was against all terms of the Geneva Convention, he was in no position to remind this Aryan bullyboy of the fact. They knew he was not alone. At least that's what they said but they could just as easily be bluffing. On the other hand they could have found the parachutes -- and even the footsloggers of the Wehrmacht could count. He sighed and prepared for what he guessed would be a long and painful night, because he had already decided that he was not going to tell the Nazi bastard anything at all. His face ached and he thought maybe his cheek was broken. One eye was cut and already starting to swell, and he had a couple of loose teeth. Gently, he explored the inside of his mouth with his tongue and waited for the next blow to fall.

He blamed himself. Stupidly he had allowed himself to be caught and the only thing for which he could now be grateful was that Ezra and Buck had not been with him when he was captured. If they had any sense, when he failed to return they would be running as hard and as fast as they could for the coast and a boat back to England. They had drawn straws to see who would leave the relative safety of the old bakery to make a reconnaissance and not only rustle up some food but find them a boat. He had managed both but on the way back he had run into a German patrol. Bad luck more than carelessness but the result had been the same. He was now a prisoner. His head snapped back again. Not a hard blow but enough to regain his attention.

"Captain Larabee. I have been very patient with you, but I do not have all night. Now, once again I will ask you, where are the rest of your crew?"

"I've told you all that I'm going to, and that's my name, rank and serial number. You can whistle Dixie for any more."

The German walked slowly round the chair on which Chris was sitting, pausing behind him, and as much as Chris wanted to turn round, his every instinct screaming out his vulnerability, he stared straight ahead and concentrated on keeping his breathing even.

"Whistle Dixie?" The officer laughed gently. "What curious terms you colonial bastard offspring of the English use. I will confess I am not familiar with the idiom but I understand perfectly the intent."

Chris braced himself for another assault but the German no longer seemed interested. Instead he walked slowly to the table, the only other piece of furniture in the room besides the chair Chris himself was sitting on, and leaned the backs of his thighs against it before pulling a pack of cigarettes from his breast pocket. He shook one out and Larabee found it

ironic that they were Lucky Strike. Probably liberated them from some other poor bastard he had questioned.

"Do you smoke, Captain Larabee?"

Chris stared evenly at the very blond Major, debating whether or not he should answer. His tongue darted out to touch his swollen bottom lip, reminding himself that this was not by any means a social occasion but at the very mention of a cigarette he found himself suddenly craving one. As if reading his mind the officer gave a knowing smile and threw the pack in Chris's direction.

"No reason we cannot be civilised about this, Captain. You will find I am not an unreasonable man."

Larabee deftly caught the pack, snatching it out of the air without comment. The Major stood up and held out a small silver lighter, a Zippo, and Chris wondered briefly what had happened to the previous owner but pragmatism won out and, pushing the thought aside, he took out a cigarette and accepted a light. At least his hands were steady, although his heart was beating in triple time and every sense was heightened as adrenaline surged through his bloodstream in an age old physical response that he had no power to control. Dragging smoke deep into his lungs, he held it for a moment before slowly allowing it to escape. He could play this game any way the man chose.

The officer, his polished jackboots crossed one over the other as he leaned against the table, eyed Chris with open interest as he touched the lighter to the cigarette between his own lips. The gesture, so casual in its delivery, had the immediate effect of making the Major seem less the omnipotent martinet and more a man, but Larabee suspected that it was all part of the German's overall plan -- all part of the game. For the moment he didn't care one way or the other. The respite, however brief or illusory, was welcome enough and as drew again on the cigarette, tasting the strong tobacco on his tongue and feeling it bite at the back of his throat, he wondered if the others had managed to get away safely.

"I am wondering," began the Major suddenly, "what makes a man strong."

Chris shrugged, determined not to be drawn into even an innocuous sounding conversation, indicating that he neither knew nor cared.

"Is it home and family, comrades, country? Love? Hate? Or is it something more primitive? The overwhelming urge to survive, perhaps?" He smiled and shook his head as the pilot continued to stare beyond him at the wall. "Name, rank and serial number, *nicht wahr?* For the rest I whistle Dixie, ja?" He seemed to find the turn of phrase genuinely amusing and as he ground the half-smoked cigarette out under his boot he chuckled softly before his face took on the hard, uncompromising expression that Chris recognised as heralding further violence. *Break time over, Larabee. Back to work.*

"In spite of your insistence that you are alone, Captain, I already know that there are two more men with you. One of them is wounded."

Chris managed to keep his face from registering the shock that he felt like a physical blow equal to any the German had so far delivered. He told himself that the Major was lying, trying to unsettle him but the accuracy of his statement sent his hopes spiralling downward.

"Have it your way," he heard himself saying, as he calmly took a last drag on the cigarette, but his thoughts were spinning wildly out of control as he considered the grim reality of the fact that Ezra and Buck might have been captured.

"You were returning from a mission -- a special mission -- to Berlin and were shot down by our superior anti-aircraft gunners as you made your run back to your base in England."

Chris swallowed although his mouth was dry as dust and dropped his cigarette to the floor, crushing it beneath his foot.

"If your gunners are so fucking good they'd have shot us down on the way in," he uttered drily, knowing he was pushing his luck but not caring.

To his surprise, the Major smiled wryly. "You do have a point there, Captain Larabee. Maybe some additional practice is in order."

He started to pace back and forth in front of the American, a slow and measured tread that took him exactly six paces in either direction. "One of your friends has already told us what you were doing over Germany..."

Larabee crossed his legs and looked keenly at the impeccably dressed officer, a half-smile on his face, confident that his first instincts had been right. They had almost done it. They had almost convinced him that they had found Ezra and Buck but the Major had overstepped the mark when he had said that one of them had ratted. "You don't know squat, and I've already told you, no one else made it."

"Ah, Captain," the German sighed, almost regretfully, "I tried my best, but it looks as though you prefer doing things the hard way." He crossed to the door and opened it. "Krebb! Schultz!"

Larabee felt a flutter in his gut as two soldiers, both big men, trooped in and smartly stood at attention, waiting for instructions. The Major gently closed the door behind them and levelled a hard look at the American pilot.

"Are you quite sure that you wish to persist in this lie, Captain Larabee? Think carefully of the consequences before you answer."

Chris hesitated a moment as if thinking it over, then smiled. "Go fuck yourself. Major."

Wilmington paced back and forth across the small room. He had been doing so for the past hour and had succeeded in wearing a definite path through the dust on the floor of the

long abandoned bakery. Wherever the town was getting its bread these days it certainly wasn't this particular establishment. The ovens had been dismantled and there was little but a shell remaining but it was enough for two tired and hungry airmen to shelter in for a while.

"It's been two hours."

In response Ezra's voice drifted out of the darkness and although Buck could see little more than a silhouette, he could easily imagine the expression on his face: "Sergeant Wilmington. I'm fully aware of the time that has elapsed since our good commander drew the short straw and sloped off into the night to discover either some food or some avenue of escape. How could I be anything but adequately informed considering the fact that you have seen fit to apprise me of the time every ten minutes for the past one hundred and twenty?"

"Jesus, Lieutenant. Don't you ever get tired of talking?"

There was a scuffling sound as Standish got to his feet. "No more than you ever get tired of women, Buck."

The sergeant laughed in spite of his growing fears over Larabee's safety. "Now that's a different story altogether, Ezra. You just can't compare. Talk and sex? Hell, Sir, it just ain't no contest."

"I'll take your word for it, Sergeant," came the wry response, then: "I guess we'd better get moving. That was the agreement wasn't it, Buck? Wait two hours and if he wasn't back by then we were on our own, right?"

Buck's reply was hesitant. "Well, yes, Sir. It was." He felt the co-pilot brush past him and reached out, his fingers closing on the officer's leather jacket. "But you ain't thinking of leaving without Chris. Are you?"

"Captain Larabee gave us a very clear and direct order, did he not, Sergeant?"

Wilmington stood fast.

"Well, yes he did but you just wait a minute here, 'cause if you're thinking of leaving this pissant town and finding the nearest slow boat to Great Yarmouth without the Captain then I reckon you'll be doin' it all on your own!" He paused for a breath, adding quickly almost as an afterthought: "Sir."

Buck was surprised when Ezra's soft laugh came out of the darkness at him.

"Sergeant Wilmington, a rogue I may be, an inveterate gambler most certainly and I have frequently been accused of being a cheat and a liar which, on occasion, might even be true but, as unlikely as it may seem to you, I have not yet descended to the level of complete asshole."

The gunner relaxed then, smiled, and self-consciously shifted from one foot to the other.

"Sorry, Ezra. Just running off at the mouth again. Don't pay any attention to me."

Standish moved to the door leaning his shoulder against the jamb as he eased the warped wooden door open, just a crack.

"Why would I start now?" he countered easily, prompting a retaliatory gesture from Wilmington that he either missed or chose to ignore as he peered into the absolute darkness beyond the bakery walls. "We have about four hours before it starts to get light. If we don't find Chris before..."

"We'll find him!" interrupted Buck sharply, "And if we don't, then we go on looking until we do. Right, Lieutenant?"

If there was any hesitation on the co-pilot's part, Buck was not able to detect it as the Southerner smoothly responded.

"Right, Sergeant."

"So what are we waiting for?"

Standish sighed and stared out into the inky void. "Would you believe me if I said, divine inspiration?"

Wilmington leaned forward and rested one hand firmly on the officer's shoulder. "While I have every faith in the Good Lord, Ezra, I gotta say I think this one's up to us. So if you don't mind, Lieutenant, either take a crap or get off the john!"

Ezra was still laughing to himself as they slipped quietly out into the deserted street, the darkness of the moonless night cloaking the two men in its soft and silent shroud.

The night was perfectly clear and still, the pure brilliance of countless stars making up for the absence of the moon, as outside the tarpaper Nissen hut Lieutenant Vin Tanner sat, as indeed he had been sitting, for untold hours. The perfectly relaxed but unchanging posture belied the storm of emotions that raged within him, but each minute that ticked away only served to torment rather than ease his already disquiet soul.

Missing.

At his back the quarters he shared with Larabee and Standish stood empty, a barren reminder that they had not come back. Chris, Ezra and Buck. Missing. Seventeen hours had passed since Overdue had turned chillingly to Missing and finally to the dreaded Missing Presumed Lost and while his heart refused to believe, his head kept reminding him of the odds and with every passing moment hope faded.

Come the dawn he would be flying with another crew. Nothing unusual in that, he had told himself, subbing for absent crew was standard practice in the squadron. Absent crew. Goddamn it, who was going to replace Chris or Ezra or Buck? He raised a hand, the first movement he had made in more than two hours, and rubbed at tired eyes but he knew the prickling he felt behind the lids was more than just the grit of sleeplessness. Who would

replace them? No one. Plain and simple. No one. A new pilot, a new exec, a new waist gunner - positions filled with new faces, new names - but it would never be the same.

Abruptly he got to his feet and, digging his hands deep into his pockets, started to walk, the stunned lethargy that had held him captive suddenly replaced by the intense and overwhelming need to move, if only to reaffirm that he was still a living, breathing entity. He walked, unthinkingly, not sure where he was going but sure he could no longer stand the painful silence of the empty barrack room over which he had kept watch for so many hours. Waiting patiently. Watching. Hoping. His emotions, having swung from raw anger to crushing sorrow and back again countless times, were in tatters; and he no longer knew what he felt except an incredible sense of loss.

Larabee's Lady.

He had not meant to come to this place -- or maybe at some primal level, he had -- but now he was here on the parkway, staring up at the barely visible nude painted vividly on the nose of the bomber, he understood in some small measure what had driven him towards the flight line. He stood quietly for several moments as a host of memories flooded into his mind, and he allowed them in freely, then as his throat constricted painfully he reached up and touched the cold metal skin. *Missing*. He wanted to shout, he wanted to scream to the heavens at the injustice of it, he wanted to hit out at something, anything, but instead he wearily rested his head against the comforting solidarity of the Fortress -- and prayed.

It was cold and even if he had been able to ignore the fact that he was shivering almost continuously, he doubted he would have been able to ignore the pain throbbing in his skull long enough to get some sleep. He was in a room. No. A cell. Solid stone surrounded him on all sides, unbroken save for a tiny ventilation outlet in one corner and the heavy steel door on set in the opposite wall. Above him a single naked light globe, recessed into the ceiling and covered by a mesh grille, burned continuously; no worries about maintaining a black out here with no window to the outside world. There was a bed frame but no mattress, just bare wire springs and a blanket, while in the corner stood a filthy metal slop bucket. All the comforts of home. He gingerly probed his mouth with his tongue again and winced -- again. Damn, as if he didn't know it hurt already, it had become almost a compulsive exercise on his part to keep seeking out the cuts and welts inside his cheeks. Finally, tired of standing, he sat on the edge of the bed frame, hunched over with his hands thrust into his jacket pockets. Christ! What he wouldn't give for a cup of coffee. He stared at the floor between his feet with a sigh. Wish away, Larabee. The bastards have got you roped, thrown and hog-tied and the branding iron is in the fire.

He stood up again and paced out the length of the room, seeking some relief for the ache in his lower back that sitting seemed to have aggravated. His ribs were badly bruised and the dull pain in his flanks warned him that his kidneys had not fared any too well, but all in all he counted himself lucky. He could remember bar fights in which he hadn't escaped so lightly. But this was no bar fight, he reminded himself, and it was a very uneven contest. Next time he might not come out of it quite so well and the one thing he was absolutely sure of was that there would be a next time.

The thick walls muffled any sounds but if he concentrated he could hear the measured tread of a guard as he passed the door, and the occasional raised voice. Once he thought he heard a gunshot but he told himself he was tired and his imagination was working overtime, and he went back to pacing and counting until finally the thud of his boots on the stone floor echoed the thudding in his head and, on the verge of exhaustion, he thought he might be sick. He surrendered then, lying down on the uncomfortable springs and wrapping himself in the woefully inadequate blanket. As he closed his eyes, he heard what might have been the wail of a siren, or it may just have been the ringing in his ears. In any case his last conscious thought was that the ultimate irony would be for him to be killed in an air raid by an American bomb dropped from a Flying Fortress.

The streets were deserted, the citizens under strict curfew, as the two adrenaline-fuelled airmen moved warily through the village. Several times the ring of booted feet on the cobblestones had alerted them to the approach of roving patrols and it had been more by good luck than management that they had been able to quickly detour and avoid walking into a detachment of German troopers. How long that luck was likely to hold out was questionable and they both understood that the longer it took to find what they were looking for, the longer the odds became of them being successful; a situation not helped by the fact that they had yet to determine exactly where, in the maze of narrow streets, should be looking.

In a pattern that had been repeated countless times in the interval the pair had been at large, Buck flattened himself against the wall, signalling with a sharp downward motion of his hand for Ezra to follow his example. The Southerner, no more than two steps behind, needed no second invitation and pressed himself against the stonework, barely breathing. A moment later Wilmington sighed and sagged.

"Just a goddamn dog," he whispered, then with a touch of impatience: "Jesus, but this place is starting to give me the creeps. It's like sneaking around a cemetery." He shot a quick sideways look at the Southerner. "You ever do that?"

Ezra, his customary aplomb momentarily deserting him, looked taken aback. "Why on

earth...?" He stopped abruptly as if suddenly realising the absurdity of the conversation and shook his head. "No, I have not! Now can we at least maintain the appearance that we are engaged in some purposeful activity, Sergeant?"

"Sure. Which way d'you wanna go, Lieutenant?" The gunner gestured to the open square at which the street they were currently in terminated. "Take your pick."

Ezra reached into his jacket's inner pocket and brought out a coin. "Heads we go right, tails we go left. Call."

"Got something against straight ahead? Reckon whichever way we go it's a million to one chance we'll ever find him. Christ, he could be anywhere!"

"Not just anywhere, Buck. If he's been picked up by a patrol then they have to be holding him. A military post, the police cells...I don't know, but these patrols are operating out of somewhere."

"Great," hissed Wilmington, rolling his eyes, "We'll just follow the next patrol that comes by and see where they go, huh?" There was a brief silence in which Buck realised that Standish may be seriously contemplating that very possibility and he quickly turned to the Southerner at his elbow. "Uh, Lieutenant, that was a joke."

Ezra looked up, his smile broadening. "Many a true word is spoken in jest, Sergeant Wilmington."

"You might've noticed I'm not laughing...Sir."

The Southerner expertly flipped the coin before snatching it out of the air and bringing it down on the back of his hand, covered by his cupped palm. "Call."

"Tails."

Ezra deftly pocketed the coin again. "You lose, we go right."

Buck frowned and caught hold of the officer's sleeve. "Hey, you didn't even look!"

Standish moved in front of the gunner. "Didn't have to, it's a two headed quarter." He had slipped silently around the corner before an indignant Wilmington had a chance to say just what sprang into his mind at that moment and instead was forced to follow the agile Southerner down yet another street.

Wilmington soon came to the conclusion that Ezra would have made a good thief, seeming to slip effortlessly between the shadows and making the gunner feel clumsy by comparison as he followed in his wake. They made better time with the pilot on point and Buck had not figured out whether it was a matter of Standish having less patience or more confidence, when the familiar tattoo of steel studded boots sent Buck's heart into double-time again. Only this time there seemed to be an echo and the gunner realised, with a sense of foreboding, that he was hearing two different sets of marching feet approaching from opposite directions.

"Ezra!"

Buck took a hasty step back, cursing inwardly when his heart skipped a beat, as the Southerner silently materialised from the shadows. "Heads or tails, Buck?"

"I'll pass if you don't mind, seein' as we're pretty much in deep shit whichever way we go. You're the officer; you get paid to make decisions. So decide."

"You're a great help, Buck. Remind me to recommend you for promotion when we get back," came the sardonic reply, "For services above and beyond the call of duty."

"Just being on the goddamn ground is already way above and beyond the call of duty if you ask me," grunted Wilmington, testily, "Now which way?"

Standish took a deep breath and jerked his head to the right. They would continue the way they were going. Buck wordlessly followed, while quietly praying for a miracle and rationalising that at least if they were caught they would in all probability be reunited with Larabee but finding the thought did not comfort him one little bit. They had passed beyond the shop fronts that radiated outward from the town centre and were into the domain of private housing. Small, terraced stone dwellings that opened straight onto the sidewalk, each front stoop pumiced to gleaming, pristine whiteness that was somehow reassuring to the gunner. The little country might be under the jackboot but life went on as it had for countless decades. Some of these stones had been standing when Napoleon's troops had fought at Waterloo and no doubt they would still be standing after this madness had passed but for now, for a lost American airman, they had a heartening solidarity about them.

The hand over his mouth came as a shock that momentarily numbed him before he was seized by a split second of panic, quickly followed by the instinct to retaliate, all of which was over-ridden by the realisation that as he was being dragged roughly backwards, a squad of German soldiers had turned the corner and were purposefully striding into the street. One overwhelming truth dawned even before a hissed warning sounded in his ear. To resist would be to die. He had no time to see if the same fate had befallen Ezra, before he found himself stumbling backwards, hauled with disconcerting ease off the street and into the dark hallway of one of the very houses he had moments ago been admiring. He felt a flare of pain quickly followed by a liquid warmth trickling down his forearm and over his hand and he realised then that he had struck his arm on the doorframe as he had unceremoniously been snatched off the footpath and opened up the wound in his arm. He had almost forgotten about it but now it throbbed with a relentless intensity, the inflamed tissues protesting the sudden abuse. It took him several moments to realise that the hand over his mouth had relaxed slightly and a heavily accented voice was whispering in his ear.

"Do not make a sound. Your life - and mine - depends on it!"

The darkness was complete and he could see nothing but he slowly nodded, a sign that

he understood, and the hand was removed completely although his unlikely Samaritan maintained an iron hard grip on his arm for several minutes until the sound of booted feet drumming on the cobblestones outside had passed by and finally faded to nothing. Even then there had been silence and only the rasp of his own heavy breathing, in counterpoint to that of the man standing behind him, sounded in his ears. Wilmington knew good fortune when it jumped up and bit him but he was not quite ready to start giving thanks until he knew the final score and right now his only thought was that he and Ezra had been separated.

"Who the hell are you?"

"Someone who just saved your life, American."

"Yeah, thanks," responded Buck quickly, "but I'd like to know where my friend is."

"Which one?"

Buck's next words froze somewhere in his throat, unable to either speak or swallow them, as his mind raced wondering if he had misunderstood the heavily accented voice.

"What do you mean, which one?" He could only manage a whisper. He still had reservations about the timely rescue, wondering if it might not be a trap although his instincts told him that this was someone he could trust.

"There were three of you, yes? One man was taken by a patrol not far from here some hours ago. We were too late to help him. He has been taken to the Fortress. Your other friend is probably asking the same questions as you are now."

"The Fortress?" Buck repeated numbly, finding the name particularly ironic considering the aircraft they flew, but whatever it was seemed to bode ill for Chris.

The man tapped his arm. "Come with me. Trust me, all your questions will be answered in time. For now, we must move from here and quickly. There is a house..."

Ezra had not realised just how hungry he was until he had swallowed the first bite of hard cheese and coarse, dark bread which he quickly followed with a generous measure of red wine; then he had difficulty in stopping himself from simply wolfing the rest of it down. Across the room Wilmington's wound was being tended by an elderly gentleman who, it seemed, was a doctor who could be relied upon to be discreet and Ezra wondered again how long they would have lasted before being arrested, if these people had not literally spirited them off the street. His best guess was not long at all and he was well aware that he owed them a lot more than his thanks. This was a safe house run by a small cell of patriots that formed part of the informally structured Dutch resistance and they were not the first, nor would they be the last, to find refuge in it. Ezra quickly glanced up from his modest meal as Buck cursed roundly in response to the white-haired physician probing for the bullet that was still lodged in the muscle of his forearm but, as the gunner could not speak Dutch and the doctor had no

English, there was little in the way of conversation. Instead the doctor murmured soothingly in his own language as he worked and Buck answered by swearing colourfully in English. It seemed to be working out well enough. Ezra swallowed slowly and washed the last of the bread down with another measure of wine and his gaze returned to the fourth man in the room.

He had been sitting patiently astride a straight-backed kitchen chair watching the two Americans carefully; if not suspiciously, then at least with a measure of circumspection for which the Southerner could hardly blame him. This was a man who did not give his trust easily. In a way, he reminded Ezra very much of Vin: lean and keen, and a man of few words. Thinking of Tanner suddenly brought to mind the distance now between them, and he allowed himself a moment's reflection on how the rest of the crew would be taking the news that they were missing. The waiting was always the hardest. As if reading his thoughts the Dutchman fastened a pair of brilliant blue eyes – another striking similarity with the Texan bombardier – on the Southerner.

“It has already been reported that your aircraft has been shot down. Soon they will know there are survivors.” He took out a crumpled pack of cigarettes and took one out for himself before offering one to the pilot, which Ezra gladly accepted, suddenly as hungry for the taste of tobacco as he had been for the food. “We counted only three parachutes. Were there more?”

The Dutchman struck a match and shared the flickering flame between the two of them. With a nod of appreciation Standish inhaled to draw the harsh smoke deep into his lungs, then exhaled slowly with a gusting sigh. So, they had been marked even before their feet had connected with Dutch soil. Hardly surprising under the circumstances, but it gave him pause to think that the Germans, having already snared Chris, could well be combing the area in the hope of making it a clean sweep. He was not sure he liked the hunted feeling the thought gave him. He had never liked playing hide and seek as a child and he found he liked the idea even less as an adult.

“No offence, but would you expect me to tell you if there were?”

“Suspicion, Lieutenant? A careful man I think. Sometimes biting the hand that is feeding you may keep you alive but also you must understand that a downed airman is as good as dead if there is no help for him. If there are any others then your silence could well bring about their capture.” The man smiled and blew a jet of smoke from his nostrils. “But, fortunately for you, I do not take offence easily.”

Ezra looked at the young Netherlander for several moments, weighing up instinct against intellect, and coming to the conclusion that he had nothing to lose by telling the truth. “No more. Just the three of us bailed out. The navigator didn't make it.”

“You were lucky.”

The Southerner drew on the cigarette again and gave a gentle laugh, devoid of any humour. “Lucky? No, lucky is getting through the flak and landing on home soil. Forgive me if I don’t consider dropping into occupied territory with the same enthusiasm.”

The man shrugged, a casual gesture that suggested Ezra was entitled to his own opinion but any opportunity to pursue the conversation further was lost as the man suddenly unfolded his lean frame and crossed the room with the speed and grace of a panther to take up position behind the door, signalling with a sharp gesture of his hand for silence. The light tapping that had drawn the man’s attention sounded again and Ezra reached out to lazily flick ash from his cigarette as outwardly composed as ever but his heart was tripping along at an alarming rate in response to the sudden injection of adrenaline into his bloodstream; not so much fear as apprehension but the result was the same. Glancing at a pale Wilmington, whose eyes reflected the same uncertainty Ezra was also feeling, he momentarily experienced a stronger bond of kinship with the lanky gunner than he had ever thought himself capable of feeling for another human being.

After a tense moment, in which Ezra found the food in his stomach had somehow turned into a solid lump of lead, the Dutchman peered cautiously through a spy hole in the door then, apparently satisfied with what he saw, eased it open a scant few inches to admit a slim youth. At first glance Ezra would have hazarded a guess that the blond boy was still not out of his teens but as the unexpectedly dark eyes keenly swept the room, lingering for a moment on Buck before locking on the Southerner, he felt as if he was looking into a soul that was centuries old. The boy shifted his gaze again and Ezra took a deep drag on his cigarette trying to ignore the fact that the lump of lead in his stomach had suddenly turned to ice.

Intent on the muted conversation between the boy and the man, the pilot barely registered that Buck had sat down opposite him until the gunner quickly reached across the table and wordlessly plucked the cigarette from his relaxed hand. Wilmington was looking a little dazed and Ezra noticed that his hand shook as he took a pull at the rapidly diminishing tube of tobacco.

“Bad?”

“No picnic,” confessed the sergeant readily, blowing twin streams of smoke into the air before leaning forward to pass the cigarette back. Ezra briefly shook his head indicating that Buck could finish it and was rewarded with an appreciative grin.. “Thanks, Lieutenant.”

“Don’t mention it.” Ezra’s attention had wandered back to the scene being played out across the room.

“I already did.”

The Southerner glanced back to the moustached gunner, a frown creasing his forehead, having already lost track of the conversation. "Did what?"

"Mention it."

He felt a momentary flicker of irritation, then he sighed and let it pass; Buck was as anxious as he was, he just had a different way of showing it and if taking refuge in glib chatter helped ease some of the tension for the sergeant then who was he to get rattled by it.

Wilmington finished the cigarette and ground the butt out in a dish, the force of his action betraying his own nervousness. "Reckon this kid knows anything about Chris?"

Ezra leaned his elbows on the table. "Quite possibly." He kept his voice low. "He did say something about the garrison and I think he mentioned a cell block."

Buck drew back a little, his eyes narrowing. "Don't tell me you speak the lingo."

The Southerner shook his head and smiled. "No, unfortunately, speaking Dutch is not one of my particular talents..."

"But..." prompted Wilmington, knowing from the way Ezra had left the sentence unfinished that there was more to come.

Ezra lowered his voice again. "Much as I'm loathe to confess it, knowing German is and it's close enough to allow me to get the gist."

"Son-of-a-bitch! You kept that one quiet, Lieutenant!"

"With good reason," hissed the Southerner, signalling for the surprised gunner to keep his voice down, "In fact I can think of two very good ones standing right over there!"

Buck nodded slowly. "I get your drift, Looey. Don't look any too trusting do they?" he grinned suddenly at the pilot, "Good thing I trust you, huh?"

"Thank you, Sergeant Wilmington," he drawled, sarcastically, "for your vote of confidence."

"Hey, don't mention it."

Ezra raised one eyebrow fractionally and a half smile crept across his face. "I already did."

Wilmington pulled a wry face, murmuring something about Ezra being a wise ass but both men quickly turned as man and boy abruptly ended their conversation and crossed to stand by the table.

"This is Koos," announced the man and both airmen received the information with a brief nod, waiting for the other to continue. "He has seen your friend."

Chris opened gritty eyes and squinted in the light. He felt as if he had only been asleep for ten minutes and he was groggy and unco-ordinated as he was roughly pulled up from the bunk. The muscles that had ached before now screamed in protest and he found that one

eye had swollen almost shut, his eyelashes gummed firmly together. He grunted as he was shoved from behind but he curbed his natural inclination to fight, having learned that it served no purpose other than to attract further punishment, and he moved forward without offering any resistance. If his compliance was a disappointment to the soldier, he gave no sign, instead maintaining his silence and delivering his instructions in the form of nudges and jabs with his rifle which Larabee had to admit was an effective, if rudimentary, form of communication.

He continued to move along narrow halls painted the same neutral grey, until he began to wonder if the guard was leading him around in circles to deliberately disorientate him, but finally, after painfully negotiating a steep flight of stairs, he recognised the corridor that he was being herded along. He was going back to the room where he had been first questioned before being beaten, and he contemplated the prospect of being forced to endure an endless cycle of being asked questions he would not answer, then being systematically worked over on the off chance that physical punishment would persuade him to change his mind. It all seemed too surreal, some insane nightmare that was happening to someone else. He thought back to what the Major had asked of him earlier. What makes a man strong? He didn't know the answer to that; he didn't even know if he was strong but he did know that he was pissed as hell, and for now, that would have to do.

The door was shut firmly behind him and he heard the key turn in the lock, then the unmistakable sound of a bolt being rammed home but for the moment he was alone and that, in itself, was an unexpected development. More games, he decided. The table and single chair stood perfectly aligned in the centre of the room and he resisted the urge to sit down and give in to the weariness that washed over him in numbing waves. Instead he forced himself to walk, hoping to ease some of the stiffness out of his back and thighs as his mind went round in endless circles. He had ordered Wilmington and Standish to make a break for it if he didn't make it back. The deadline had been and gone but something told him that the two airmen would be as likely to obey that particular order as sprout their own wings and fly back home. His concern was what they would do once they realised that he had been captured. Ezra was a good co-pilot and he had proved to be a resourceful member of the crew, and Buck was as good a friend as anyone could wish to have but, like him, they were out of their element. True, Ezra had been shot down before, and he had evaded capture, but he had been badly wounded then and partisans had taken care of him, concealing him from the Germans and smuggling him to eventual safety. This was different and, if he was honest with himself, he believed it would only be a matter of time before both Ezra and Buck were sharing his fate. He found himself thinking of Palmerston, and wondering if he might not have been the lucky one.

He sat down at the table then, painfully aware of the depressive mood that was permeating his every thought but unable to do anything about it. *Goddamn it, Larabee! Don't let them do this to you. That's exactly what they want.* But he was cold, hungry, tired and hurting, and more than that – he was utterly alone. With a sigh he lowered his head onto his folded arms and closed his good eye. *Bastards.* It came to him then that he had never considered the possibility of falling into enemy hands. Like many others before him he had not given it any real thought, because it was never going to happen to him, any more than he thought he was going to die each time he took to the skies on a mission. Not because he believed he was invincible but because if he started to dwell on the possibility that he might not return, he would never be able to get off the ground never mind see his crew safely home. So it was a grim reality of which he was aware but which he did not allow to cloud either his thoughts or his judgement. Now here he was. Far up the creek, and he had lost not only his paddle but his canoe as well. He lifted his head and, straightening his back, pushed himself away from the table, resting the palms of his hands on the scarred surface as he took a deep breath and looked at the door through which he knew his nemesis would shortly be walking. *Larabee, you are well and truly fucked.*

There was just an hour till sunrise and the four men were within sight of the building the locals had nicknamed the Fortress. At first Buck had been unimpressed but as they watched it became evident that the precinct was not only well manned but heavily guarded. Koos had already pointed out to them not only the section where Chris was likely to be but the cleverly concealed machine-gun posts and Wilmington knew that without the boy's intelligence, the possibility of getting within 50 yards of the compound would have been zero. Even now, as he thought about it, the plan they had hatched at the safe house to try and liberate Chris seemed suddenly as fragile and insubstantial as the mist now descending on the town. They had been watching for more than half an hour and Buck's legs were cramping painfully from the extended crouch he had been forced to maintain, but he dare not move. Beside him Ezra squatted, as still as a statue, his breathing slow and even and Buck wondered just what was going through the Lieutenant's mind.

"We must move soon," whispered the man who had finally given the name of Jan, although Wilmington doubted that it was his real name, "It is not long before it will be light."

The Sergeant remembered the argument earlier between the Lieutenant and the Dutchman. It had been short but intense, and in the end Ezra had the last word. They were not leaving without Captain Larabee. End of story. Jan had wanted to get the two of them to safety first. His only obligation, as he saw it, was to smuggle the airmen over the border into Belgium and then to Switzerland or Spain. A tried and tested system that had seen many a

stranded airman home. Buck was still not sure how Ezra had managed it, but the smooth tongued and persistent Southerner had convinced the Dutchman to go along with a plan to at least make an attempt to get Chris away from his captors. It had sounded risky but feasible at the time; now faced with the reality Wilmington was not so sure. Perhaps Jan had been right. Perhaps they were insane. One thing was certain, diversion or not, Ezra was about to stick his head into the wide-open maw of a sleeping tiger. He just hoped that when the beast snapped its jaws closed, the Southerner would be quick enough to get away in one piece.

Koos, looking more childlike than ever, grinned and tapped Buck's shoulder. "We have the luck." He pointed upwards and the gunner suddenly realised that the drifting mist was rapidly becoming more dense, billowing in from the sea. "I go now." He saw Jan briefly clasp the boy's hand and he was gone, into the night and the thickening fog.

Buck leaned closer to Ezra. "You know what? This is goddamn crazy!"

Standish didn't move or make any sign that he had even heard, then out of the darkness came the familiar Southern drawl. "You know what? I think, for once, you may be right."

"But you're gonna do it anyway, right?" There was a moment of silence and Buck felt a sinking in the pit of his stomach. "Right?"

Ezra turned and showed even white teeth in a feral grin. "Abso-fucking-lutely."

Wilmington smiled. Standish wasn't bad for an officer. Not bad at all.

Jan edged closer and drew the two men into a huddle. "Listen closely. You will have only one chance and if you are caught, I cannot help you."

Ezra nodded. He understood the risks.

"At this time there are not so many in the building itself, but the barracks, are just one hundred metres away, over there." He pointed to the right of their position. "The...*opschudding*..." he paused, seeking the word, "...commotion? Will bring the soldiers. All of them. Believe me, my friend, it will be easier for you to get in than it will be to get out."

"Let me worry about that. Just get me inside and give me some time."

Jan dug into his pocket and thrust something at Standish. "Take this. You may need it." A Webley revolver. "Now we go. I will show you the way." He gave a grim smile. "With luck the fog will be our ally tonight."

Jan soundlessly melted into the night, and Buck hastened to follow an equally stealthy Ezra. Feeling clumsy and awkward, he had a fleeting but overwhelming conviction that such was the single-minded determination of these two men, who seemed to so effortlessly blend into their surroundings, that they would leave him floundering in their wake. He shivered feeling the cold, damp, clinging, shroud of fog descend around his shoulders and, not for the first time, hoped to God that Ezra knew what the hell he was doing. Before he had time to

dwell on questioning the Southerner's capabilities, or indeed his sanity, too closely, he was pulled abruptly to the ground with the Lieutenant sprawled half across him. He resisted his first impulse to struggle from under the Southerner's weight, instead trusting in whatever instincts had prompted Ezra to suddenly hit the deck.

"Halt! äußern sich!"

Buck held his breath and wondered if Ezra, pressed hard against his back, could feel his heart trying to jump out of his chest through his ribs. Close by his ear he heard an emotion charged, barely breathed: "Fuck!" from the pilot as the crunch of boots on the road took a hesitant step, then another in their direction and Buck's gut flipped as he identified the metallic snick of a rifle bolt.

Wilmington felt Standish take a deep breath and roll away from him, the gunner too stunned to react as the Lieutenant gained his feet several yards away, then promptly made a show of noisily falling down, laughing and softly singing in the euphoric haze of a typical drunk with not a care in the world. Buck tensed for a shot, convinced that Ezra was committing suicide, but the sheer bravado of his insane playacting seemed to be affording him some protection. The fog was a blessing, blurring his outline and concealing his uniform as he staggered erratically towards the picket, grumbling petulantly and cursing as he tripped, before responding to the guard's formal challenge with a flood of German, of which Buck understood nothing but which seemed to mollify the sentry. A light tap on his arm almost stopped his heart altogether, but it was Jan urging him to move, wisely using whatever time Ezra was gaining for them to find some cover.

He could hear the continuing exchange between the pilot and the sentry, the fog eerily distorting the sounds, as Ezra persisted with his impromptu performance of impersonating a drunken soldier. Time seemed to have lost all meaning for the Sergeant who blindly followed where the Dutchman lead, each passing second pure torture as he waited for the balloon to go up; fully expecting the alarm to be raised and to hear the shot that would tell him that the Southerner's gamble had not paid off. Instead he heard the German laugh nervously, and then what sounded like a scuffle and a soft thud. The silence lengthened and Buck's nerves were stretched as tight as guy wire as he strained to interpret the noises of the night filtered through the now dense fog. A moment later he was startled as a shape materialised out of the mist and stumbled over him, barely managing to stop himself yelling out, his body reacting with a burst of adrenaline that left his pulse racing.

"Piece of cake." The figure dropped quickly to the ground next to him and Buck could tell by Ezra's heavy breathing that it had been anything but.

"Jesus, Ezra! My nerves are shot already," he protested in a hoarse whisper, "You tryin' to kill me or somethin'?"

Jan interrupted then, tapping them both on the arm. "We have two minutes, then I guarantee that all hell will break loose. You must be ready. Come."

As the lieutenant started to get to his feet, Buck caught his sleeve. "What about the guard, Ezra?"

"Don't worry about him," came the hissed response, "I took care of it."

"Dead?"

"Very."

Standish moved off after the Dutchman and Buck again brought up the rear, thinking how little he knew about the Southerner. Hell, he was happy to kill Germans but he had only ever fired a shot in anger from the waist gun of a Flying Fortress, he had never had to look into a man's face as he killed him. Ezra had done just that. Piece of cake? He reminded himself never to get on the wrong side of the pilot.

Two minutes.

Two minutes and the night exploded in a fiery pillar of flame and smoke, no less spectacular for being shrouded in dense swirling mist. Ezra did not know what exactly had gone up but from the smell there was a great deal of gasoline and oil involved, both precious commodities, so a double strike at the occupying forces in one action. The Fortress erupted, an ants' nest disturbed and threatened, and now spilling out its soldiers to counter any attack. Sirens moaned and rose to shrieking crescendo, a discordant assault on the ears that set the blood pumping, as the body responded before the mind had any chance to interpret the source of the danger.

Another explosion quickly followed by a third and the mobilisation of the Germans was quickly become disordered confusion. A few shots were fired although Ezra seriously doubted that the soldiers had found any target to shoot at but it was enough for him to know he would have to work quickly. Surprise was his only real weapon and right now there was more than enough confusion to satisfy the Southerner. Without looking back, he tapped Wilmington on the shoulder. "See you in hell, Buck."

Ezra made a quick dash across the cobbled forecourt but skirted away to the left and away from the main entrance, eyes already smarting from the roiling smoke that was thickening by the minute. Whatever Koos had torched, and Ezra could only guess that it involved gasoline in large quantities, it was causing not only the expected confusion but was drawing soldiers away to fight the resultant fire. He took a deep breath, tasting the oiliness of the air now thick with the smell of burning rubber, and darted around the side of the building expecting at any minute to be seen, and quite possibly shot, by one of the two sentries flanking the front door, but like everyone else their attention seemed to be elsewhere. More

than grateful for the diversionary chaos that was serving to cover his little attempt at breaking and entering far better than he could have ever have wished, the Southerner quickly pushed aside thoughts of possible retribution to the town for the night's work. He glanced at his watch, then up at the brickwork looming three storeys above him. Second floor Jan had said. Suddenly it looked a very long way up and Ezra felt the fluttering in his belly that urged him to run like hell; that what he was proposing was madness and doomed to fail, but he took a step back and spat on his hands, before testing the stability of the down-pipe and finding it sound. *Courage, Ezra, courage!*

Flying boots were not made for climbing and he slipped more than once, raking skin from hands, elbows and knees as he fought to maintain his grip and complete the awkward ascent without crashing to the unforgiving pavement below. Twenty feet did not seem such a great deal, he mused as he sought purchase with a boot toe in the space between two bricks, especially if you said it quickly but, in spite of the chilled and damp air, Ezra was sweating and puffing as he drew level with the second storey window. Hell, he used to shin up the drainpipe and give his mother a near coronary by walking on the roof ridge when he was a kid. Except, he reminded himself, that was twenty years and an equal number of pounds ago. Now it was sheer hard work. He felt damp, the moisture-laden fog seeping into the very fibres of his clothing and he shivered in spite of the protection of his flying jacket. A narrow ledge ran around the building above the window, and while Ezra could only imagine that its purpose was decorative, it could have been placed there for just this moment. He would have preferred it to have been below the window, giving him some stable base on which to stand, but he was in no position to be choosy. This way he would be relying on the strength of his arms to support him as he moved across the gap but the distance was not great and, provided he could find secure footholds, it should prove no great obstacle. Reaching up with his left hand, he curled his fingers over the lip and smiled when he found the ledge was conveniently cup-shaped rather than flat. *Piece of cake!*

Adjusting his position, he re-established a firm toe-hold then moved his right hand to the ledge, then pressing himself close against the rough brickwork and started to inch his way across to the recessed window, grateful for a wide sill waiting to receive him at the other side. The sound of his own breathing was loud in his ears but over that he could hear the voices of soldiers, a discordant chorus of shouted orders, curses and complaints, interspersed with occasional gunfire and the dull *whump* of something else exploding. Ezra paused to take a deep breath and started the search for another foothold, very aware that time was ticking rapidly away. The garrison would only be distracted by the attack on the fuel store for so long and he could already tell that the immediate panic had subsided.

"Halt! Hande hoch!"

Ezra almost lost his grip, and moulding himself against the bricks he instinctively tried to make himself a smaller target, knowing he was completely vulnerable in his current position. He closed his eyes and held his breath, waiting for the shot that would pick him off the wall like a duck at a shooting gallery and wondered how painful the landing would be after falling twenty feet to the gravel below. Not even a patch of grass to cushion the landing.

"Hans! You idiot. What the hell are you doing round here?"

"Same as you. Keeping right away from that fucking circus. Want a smoke?"

"Christ, Stefan! The Major'll have both our guts for garters if we're caught."

A match rasped, and Ezra could imagine the two soldiers leaning back against the brick and savouring the taste of tobacco just as he had earlier. He just wished they had chosen somewhere else to be derelict in their duty rather than ten feet away from where he was hanging like some crazy bat from the side of a building some twenty feet in the air.

"Not a chance! He's too interested in that American flyer we picked up."

A harsh laugh followed.

"You know, I feel for that poor bastard. Ziggy's probably got his balls in a vice by now!"

The other soldier joined in the laughter and Ezra found his stomach doing a back flip. Chris.

"Don't waste your sympathy, Hans. All's fair and all that..."

"Yeah." A sigh. "S'pose you take your chances."

There was a sound of movement as shuffling feet stirred the gravel and Ezra tried not to think about the tingling in his fingers as the blood drained out of his arms, or the tightness in his calves as he held his position, barely breathing. He dare not look down but he knew the soldier's had moved directly beneath him. Sweat trickled uncomfortably between his shoulder blades and he felt almost giddy with the amount of adrenaline pumping into his bloodstream, but while his body was urging him to flight he was forced to remain in suspended animation, his body pressed into the unyielding brick and every muscle protesting the enforced rigidity.

"What's he like?" The one called Hans again. Ezra guessed the soldier came from Bavaria from the thick accent that coloured his words.

"Regular as you or me. But not so good looking." The hard, humourless laugh again. *"Well, not anymore. Just saw Richter taking him upstairs but that was before the balloon went up."*

There was a long exhalation, and Ezra heard the scrunch of gravel again, the sound duplicated a few seconds later as the soldiers finished their cigarettes and ground the butts under their boot soles.

"Better get going. Don't want to end up on a charge. The Major's going to be really pissed after this."

"Yeah, I'll go see what those stupid assholes are doing over at the fuel dump. Any luck and they'll have the fire out already. I won't even have to work up a sweat."

"Go on! You'll be finding yourself in the stockade if you're not careful."

"Nah, Ziggy likes me. Who else has he got that doesn't mind topping these clog-hoppers when they get outta line? He knows I never need more than one bullet to do the job."

"Reckon you'll be busy tomorrow then, Stef. Someone's gonna have to pay for tonight's little show."

There was a sound of a hand slapping against metal and Ezra could imagine the gesture the soldier was making. Putting his faith in his rifle.

"Yep. Ever ready. That's my middle name, Hans."

Hans laughed dutifully and the two men parted company, each moving in a different direction and once again Ezra was alone with the sound of his own breathing in his ears, the distant calls of soldiers and the random crackling of ammunition exploding.

It took a full minute before the Southerner could force his limbs to move again. The hollowness in the pit of his stomach had turned to a roiling nausea, and his mind raced as he considered what he had overheard. *Upstairs*. But upstairs from where? If there was a basement it could mean Chris was on any of the three floors. Jan had thought he would be on the second floor but he could not be certain. Slowly, he started moving again, boot toes digging into the cracks as his fingers gripped the ledge, feeling his muscles burning and wondering how the hell he had come up with such an insane idea. Hell, he was more likely to get himself killed than he was ever likely to find Larabee, let alone emancipate him. As he carefully manoeuvred across to the window he questioned again the wisdom of not obeying Larabee's orders, then he remembered the two soldiers laughing. *Probably got his balls in a vice by now...not so good looking anymore...the Major's going to be really pissed...doesn't mind topping these clog-hoppers...and he knew exactly why he was there.*

The blast of the first explosion rolled over the solid brick structure like a wave, and inside

a locked room Captain Chris Larabee felt rather than heard the percussive shock as the walls shuddered around him. He raised his head with a snap, bracing himself to push away from the table but before he could respond to the natural instinct to get up and run, he reminded himself that there was nowhere for him to go. He forced himself to relax, straining his ears but the thick walls buffered the transfer of sounds, and for the first time the implications of that particular quality disturbed him. His mind slithered away from the possibilities and he stood up, feeling the need to move as he experienced a sudden rush of claustrophobia. Digging his hands into his pockets he walked a circuit of the room, and concentrated on regulating his breathing, aware that he was beginning to hyperventilate. There was no need for him to analyse what he was feeling; it was fear. He was scared. In a totally irrational and wasted, but nonetheless compulsive gesture, he rattled the door handle. Frustrated, he thumped the solid door with a clenched fist and turned away, then after a few agitated minutes of pacing he threw himself down in a corner, the idea of sitting at the table suddenly repulsive to him. Not because he had any particular objection to sitting on a chair, but because that was what he was expected to do. Wedging his shoulders into the angle of the two adjoining walls, he leaned back and rested his forearms across his raised knees, staring at the closed door and desperately craving a cigarette.

He listened but what sounds he heard made little sense. Random explosions that vibrated through the walls, too few and far between to be bombs; the crackle of intermittent gunfire and the thud of booted feet running from the floor above. Whatever the reason, he was grateful that something seemed to be delaying his next encounter with the Major. Chris sighed and let his head fall back, fixing his eye on the ceiling. What was it that he was supposed to know? He was a pilot not a goddamn spy. What the hell could he tell them that would matter a damn other than the fact that he had just dropped an agent into Berlin, or perhaps that there were still two American airmen on the loose nearby? He supposed that he could lie but it went against the grain to tell these bastards anything. He was obliged only to give them his name, rank and number and he had already done that – several times. His tongue probed the cuts inside his mouth again, wincing as he disturbed a loose tooth and for an instant he felt a surge of anger remembering the signet ring that had smashed into his mouth, chipping his right canine, and splitting his lower lip. He quickly reined in his emotions, recognising the futility of anger without focus and reminding himself that he needed to conserve what energy he had remaining. Whether he liked it or not it was obvious that they had not finished with him yet.

Prisoner of war. Larabee mulled the term over in his mind and found he did not like any of the images it conjured. He was not a criminal, he was just a man. A man who had volunteered to fight in a war not of his making, doing what he did best and trying to survive in

the only way he knew how. The idea of trading the freedom of the skies for being locked away behind barbed wire sent a faint shudder through him, and he found small comfort in the directive that it was every officer's duty, if captured, to escape. He stared again around the small, windowless room, his gaze finally returning to the locked door and sighed. One step at a time, Larabee. You have all the time in the world.

Ezra swore under his breath and sucked the bloodied knuckles of his left hand. He had been forced to break the window to get to the catch and, in his haste, had inadvertently raked his hand across the jagged glass as he withdrew his clenched fist. Now inside he spared a moment to wrap his handkerchief around the shallow but freely bleeding laceration and came to the conclusion that he would not be considering burglary as an alternative means of employment. It was too much like hard work. If he didn't count the bruised testicles, he had escaped unscathed from a crashing B-17, only to put his fist through a pane of glass and slice his knuckles open to the bone. Maybe he'd get another purple heart out of it. He pulled the knot tight with his teeth and moved forward, guided by the ribbon of light shining under the door, unsure of what might be on the other side but having no choice other than to open it. The alternative was to go back out of the window. He pressed himself against the jamb and, taking a deep breath, gripped the decorative brass knob. *Hope you appreciate this, Larabee!*

The room, not surprisingly, opened up into a hallway and one, to Ezra's great relief, that was at that moment mercifully free of traffic. He had the Webley revolver tucked into the waistband of his pants but he knew that if it came to using it then he had probably blown any chance of ever leaving the building – with or without Chris. Feeling about as exposed as it was possible to feel without being completely naked, he slipped out into the brightly lit corridor and tried to get his bearings. His leather jacket covered his uniform and insignia yet there would be no chance of him ever being mistaken for anything other than what he was -- an unwelcome intruder, but somewhere, in this rabbit warren of a place, Chris was being held and it would be a minor miracle if he could find him before the troops began to filter back. A distant shout from somewhere below spurred him on and he moved quickly along the deserted hall, once again questioning his sanity.

It soon became clear to the Southerner that the first floor was nothing more than suites of offices, stores and some living quarters; and, that he was not going to find Larabee so easily. The ground floor was obviously the heart of the complex and without question that was where he needed to be. It was also the one area from which he had heard voices and movement. At the head of the stairs he hesitated, stepping back to lean against the wall and wipe the sweat from his face with the back of his hand, as he took several quick deep

breaths in an effort to muster his resolve. Once he started down the staircase the die would be cast.

Aware of the minutes ticking away, the Southerner debated whether he should take the hare or the tortoise approach; to get down the stairs as fast as he could sacrificing stealth for speed or take it slowly and guarantee a silent descent but risk longer in the open. In the end he listened for a full minute, sure that the voices he could hear were not as close as the foot of the staircase and bolted, the result being a hybrid of the two. Heart pounding, he swung nimbly around the newel post and ducked into the space under the stairs, crouching as far back as he could in the musty darkness that at least gave him the illusion of safety, as he tried to bring his too-rapid respirations under control. Briefly closing his eyes, he decided then that he was not cut out to be a hero. Next time his plane was shot out of the sky, he would stay right where he was – in the frying pan -- at the controls, like a Captain going down with his ship. To hell with stepping out of a plane at twelve thousand feet and straight into the goddamn fire! Ezra rocked forward and from the shadows scanned the length of the main hallway. Nothing. Low voices came from a room out of his line of sight and he estimated that there were at least four different soldiers contributing to the conversation but all his eavesdropping gained him was the knowledge that one of them had picked up a dose of the clap from a Dutch whore. Forcing himself to abandon the under-stair hideout he crept to the opposite wall and edged along to the first doorway. *Now, where are you, Larabee?*

Ezra flattened himself against the wall behind the open door and prayed that the German soldier entering the room would not close it and reveal his woefully inadequate hiding place. He had been in and out of several rooms already which had yielded nothing except the distinct possibility that he would be seen and challenged by roving soldiers. Now, barely breathing, he listened to the heavy footsteps moving around the room, wondering how much faster his heart could beat before it exploded in his chest. Twice already he had avoided being caught by the narrowest of margins and he knew that the odds of continuing to do so were stacked heavily against him. The longer he stayed in the building, the greater the odds and, as a gambling man, he really didn't like his chances. So far Lady Luck had seen fit to look favourably on him, and he had managed to stay that one step ahead and out of sight. He had also learned that judging distance by voices and footsteps was an inexact science and getting more difficult as the number of people circulating through the ground floor steadily increased. There was no doubt about it; the diversion was over and the grim reality was that he had run out of time. Soldiers were already filtering back into the building and soon he would be forced into a choice between leaving, and abandoning Larabee or staying, and risking his own capture. Neither alternative appealed to him in the least.

Minutes passed, Ezra straining to interpret every sound; the jangle of keys, the scrape of

a boot on the linoleum floor, a cough and the rustle of clothing as the soldier moved around the room. Conscious of the time ticking away he wondered how long Jan and Buck would wait and for a terrible moment he considered the prospect of being unable to find Chris and making his own escape only to find Buck and Jan had already left. Or worse, that they should still be there but having to endure the look in Wilmington's eyes if he should go back without the Captain. There was only one thing for it; he *had* to find Larabee or he would die trying. After several more minutes, ticking by with agonising slowness, the soldier left, swinging the door shut behind him. Taking several deep breaths to get some much needed oxygen into his overactive system, Ezra moved quickly behind the door, keeping his hand on the doorknob as he listened for any movement without.

As he listened patiently, his mind finally registered what his eye was seeing. The wall to his left was adorned with an impressive rack of keys. Each one meticulously labelled and catalogued. His sigh changed to a barely breathed laugh and he briefly closed his eyes, giving thanks for the Teutonic obsession with order. Reminding himself that he had little time to indulge in either admiring the perfectionism of the system or giving thanks for the absolute simplicity of it, he scanned the orderly rows and quickly retrieved several keys. This was going to be so easy. Hadn't he said it would be a piece of cake?

Larabee had reached the stage where his frustration had slowly leaked away to be replaced by a mind-numbing lethargy. He had not moved from his place in the corner and he had been staring at the same spot on the ceiling for at least twenty-five minutes. He wondered if this was yet another part of the softening-up process; isolation. The logical part of his brain that was still paying any attention, reasoned that he had been isolated equally well in the cell, so why would they bother to move him.

To get your hopes up.

He dismissed that thought before it had fully formed. What hopes? Being beaten up. Playing mind games with a German officer. Not what he would normally consider something to look forward to. No. This was something different but whatever it was, he had not been able to make any sense of it. In fact, the longer they left him alone the better he liked it. He would just sit in the corner and wait.

The sound of the bolt on the outside of the door sliding open was unmistakable. He shrugged mentally. *So, it was a short wait.* He had already decided that if they wanted him, they would have to come and get him because he had no intention of doing anything willingly. As the door swung open, he continued to stare at the ceiling.

"Captain Larabee, I presume?"

Galvanised by the unmistakable Southern accent, Chris scrambled to his feet quite aware that he was looking at the last man he had expected to see with vacant stupidity. Struggling to recover his scattered wits he snapped his mouth shut and finally got his voice to work.

“Fuck me! Ezra.”

The Lieutenant gave a slow smile, managing to look as if he had all the time in the world. “I’m taking that as an expression of surprise and not an invitation, Sir.”

Larabee shook his head as if he couldn’t quite believe what he was seeing. Hell, he didn’t quite believe what he was seeing. “How the hell...?”

Ezra moved quickly forward and grabbed the pilot’s elbow. “Long story, and we don’t have much time. Are you okay?”

Larabee moved stiffly forward, responding to Ezra’s urging. “Lieutenant Standish, I distinctly remember giving you a direct order...”

“And in your absence, as senior officer, I made an executive decision,” interrupted the Southerner, smoothly, “Now can we discuss this later? I’d rather not stick around here if you don’t mind.”

Larabee grinned in spite of his painfully swollen lip and, with a nod of agreement, slapped Ezra on the arm. “So what are you waiting for?”

Unanswered questions tumbled over one another in his mind as he wordlessly followed the Southerner. It was not a role he was accustomed to taking but Ezra had one big advantage; he had already managed to get into the place. Whatever misgivings he might have, he had no choice but to believe that his exec was also capable of getting them out again. That Standish was quick and decisive in his movements did not come as any surprise, never once hesitating as he lead the way; moving from one place of concealment to another in what seemed to Chris to be a manic game of hide and seek. This was a man who took risks, who obeyed his instincts and put a lot of faith in blind luck. All he could do was tag along and hope that Ezra’s luck, and by default his own, held out.

Chris had not given much thought to exactly how they were going to leave the stronghold, he was just glad to be on the move and at least enjoying the illusion of freedom. The fact that Ezra moved with such purpose was a convincing enough argument that he had a definite agenda to follow but as the Southerner tapped his arm and signalled they were going up to the second floor, Larabee frowned.

“You sure you know what you’re doing?” he whispered urgently, but Ezra’s only reply was a quick, maddeningly confident, grin as he took off like a hare leaving Chris with no option but to follow. Obviously he did.

Already nursing badly bruised ribs, Chris grunted as, seconds later, he connected solidly with an unexpectedly stationary Ezra at the top of the landing. Wordlessly a hand snaked out

across his chest both to steady him and to warn him to stay down; something Chris did not need to be told twice. A moment later, Ezra held up two fingers and Larabee understood that they had just stumbled across a couple of soldiers in the upper halls, although how immediate the danger he could not guess either from Ezra's expression or attitude. For all he gave away, they might well have been sitting patiently on the flight line in readiness for the command to taxi. He waited. This was not his call to make. He might have the rank but Ezra was at the controls on this sortie. Right now he was hurting in more places than he cared to name but he could still fight if he had to; kill if he needed to. The grim reality was that he would do anything to get away. He turned his head, forced to compensate for the loss of vision in his left eye, surprised to find the Southerner watching him carefully. Calculating the odds, he knew. There was no mistaking the look or what was going through his mind. Ever pragmatic, Ezra was weighing up whether Chris would be an asset or a liability in a fight. Larabee gave a lopsided grin, that he immediately regretted as his split lip reopened, and gave a thumbs-up sign. *I'm okay*. Standish risked a quick glance around the corner then quickly leaned back and ducked down close to whisper in Chris's ear. "I think we'll pass on this one." He smiled. "No offence, but it looks like you lost your last fight, sir." He jerked a thumb towards the stairs winding on upwards. "When I say go, you go." Chris gave a reluctant nod. It seemed to him that to keep moving higher was going to eventually corner them like rats in a trap but at least it would buy them some time and right now that was the most precious thing in the world.

Several heartbeats passed before he heard the Southerner's urgent whisper, and he made the break as quickly and quietly as he could, the back of his neck prickling with the anticipation of being seen and challenged. He had reached the second landing before he realised that Ezra was not, as he had expected, hard on his heels. He curbed his first instinct to start back down and, instead, quietly damned Standish to hell and back, realising the crafty Southern son-of-a-bitch had never intended to follow, but had only wanted to get him out of the way. He leaned back against the wall, breathing hard. The man was a maverick and no mistake. No wonder he had never managed to stay with any one crew for too long; he was a one-man-goddamned-band. A moment of bitter fury gave way to a grudging admiration for the Lieutenant and what he had just done but it didn't stop Chris from vowing to break the bastard's balls when he caught up with him again. He tried to ignore the tiny echo that came back with the unimaginable: *if* he caught up with him again. Pushing that thought from his mind, he debated his next move. He could either stay and wait for Ezra, or he could see what possibilities there were to escape from the topmost storey that did not involve some incredible feat of physical prowess. With a final glance at the empty stairway, he moved down the hall. Patience had never been his strongpoint.

Larabee had been curious as to how Standish had succeeded in liberating him with such apparent ease. Now, as he watched from one of the rear windows, he had some idea and he guessed that somewhere out there Buck Wilmington was watching and waiting. Fog was rolling past the windows, an already dense mist coming in from the North Sea made thicker by smoke billowing from a number of fires that had erupted around the compound. There was no doubt in his mind that somehow Ezra and Buck had been a part of creating the confusion, and as a ruse it had obviously been a runaway success judging by the manpower that was being diverted to deal with it. He let the edge of the drape fall back into place and quickly withdrew from the room, his own sense of purpose renewed.

He cautiously padded along the hall, his senses alert for any sound that would suggest he was not alone, his mind racing as he weighed the possibilities. One thing was clear to him, if they were to have any chance of leaving this place undetected, then it would have to be from the western end of the building. There were just too many troops to the north and east and if the main entrance had been a realistic choice then he and Ezra would already have been free and clear. But it wasn't and they weren't. Instead, he was three floors up and the only option that kept hammering at his mind was one he didn't care to think about.

Heart thudding in his chest like a jackhammer, he ducked into the last room off the hall; a bedroom. Not only a bedroom but one with a westerly facing window. He leaned on the sill and looked down, his breath clouding the glass as he contemplated the drop, feeling the familiar unpleasant roiling in the pit of his belly. *God, but he hated heights.* It had always seemed absurd even to him that he could quite comfortably take a gravity-defying piece of machinery to 30,000 feet without a second thought and, not too many hours ago, he had stepped out of a plane at 8,000 feet but to stand now and look down at the ground thirty or so feet below made him feel sick. To actually contemplate climbing out of the window left him reeling. He pushed himself away from the sill, breaking out in a cold sweat and turned back to the room. *Ezra, you bastard, where the hell are you?*

In a burst of activity he stripped the sheets from the bed, twisting the material along its diagonal length and knotting it at intervals, his fingers clumsy in his haste and his breathing sounding loud in his own ears as he tried not to think about what he might be about to do. He repeated the actions with the second sheet and tied the two lengths together, taking care to make the knot fast and secure. He allowed himself a fleeting smile. Chris Larabee – Eagle Scout.

He stopped for a moment, and sniffed the air. Smoke. He could definitely smell smoke and not from the fires burning outside. In almost the same instant he heard frantic shouting from below.

“Raus! Raus! Feuer!”

Jesus! Fire. That was all he needed. He grabbed the makeshift rope, no more than fifteen feet of usable length he knew, and looked out into the hall. The measured thud of footsteps on the stairs, taking the two flights from the floor below at a run, made him draw hastily back. Someone checking the top floor.

“Feuer! Feuer!”

Larabee frowned. Something was definitely not right. He knew that voice! Cautiously he peered out from behind the jamb again and instead of the expected German soldier found himself looking at an obviously elated Lieutenant Ezra Standish. Stepping out into the hall, he gave a low whistle and the Southerner, grinning hugely, sprinted towards him. On drawing level, the younger man slapped him on the arm. “We haven’t got much time. Let’s move it.”

Larabee gripped his sleeve, his voice urgently demanding. “What the fuck have you been doing?”

Ezra’s eyes were bright, the Southerner high on a cresting wave of adrenaline. “Just left a little something for them to think about. Keep them off our backs for a while.”

“So you torched the place?” Chris hissed. “With us still in it and no goddamned way out? Great!”

Standish shrugged out of Larabee’s grip and gestured to the length of bed linen looped around the pilot’s arm. “Looks like you have everything under control, sir. Couldn’t have done it better myself.” He pushed past the dumb-founded Captain and carefully opened the window, taking a moment to scan the area immediately below and then in a wide arc across the grounds, before pausing and glancing back at Larabee, still smiling. “You might want to shut that door, Chris. Just in case.”

“In case of what for Christ’s sake?” snarled Chris, finally finding his voice again but, nonetheless, he quickly closed the door behind him and turned the key in the lock, although he felt the gesture to be an empty one under the circumstances. Anyone in pursuit was not going to knock and wait.

Ezra, apparently satisfied that the coast was clear, reached for the knotted sheets and secured one end to the foot of the heavy oak bed and played the remaining length out of the open window. “Okay, you go first, Chris. There’s a fair drop at the end but you should be okay.”

Larabee felt the blood drain from his face, and he forced his legs to move him closer to the window. The moment seemed to expand as he looked down, the ground now a dizzying drop below and he balked, panic-stricken and suddenly unable to breathe.

“Chris?”

Ezra’s voice was very close yet seemed to be echoing from a great distance and Chris

could feel the rough texture of the wooden sill under his fingers as he gripped it, knuckles whitening, overwhelmed by the sense that he was about to fall although logically he knew that he was still standing with his feet on solid floorboards.

“Chris. We don’t have much time.”

Larabee stepped back, sucking a deep draught of air into his lungs; air already tainted by the smoke filtering up from the fire Ezra had set on the floor below. “You go.”

“I don’t...”

“That’s an order, Lieutenant!”

“What the hell’s wrong with you?” Larabee felt Ezra’s hands grip his biceps, shaking him and as he slowly looked up, aware that he was not only sweating but trembling, he saw the understanding dawn in the Southerner’s eyes. “Jesus.”

“I can’t do it, Ezra.”

It was done. He had said it.

Standish did not release his hold on him as he cast a quick, almost longing, look out of the window and into the swirling fog before turning his attention back to Chris. “Can’t?” He gave a short humourless laugh. “We don’t have the luxury of can’t.” He paused and listened for a moment, the sound of many feet running through the building transmitted with ominous clarity. “You hear that, Chris? They don’t even know what they’re looking for yet but I can guarantee that if we don’t haul ass now, in five minutes these goons are going to be right on top of us and they won’t be stopping to ask any questions. I don’t know about you, but I hadn’t planned on dying just yet!”

Chris slowly shook his head. He knew Ezra was right, but it didn’t alter the very simple fact that his muscles were now locked into rigid knots and he was having difficulty catching his breath as raw panic consumed him. In a few more minutes if he didn’t get some usable oxygen into his lungs, he knew he would pass out. The Southerner’s eyes were on him, searching his face, concern mixed with unease, and he could feel the pressure of the lieutenant’s fingers through his flying jacket silently signalling the urgency of the moment and relaying Ezra’s own anxiety better than any words could ever hope to. Suddenly Standish drew back from the window and released him. “Okay. We’ll find another way.” Larabee took a stumbling step back like a man coming out of a trance and bumped against the wall, bracing himself with his hands splayed on either side of him, his fear now of a different kind. Ezra had already pulled the revolver out of his waistband and was checking the chambers, glancing up with a crooked grin. “and if that’s the way it’s gotta be, at least we can take a few of them with us.”

“No!” Chris forced the word out in a rush. That was the way of madness; the glory-seeker’s end, that had no possible ending but death.

He watched as the Southerner tilted his head, listening, and then glanced at the door before levelling a hard-eyed stare at the pilot. "No?" He managed to sound puzzled, as if Chris was being unreasonable. "So what's it to be, Captain Larabee? There are only two choices. We can go, or we can stay; but either way we do it together."

Chris felt like a hunted animal with nowhere left to run and his eyes flicked from the locked door to the open window. Hobson's choice. He was acutely aware of Ezra watching him, not judging, merely questioning. Waiting patiently. His silence more demanding than any words. He knew Standish was playing a trump card, trying to force his hand, and making the ultimate wager on the basis that Chris would not willingly forfeit another man's life if there was another way. Any other way. And he was right.

"You bastard!" he whispered forcefully, shoulders sagging in sudden defeat. He ran a hand over his face, ashamed that he was unable to control the fine tremor in either his muscles or his voice but feeling a sense of detached unreality smothering the panic that had gone before as he slowly raised his head and met the Southerner's unwavering gaze.

Reading the signs of capitulation, Ezra moved quickly forward and again took the pilot by the shoulders. "We're out of time, Chris, and there's no easy way to do this, you know that don't you?"

"I know."

He felt himself being steered, responding like an automaton to Ezra's prompts, until he felt the chill, damp breeze gusting through the open window behind him and started to turn.

"No! Don't." The lieutenant jerked him around again. "Whatever you do, don't look down! And don't think!"

"Ezra..."

"For Christ's sake, don't argue! Just listen and we both just might get out of this in one piece!" Standish was talking quickly, but there was no hint of panic in his voice, just grim determination. "Now do you trust me?"

Swallowing hard, he took a deep breath and managed a shaky laugh, although his pulse was racing and he felt cold and clammy. "Trust you? The biggest con-man in the squadron? Fat chance!"

The Southerner grinned and with a casual ease that made Larabee's stomach heave, threw a leg over the sill and sat astride the window casement. "Okay, now do just as I say..."

Buck had lost all sense of time. He just knew that he had been lying in the damp grass for so long that his kidneys ached and he had a cramp in his right leg. Shifting cautiously he stretched, then relaxed, the muscle of his calf and was rewarded with an excruciatingly painful response that had him biting back a groan as he waited for the spasm to pass.

Beside him Jan seemed untroubled by the discomfort of their hiding place but it was obvious that the approaching dawn was of growing concern to the Dutchman. Several times he had muttered uneasily about the lightening sky but it seemed fortune was on their side as the storm clouds and the rolling fog continued to mask the sunrise. The American was certain that if not for the weather Jan would have already been preparing to leave, a possibility Buck was loath to even contemplate. Now, as he waited, his trepidation increasing with every passing minute, he started to wonder how Ezra had ever conned him into believing that he could succeed in what was always a doomed venture. His keen eyes roamed back and forth, searching for any signs of the two airmen, as he vainly tried to imagine Larabee's Lady without Chris up front in the cockpit, or the enigmatic Southerner at his right hand. Hell! Without Chris there would be no Larabee's Lady. With a sigh he rubbed his eyes and thought of the rest of the crew waiting at Bassingbourn for them to return, suddenly able to sympathise with them as he, in turn, waited.

Jan nudged his arm. "Something is happening. See over there."

The Dutchman was right. Something had changed. The focus seemed to be switching from the fuel dump to inside the mist-shrouded mansion as a score of soldiers, in response to a shouted order, detached themselves from the clean-up detail and suddenly ran back into the building.

"This doesn't look good," murmured Buck, uneasily, then: "Come on, Ezra. Where the hell are you?"

Jan moved cautiously to his knees. "Look! There is a fire. See, up there on the second floor."

The sergeant gratefully adjusted his own position, folding his lean body into a crouch and moving closer to his ally. "Jesus! If they don't find a way out soon, then it's gonna be too late."

"I think you underestimate your friend, Sergeant. I am thinking that the *Luitenant* might have something to do with this. Another diversion perhaps?" He looked at his watch and then at the gunner. "But ten more minutes is all I can allow, then we must leave. There is a boat waiting."

Buck bit back the protest that automatically sprang to his lips. Jan and his young friend Koos had already risked their lives by offering their help, he did not want to be the one to compromise their safety. He nodded once. Understood. His gaze went back to guarded stronghold in front of him. After all was said and done, it had always been a gamble.

The sun was up but the dawning of a new day the went unheralded as the blackened sky overhead disguised the event behind dense storm clouds, that threatened at any minute to

unload their burden of rain across south-east England. A flight of silent geese flew in perfect formation over the airfield, while below a flight of B17 bombers sat inelegantly on the ground patiently waiting for the signal that would see them airborne.

Lieutenant Vin Tanner, sat in the nose of the aircraft to which he'd been temporarily assigned, relaxed but shunning company. He had checked his equipment a dozen times already, a compulsive action triggered by inactivity that today he seemed powerless to resist. The squadron had already been stood down once on account of the prevailing weather conditions over the target and, uncharacteristically, he found himself hoping that the mission would be aborted. He had turned in late and slept badly only to be roused again at four o'clock, gritty-eyed and irritable. The Texan had always taken a certain amount of pride in his pragmatic nature, but his legendary equanimity had taken a beating over the last forty-eight hours as he waited in vain for some news – any news, good or bad – of the ill-fated night flight from which three of his crew-mates had not returned.

Vin sighed and rubbed his eyes, glad of the quiet darkness around him and appreciating the reticence of the navigator who shared this small space with him. Never a talkative man at the best of times, Vin felt no need for idle conversation and at this moment he wanted nothing more than to be left alone. If the rest of this crew of strangers thought him unfriendly then so be it, he didn't much care what anyone thought of him. He knew he wasn't the only one who was feeling not only a little disorientated but more than a little shell-shocked. Young JD Dunne was taking it harder than anyone; or perhaps just wearing his feelings more openly. Buck was almost like a brother to him, the Sergeant having taken the kid under his wing from the day he had joined the crew. For Vin, he found it wasn't so much the idea that they might have been shot down and killed; it was the not knowing. Hell, every time they went out on a mission, the chance was that they wouldn't all make it back but there was something wrong about them not being together when it happened. Tanner picked at a thread on his flying suit, his face impassive but raging within. *Fuck the Nazis! Fuck the whole goddamn stupid war!*

"Hey, Tanner."

Vin looked up, resenting the intrusion. "Yeah?"

"How many sorties for you?"

"Too goddamn many," he snarled abruptly, then immediately regretted taking his anger out on the young second lieutenant and sighed, composing himself. "This tour? Fifteen."

The boy, who looked about JD's age, flicked a nervous glance in the Texan's direction. "This is your second tour? Jesus!" He licked his lips before looking away. "This is my first." He hesitated, almost embarrassed. "I mean my first sortie."

Tanner felt an unpleasant sinking in his stomach. A rookie. "Don't worry. We all gotta

start somewhere.” He desperately wanted the conversation to end but he remembered his own first mission and forced a brief smile. “You’ll be fine.” The words sounded hollow to his own ears but the youngster smiled and returned to his slide rule and notebook. Vin just hoped he knew what the hell he was doing.

There was no denying it. Chris was afraid. He was sweating heavily in spite of the dawn chill and the clinging mist that swirled around him, and his mouth was as dry as a dustbowl. How Ezra had managed to get him over the sill was a blur in his most recent memory, all he knew was that he was now suspended in mid air and that he felt that he might be sick. He was not sure that there was any blood left in his brain, as it all seemed to have drained to his feet leaving him light-headed and faint.

“Chris!”

Ezra’s urgent hiss drew him back from the brink and with a huge effort of will he focused his mind on the wall in front of him; concentrating on the grains of sand in the mortar between the bricks, the texture of the surface; anything but the fact that he was over thirty feet in the air. He swallowed, throat dry, and took a deep breath, then nodded, not trusting himself to speak or even sure that he could have through a painfully constricted throat. He realised that Ezra still had a firm grip on him, their arms linked in a Roman handshake, but the lieutenant was urging him to start the descent, preparing to relinquish his hold as soon as Chris was ready. Only Chris knew he would never be ready.

“Okay, just take it slow. It’s just like...”

“Don’t you dare say...falling...off a log,” interrupted Chris, in a staccato gasp, finding his voice at last.

“Now, would I do that, Captain Larabee?”

Larabee didn’t look up but he knew that tone of calculated innocence too well and as the quality of Ezra’s voice changed, he also knew his exec was smiling. For some reason he could not explain, that fact alone made him feel better. He reluctantly loosened his grip on the Southerner’s arm and felt a reciprocal easing of pressure on his own forearm. Chris moved carefully, searching with his feet for the next knotted section, knuckles whitening as he clutched the sheeting and relied on the muscles of his arms to take his weight.

“That’s fine...keep going down easy...just like climbing rope in gym class...” The smooth Georgia accent, as mellow as twelve-year old sipping whiskey, flowed over him; Ezra, as always, managing to exude an aura of calm that suggested a man in total control.

Chris tried not to dwell on what Ezra had just said, closing down the emergent memory that surged out of his past with the ferocity of a predatory animal. He didn’t think it was the time to enlighten the lieutenant that he had broken his back doing that very thing some

twenty-five years before. Fifteen years old, star athlete, invincible. He had spent three months flat on his back in traction after the eye-bolt securing the rope to the ceiling beam had worked loose. He wiped his forehead on his sleeve, resting his head against his arm for a moment, suddenly unable to move as he fought the remembered horror of falling and crashing into the polished boards of the high school gymnasium.

“Chris,” Ezra’s voice broke in again, drawing him back. “listen to me. Don’t think. Just keep moving. You’re doing just fine but we don’t have much time.” A pause. “And we have visitors...”

Larabee mechanically forced his limbs into action, lowering himself hand over hand, and losing all sense of time as he focused on his methodical descent, eventually pausing again as he sensed he was close to where he would have to summon enough courage to let go of his lifeline. Not only his lifeline, he reminded himself. Until he let go Ezra would not be able to make his escape. Another three feet and he stopped, arms aching, able to go no further. Random shots punctuated the stillness of the night and he could hear the sound of booted feet on gravel, getting steadily closer; shouts that made no sense to him but which heralded imminent discovery if he didn’t move soon. Against Ezra’s advice he looked down. Jesus! Gripping the sheet tighter he closed his eyes, his world still spinning even when he had shut out the sight of the ground so far below him still. He could hear Ezra’s voice coaching him from above and he wondered at his exec’s patience; in the same position he would have been rabid with frustration. It crossed his mind that perhaps Standish was; but that he was much better at masking his feelings. A Southern gentleman to the end.

The bark of a single gunshot was so close that Chris jerked in surprise, and instinctively looked up in alarm, fearing the worst when he could no longer see Standish at the window. “Ezra?”

The Lieutenant reappeared a few seconds later, smiling tightly. “I’m okay, but you might want to think about making that jump sometime soon. I just shot one of your hosts.”

Chris hesitated for just a second before closing his eyes and releasing his grip, telling himself it could be no worse than a parachute jump. He was wrong – it was. He landed heavily, body and limbs collapsing into an untidy heap without the least suggestion of control or grace, grunting as the impact drove the air forcibly from his lungs. A dozen separate explosions of pain erupted throughout his body and for a moment he was unable to move, stunned and winded, yet elated that he seemed to be intact. Staring skywards as he rolled onto his back and struggled to catch his breath, he was amazed by the fact that Ezra had already scaled the length of the makeshift rope and was preparing to make the final drop that would see him on solid ground. Fuelled by adrenaline, Larabee scrambled to his feet, chest heaving as he concentrated on making his lungs work again. His right hip felt as if someone

had taken a swing at it with a hammer and his left shoulder throbbed painfully but he could stand, and he knew beyond any doubt that he could run. Seconds later, Standish landed in a slithering crunch of gravel beside him, folding and rolling in a calculated bid to reduce the impact as soon as his feet touched the ground. Chris darted forward, extending a hand and hauling the younger man to his feet. "You okay?"

"Yeah. You?"

"Still in one piece. I think."

The two airmen exchanged a quick grin before Ezra tugged at Larabee's sleeve and set off at a run. "This way. Stay close and stay down!"

Chris had every intention of doing just that without the need for any additional prompting from his exec. He may not be able to understand the angry shouts that erupted behind them but he could sure as hell interpret the intent without any help. Ducking reflexively in response to a brief but intense volley of gunfire, he found himself wondering if there was any truth in the axiom that you never heard the bullet that killed you. Keeping low, and grateful for the denseness of the fog that closed almost comfortingly around them, he suddenly found the thought incredibly funny, barely able to contain his amusement as he pushed hard to keep up with Ezra. Who the hell was going to prove that one! Although he knew there was no answer, he was still debating the circuitous nature of the question when he was abruptly tackled and brought to ground by some unseen hand. Pulse racing, his system already overloaded with adrenaline, he landed a solid punch before he realised that his assailant was not only laughing but trying to draw him into a bear hug. "Hey! Hey! Is that any way to greet a friend, you old bastard?" Buck!

Larabee sagged, not sure if his heart would ever recover and beat normally again. "Jesus, Buck! You tryin' to kill me or something?"

"No, pard. But I think someone is." Wilmington effortlessly pulled him to his feet and made a show of quickly dusting him off, but he was talking fast and his own unease was evident. "Looks like you pissed these guys off pretty bad."

Larabee quickly touched his swollen lip with the back of his hand and wiped away a fresh trickle of blood, before anxiously looking round him. "Not me. Blame him. He's the fucking madman." He jerked his head towards the Southerner. "I just tagged along for the ride."

With a grin Wilmington slapped Chris on the shoulder, forcing a grimace from the pilot as the gunner's hand met bruised flesh. "Sure has a way with people don't he?"

Larabee nodded. "You can say that again. Now how about we get outta here." He carefully eyed the man that Ezra was talking to as he rubbed his side, feeling for the first time a raw length of abraded skin under his shirt. "Who's that?" But there was no time for further conversation as a new barrage of gunfire erupted and Ezra quickly signalled that they

should be moving out. Without a backward glance the three Americans unquestioningly followed the lone Dutchman, with no option remaining but to put their trust in him.

There was never any doubt that they would be pursued. Ezra had known that the instant he had shot the soldier. Until then they might have at least managed a head start before it was realised that a prisoner had escaped, but in that one moment when he had pulled the trigger the odds had swung against them. Now they could do nothing but run, and keep running, until either Jan succeeded in getting them to the boat or they were caught.

Shots were being fired at regular intervals both singly and in short bursts, still behind them but spread out in a fan that threatened to flank them if they once slackened their pace.

Ezra paused, blowing into his cupped hands as he waited for Jan to scout ahead. He had thought the fens a cold and wild place but here, the wind sliced through flesh and bone leaving a frigid, hollow emptiness and for a moment he yearned for the sultry heat of Savannah in summer. He had always been glad to escape the stifling humidity but suddenly it seemed like the most desirable place in the world. He rubbed his hands again, vainly trying to restore some circulation and gave a fleeting smile. In truth, he imagined that almost anywhere on the planet would be an improvement on his current situation.

Jan was waving; the signal for them to move again. Only too eager to keep some distance between himself and the soldiers to their rear, Ezra sprinted across the road as yet another burst of gunfire echoed in the still air, confident that Chris and Buck were hard on his heels. He staggered as something struck him between the shoulder blades, forcefully enough to throw him forward and drive the breath from his lungs, then he was falling and silently cursing whichever idiot had crashed into him and tripped him.

“Ezra! Come on, man, for Christ’s sake get up!”

The Southerner blinked slowly and shook his head. He could not remember how he came to be on the ground yet Buck was urgently trying to drag him to his feet. He felt a fiery warmth in his back which, as he tried to stand, abruptly exploded in a shocking wave of pain that sucked the breath from his lungs, and he dropped heavily back onto one knee suddenly unable to rise.

“Aw, hell! Chris! Ezra’s shot, gimme a hand.”

Shot. Of course. He heard Larabee swear and the next moment he was being dragged upright as the two men steadied him between them. Chris was talking to him but he could make no sense of the words and although he wanted to say he was all right, that it wasn't too bad, he was having difficulty catching his breath. Then they were on the move again and he had no time to do anything but concentrate on putting one foot in front of the other. His chest felt tight and the pain was ferocious if he breathed deeply but at least he was able to keep up. For how long was another question entirely.

When finally the punishing pace, that he had been increasingly hard-pressed to maintain, relaxed, he was on the verge of collapse. In a daze, he found himself being firmly guided to the ground by supportive but insistent hands, only too willing to accept even a moment's rest. In the meagre shelter of a low stone wall, he let his head roll back and closed his eyes, but there was to be no respite. In strained silence, punctuated only by a chorus of laboured breathing, Chris awkwardly shoved his upper body forward and he felt a sure hand push his leather flying jacket up between his shoulder blades. In any other circumstances, Ezra might have remarked on Larabee's lack of finesse but for now, words failed him. Behind him, Chris impatiently tugged his shirt free, and he felt his skin erupt in gooseflesh as frigid air caressed his exposed back. Stoically silent, he waited for the verdict. He already knew that the wound had bled a lot from the warm, wet heaviness of the fabric of his shirt against his skin and Buck's whispered: "Christ!" merely confirmed his suspicion that he was in deep trouble. He bit down, clenching his jaw to stifle the inarticulate roar that threatened to emerge, instead confining it to a grunt, as sudden pressure on his back translated to searing pain that a hurried apology from Chris did nothing to ease.

"Sorry, Ezra, but you're bleeding like a stuck pig here. Get ready, this is gonna hurt."

The Southerner had never known Chris to lie. This occasion proved to be no exception. Buck quickly gripped his shoulders as he jerked violently back, arching and twisting his spine to avoid the unrelenting pressure of the heel of Chris's hand and loosing a string of whispered invective that in spite of the gravity of the situation set Buck quietly chuckling.

"Goddamnit, Lieutenant, that has to be the best line of cussin' I ever heard."

The Southerner, face blanched to a pale shade of ash, finally gave a shuddering sigh and slumped forward. "Son of a bitch," he gasped softly.

Wilmington eased his hold on the Southerner's shoulders and drew the pilot into an awkward embrace, allowing the exhausted lieutenant to lean against his him.

"Yeah," he responded tightly, "I take your point, pard."

The two men briefly locked eyes and an almost imperceptible shake of Chris's head telegraphed the unwelcome but not unexpected news. Not good. Standish had already lost a lot of blood from a surprisingly small bullet wound just below his left shoulder blade. A hasty

check of the lieutenant's chest showed no corresponding exit wound; God alone knew what damage might be hidden beneath the surface. Working quickly Larabee ripped the tail off the Southerner's shirt, half expecting him to object but shock and pain were keeping him mute, and wadded the fine material against the younger man's back. A faint shout sounded off to the right and Larabee snapped around to locate the source, as Jan signed urgently that it was time to move. There was no more time. "Jesus! We've gotta go, Ezra."

Chris hesitated a moment, needing to secure the pressure pad before they moved again if Ezra was to stand any chance of getting more than a few miles without bleeding his heart dry. One handed, he freed the belt from around his own waist and buckled it round his co-pilot's chest, cinching it tight enough to keep the makeshift dressing in place. Not by any means the most satisfactory arrangement but it would have to do. He eased down the bloodstained shirt and, letting the jacket fall back into place, touched Standish on the shoulder.

"Best I can do for now. You ready?"

Ezra straightened, his face pale and drawn, but with a half-smile on his face as he made eye contact with Larabee that said he knew the score, and although the odds were against him he was going to place a bet anyway. "As I'll ever be, Captain."

Chris nodded and once again the three men rose from the ground, leaving their temporary shelter as the sounds of pursuit closed in around them, to follow the Dutchman.

There was no question that it was daylight now and with every passing minute their situation became increasingly untenable. It was more than an hour past sunrise with only the insubstantial vapour of the rolling fog to offer them any kind of protection and they had no choice but to keep moving. Jan kept up a steady, ground-eating pace leading them through fields, under hedges and over fences, skirting habitation while moving ever closer to the estuary and the boat that would carry them across the channel. It was hard going. Ezra had pushed himself to the limit in order not to slow them down and Chris could only guess what the effort was costing him, but now it was becoming obvious that he was in trouble. The Southerner was beginning to stumble, and it was clear that he would not be able to keep going for much longer. He needed rest and he needed a doctor. Abruptly, Larabee stopped and shook his head, easing Standish to the ground and touching his fingers to the pulse in his neck as he crouched anxiously beside him. "I can't do this. I *won't* do this! He needs to be in a hospital."

Buck squatted beside him. "I know what you're thinking, pard, and it ain't the way." His voice was pitched low. "Believe me, Chris, you don't want to even consider it."

"You want him to die, Buck?" Chris hissed in response. "Because if we go on like this that's what's gonna happen. Look how much blood he's lost already..."

"Yeah, I know it looks bad but..."

Ezra's eyes flickered. "Forgive the interruption, gentlemen, but I'm not a corpse yet." He paused for a breath, the effort of speaking an obvious drain on his limited physical resources. "and I'd appreciate it if you didn't whisper over me as if I wasn't here."

Chris accepted the mild rebuke with a guilty lowering of his eyes, but continued patiently. "Ezra, this is crazy. You can't go on like this. You need a doctor."

"I could also use a double whiskey, but I'm not going to get one."

Larabee rubbed a hand over his face, his next words coming out in a rush. "Look, the krauts are obliged to give medical treatment to prisoners, maybe you'd stand a better chance..."

Ezra snatched at Chris's jacket, grabbing a handful at the shoulder with surprising strength as, breathing heavily, he jerked the blond pilot forward and almost off balance.

"Fuck you, Chris Larabee! Don't you dare..." He took a quick, obviously painful, breath. "...don't you even...think about leaving me here, you bastard."

"Listen, Ezra," Larabee tried again. The voice of reason. "I have to consider what's best..."

Standish gripped the supple leather still harder, a hint of desperation creeping into both his actions and his voice. "No, you listen!" He closed his eyes and grimaced, his face contorted in pain, but defiantly forcing the words out in faltering bursts. "I can make it. I won't...slow you down. You...you leave me...I'll crawl all the way after you! And..." He swallowed hard, sweat standing out in beads on his forehead. "if I die – I swear...I'll fucking well haunt you every day of your life!" He slumped back, chest heaving, his fingers still clutching Larabee's jacket.

A shadow briefly crossed Buck's already troubled features then he sighed deeply and nodded at Chris, signalling his support for the Southerner. "You can't do it, Chris," he said softly, then after a brief hesitation: "If Ezra stays, then so do I."

Larabee's shoulders slumped in an attitude of resigned acceptance. He was only trying to do what was best for all of them. "Okay. You win. Don't say I didn't try."

Ezra closed his eyes again, his fingers relaxing and slipping from the pilot's shoulder. "Thank you." The familiar wry smile was there, gently mocking. "Sir."

"Save it till you have something to thank me for," he replied gruffly, not wholly convinced even now that he was doing the right thing. In his experience command decisions made with the heart rather than the head, had an uncomfortable habit of coming back to bite. Only time would tell if he had made the right choice. He slowly raised his eyes to meet Ezra's intense gaze. "It's going to be tough going. There's no guarantee..."

"Chris! Goddamnit, I know the score." The lieutenant's response was so forceful that he

gasped, doubling over and holding his ribs, as all colour drained from his face. For a moment Chris was certain that the Southerner was going to pass out, but with an obvious effort, he rallied and held out his right hand. "Just...just get me up."

Materialising out of the fog, Jan glanced almost apologetically at the Southerner before turning his attention to Larabee. To say he looked worried would have been a gross understatement. "*Kapitein*. If we stay any longer I cannot promise that the boat will wait...the man has a family..." He paused and sighed. "This is very dangerous for everyone."

"I realize that, but Ezra..." he stopped. He was the one who had called the halt, not Ezra. If anyone was to blame for the delay it was he. "Okay. Let's not waste any more time. How far?"

Standish was on his feet already, supported by Wilmington, who seemed to have effortlessly shouldered most of his weight and was making wisecracks at the co-pilot's expense as he coaxed him to start moving again. Chris felt a welcome lightening of the load on his own shoulders. Buck would look after him.

"Maybe a kilometre. Not far."

Chris gnawed at his lip. A kilometre. Just over half a mile and already Chris could hear the faint but sharply distinct bark of an excited dog, quickly joined by a second and then a third, and although the thick fog masked the exact origins of the sound, he guessed that the animals could easily overtake them before they had travelled even half that distance, should they be unleashed. Jan slapped his arm as he moved off, obviously having come to an identical conclusion. "*Kom*."

Half a mile. Eight hundred and eighty yards. In college he had been able to run the distance in record time. Now, it might as well have been a marathon, and he had sworn to Chris that he would not slow them down. An empty promise as it turned out but then, he guessed, Larabee had known that all along. He was cold but he knew it was more than the biting wind or the constant fine drizzle soaking him to the skin. His body was trying to compensate for the blood he had lost. The weather was just one more factor in the equation. One more factor he could do without. In his opinion a bullet in the back was enough to contend with, without freezing his ass off at the same time.

He fell. In an ungainly tumble that sent him crashing into the hard ground and almost dragged Buck with him, he landed heavily on his left shoulder. His vision greyed as the following wave of pain almost robbed him of his senses and for an instant he thought he might be sick. He curled his body, hugging his chest and trying to roll to his knees but he was having difficulty drawing a breath and his muscles were refusing to obey him. Finally, he surrendered and collapsed, sinking slowly into the wet grass, barely holding onto consciousness.

“Ezra! Don’t do this.” Buck’s harried voice echoed hollowly in his ears, and he felt the gunner urgently trying to turn him over and onto his back, then cool fingers searching for a pulse in his neck. “Talk to me, pard.”

If he had been able to coax his mouth to co-operate and form any kind of coherent response he would have told him that he wasn’t trying to be difficult and that he certainly wasn’t dead. As it was he struggled to mumble an apologetic: “Sorry...fell.”

“You don’t say?” The heavy dose of irony in the gunner’s voice was unmistakable and Ezra felt a mild sense of indignation at Buck’s sardonic response; an indignation that was to quickly deepen, as he found himself being unceremoniously hoisted onto Wilmington’s shoulders.

He closed his eyes. This was not how it was supposed to end. Shot in the back, running for his life. Funny really. He’d always been good at running away. It what was he did best. The story of his life in fact: when the going gets tough, the smart get out of town. And that’s how it had always been for him; moving on, never putting down anything but the shallowest of roots and never letting anyone get close enough to mean anything to him other than a convenient port in a storm. No ties, no commitment, no obligations. Life, he had discovered a long time ago, was not only safer but also far less complicated that way. It was also a necessarily friendless existence.

“Ezra? Come on, man. Don’t think you can weasel out on me now.” Chris’s voice filtered into his consciousness and, confused, he finally grasped that he had drifted off, too easily slipping into a comfortable void. Running away again. Lifting his head, he blinked and focused on the blond pilot now jogging beside the gunner. The man was a goddamn mind-reader.

“Not...in...” he paused, to snatch a shallow breath, feeling the bite of the bullet lodged in his back as his ribcage expanded, “...my plans.”

“Better not be, Lieutenant.” He felt a hand grip his arm in a roughly affectionate squeeze. “And that’s an order.”

Ezra nodded slowly, wishing he didn’t feel quite so much like throwing up. It didn’t pay to argue with Chris Larabee. Ever.

“So where the hell is it?”

Chris glanced at Buck, understanding the sergeant’s undisguised irritability as, for a moment, his own disappointment threatened his decidedly brittle self-control. In front of them an open stretch of water rippled gently in the stiffening breeze and fragmented wisps of fog swirled like smoke on its surface, but its serene emptiness mocked the exhausted men. A small wooden jetty jutted from the riverbank twenty yards downstream but its skeletal form

suggested neglect and decay, and its rotting stanchions looked incapable of securing any vessel. He shrugged and avoided meeting the gunner's eyes. This was his fault. He had wasted so much precious time because he just didn't have the balls to climb out of a goddamn third storey window. Now everyone was paying for his weakness. Not only had Ezra had taken a bullet because of it, but it seemed that they had also lost their only means of escape.

Beside him Buck shifted his stance, adjusting the load on his shoulders. "Listen to those goddamn dogs. Sounds like they're onto somethin'." Chris focused on the sound; Wilmington was right if the frenzied barking was anything to go by. "Think it's just about time to be somewhere else, if you get my drift."

Larabee scanned the river again, and then cast a quick glance at their Dutch guide. "Well, what do you say? Do we stay or do we go?"

Jan whistled softly, an obvious signal, and paused expectantly for a few seconds before looking steadily at the airman. "We wait."

"For how long?"

"A few minutes only." Jan repeated the whistle.

Buck moved back a pace, as his boots started to sink quickly into the soft soil of the riverbank. "Reckon a few minutes is all we've got," he muttered, doubtfully, then edged closer to Chris, keeping his voice low. "I think maybe you should take a look at Ezra."

For an instant Chris felt as if an iron fist had slammed into his belly. The Southerner had been quiet for some time and as Larabee looked on the smooth, ashen features under an unruly shock of wet, dark hair, lips blanched of colour, he hesitated for a moment, fearing the worst, before he could bring himself to touch the cold skin and feel for a pulse. He was almost surprised to feel the rapid and shallow beat of Ezra's heart under his fingertips, not strong but still there. There was no response even when Chris pushed back an eyelid with a thumb. "He's out of it," he confirmed, struggling to keep his voice even; the certainty that he was looking upon Ezra's lifeless body had been so strong that it had shaken him more than he cared to admit. "Maybe it's just as well."

"Yeah," agreed Buck, "one way or the other, it's gonna be tough going." He shifted again and Ezra's head rolled back, exposing his face to the rain for several seconds before Chris was able to manhandle the unconscious pilot into a less vulnerable position.

He slowly let his hand fall from the Southerner's back, his fingers brushing across the hole punched into the leather and uneasily remembering the blood pouring from the hole punched into Standish's back.

“Buck...I...” It was the start of an apology but it was as far as he got. Wilmington gave him a sharp look and started to move away, and Larabee knew then that the gunner had already guessed his intentions.

“Forget it, Chris! I don’t want to hear anything right now except someone telling me where that goddamn boat is! I ain’t listening to any ‘sorry’ crap and I ain’t interested in premature goodbyes.”

Unable to help himself, Larabee smiled faintly, feeling a sudden surge of affection for his old friend. That was what happened when you knew a man as well as Buck knew him. “Then how about, thanks?”

“Hah,” snorted Buck, still edging a little further downstream as if compelled to keep moving, “it’s all just bullshit, man. You want to unburden yourself, you find a priest, ‘cos I ain’t interested!”

Chris dug his hands in his pockets, shivering as the rain found its way under his collar and trickled uncomfortably down his neck as he watched Wilmington move cautiously along the bank. He would talk to Buck later, providing there was a later. He sighed and his breath was transformed into mist in the cold air. The fog had been more than a lucky break, it had been their deliverance; without it they would never have evaded the pursuing soldiers for as long as they had but it was a double-edged sword. While it cloaked their movements, it also hindered their own progress and he knew that without the Dutchman to guide them they would have been hopelessly lost. Now it merely served to delay the inevitable and as the seconds ticked away, so did any chance of making an escape.

“*Kapitein?*”

Larabee spun around as Jan touched his sleeve, startled out of his dispirited preoccupation by the unexpected contact but his apprehension quickly dissipated as he followed the Dutchman’s gaze. Soundlessly, a row boat glided across the still surface of the river, its prow driving rhythmically through the water with every pull of the oarsman’s powerful shoulders. In a half dozen strokes, the craft was nudging the bank and Jan ran to steady the dinghy, exchanging a few words with the rower before turning to the Americans.

“You must hurry.”

Buck gave the Dutchman a grim smile. “No offence, but I kinda figured that one out for myself already.” Stooping to unload his burden, he eased Ezra off his shoulders, surrendering the Southerner to Chris and Jan, who wasted no time in carrying the unconscious airman to the waiting boat and inelegantly depositing him in the stern. The awkward manoeuvre cost both of them an unwelcome excursion into the cold water but neither man hesitated as the sounds of pursuit rapidly closed in on them. Wilmington hurriedly jumped aboard to help with Ezra as the oarsman sat impassively, obviously keen to

be away. He didn't blame the man. It was going to be touch and go.

Back on the bank, Chris wordlessly shook the Dutchman's hand, and with a curt nod the gesture was returned. There was no time for anything else. Jan slapped his upper arm and gave him a slight push. "Go now!" Larabee, knowing that he could afford to waste no more time, quickly turned and stepped into the dinghy. The Dutchman shoved the small vessel away from the bank and with a wolfish grin and a quick wave, was gone, noiselessly disappearing into the fog.

Something had changed. The pain was no less, still savage and intractable, but he was aware of a muted calm that seemed to have settled around him. Disorientated, he attempted to make sense of the signals being telegraphed to his sluggish brain, struggling to put together the fragments, but understanding only that he was suddenly afraid. Tightness in his chest made it hard to breathe and he fought the alarming sensation of suffocation as he tried to rise. The movement triggered a spasm of abused nerves and tissue that forced an involuntary moan from between clenched teeth as he bore down against the pain of it. He felt a sudden movement beside him and a hand closed quickly over his mouth, stifling the sound and increasing an already crushing sense of panic. Eyes flying open, he reacted instinctively, his body becoming rigid as he steeled himself to resist in spite of the wound in his back.

"Easy, pard. Quiet now! Okay?" The voice was so close, the words chillingly calm, but whispered with such intensity that he could feel the warmth of Buck's breath on his neck and he settled at once. Remaining perfectly still, he bit back the grunt that had risen in his throat and acknowledged with an almost imperceptible inclination of his head that he understood. The hand over his mouth slowly relaxed by degrees as if Wilmington was reluctant to trust that he could keep himself under control and at any other time, Ezra might have been insulted, but at that moment he could hardly blame Buck for his caution. He blinked several times allowing his now rapidly awakening senses to adjust, as his surroundings gradually came into sharp focus.

A boat. That had indeed been the plan, but he had expected something a little larger than a rowboat. It did, however, help to explain the reason he was currently sprawled awkwardly across Buck Wilmington with the gunner's arm draped loosely over his right shoulder in a parody of an embrace, a situation that, even given his debilitated state, he found altogether discomfiting. Yet, he dare not risk moving and he had to admit that it was a far better alternative than being carried over the lanky sergeant's shoulder. For one thing it was less painful, for another it was more dignified, if only slightly so. Chris, looking haggard and drawn, gave him a tired, fleeting, smile then resumed staring intently into the far distance in the attitude of a man focusing all his energies into listening for what he could not see, his

entire body reflecting his inner tension. They drifted in eerie silence, veiled in a thick shroud of mist; the man at oars carefully lifting and lowering the blades with the merest whisper of sound, noiselessly moving them through the water as muted shouts and the intermittent barking of an excited dog reached them from the unseen riverbank. As they continued to blindly grope through the murky vapour, Ezra could not help but marvel at the man's skill in navigating but, while he appeared to know exactly what he was doing, the Southerner tried not to imagine the worst that could happen if his instincts should fail. With a soft sigh, he closed his eyes again. Whether he liked it or not, events had passed out of his control the moment he had been shot. Now it was all he could do just to concentrate on taking his next breath, and for the moment that was about as far ahead into the future as he was prepared to look.

The cold seemed to have seeped into his very core, and he shivered, unable to stop the violent tremors that shook him until his teeth rattled, as his body attempted to generate some heat at a primal level beyond Ezra's own ability to control. He felt Buck edge closer, arms tightening around him, and while it felt all wrong he was sufficiently cold and shocked enough to accept the additional warmth that close contact with the sergeant offered. Retreating into a small, secluded corner of himself, he pushed back the physical discomfort to a tolerable distance, focusing on clearing his mind of anything other than the need to stay calm and remain perfectly still. Instinct urged him to draw as much air into his lungs as he could in a compensatory mechanism driven by his body's demands for oxygen, but with each inspiration he felt a stabbing pain deep in his chest and instead he forced himself into a rhythm of breathing in short, shallow bursts. Whatever he did, it still hurt but at least he had some control over its intensity.

Guardedly hunching his shoulders, he clumsily drew his jacket closer about him with stubbornly unresponsive fingers and shivered again. *Christ, but he was cold.* His shirt, wet with his own blood, clung uncomfortably to his back and the moisture-laden air seemed to have found a way to percolate through the fabric of his uniform, so that every inch of his skin felt clammy and moist. The feeling of light-headedness and weakness was something he recognised well enough. After all, he had been on the receiving end of a bullet before, several of them in fact. Ploesti. He had survived that debacle, but as a memento he had taken five 9mm rounds to various parts of his body. He had been lucky then, although at the time he would have argued that particular point, and every one had lodged in muscle and bone, miraculously avoiding major blood vessels and organs. It didn't need anyone with a medical degree to tell him that he was not quite so lucky this time round. Wilmington shifted behind him and he hissed softly, tensing, as the sudden flexion of his torso sent a lightning bolt of pain through his back and shoulder. The gunner squeezed his arm in silent apology

and Ezra leaned back again, carefully avoiding putting any pressure on the wound in his back but, with a sinking in the pit of his stomach, he knew beyond any doubt that in the space of a heartbeat the odds had taken a dramatic shift against him. The sharp intake of breath had not only hurt, but for the first time he was aware of a faint but distinctly liquid vibration low in the left side of his chest. *Lung shot*. He struggled to control the growing dread that threatened to shatter his brittle restraint, and instead slipped unresistingly into the fading consciousness of a body sliding slowly into shock.

At the edge of his awareness he heard a whispered exchange between Buck and Chris, and the boat rocked gently, a moment before he felt something light being draped over his chest and shoulders. He didn't have to open his eyes to know that it was Chris's own flying jacket that now covered him, still pleasantly warm from the pilot's body heat and smelling of a blend of leather, sheepskin and sweat; a combination that, far from being disagreeable, was one that was strangely comforting, and for perhaps the first time in his life Ezra not only knew, but was able to draw on, the strength of unconditional friendship. He allowed himself to let go then, no longer caring about either appearances or how anyone else might judge him, knowing at least that if he should die, there would be someone to remember him.

Larabee was starting to wonder if giving up his jacket had been the smartest move. Ezra still looked pinched and cold, and he was freezing but he kept reminding himself that, while he might be feeling the bite of the wind through the thin fabric of his shirt, he was better able to withstand it than the wounded Southerner. He sighed and a cloud of condensed air billowed from between his lips. More like winter than spring, he thought absently, unseasonably cold. He should be grateful. It was this stinking weather that had allowed them to avoid the soldiers who were, even now, still blindly searching for them. He cocked his head, listening, and suddenly realised that the sound of voices was growing steadily fainter and he knew then that, without a doubt, taking to the water had been their saving grace. He turned his attention to the rower, whose smooth yet deceptively powerful strokes at the oars were drawing them steadily away from their pursuers. If the Dutchman was at all concerned for either his or their safety, he showed no sign of it and for the first time in many hours, Chris allowed himself to believe that there just might be a chance for them to escape.

He tried not to think about it. Instead he tentatively touched his fingers to the bruise on his cheek, thinking about how much more it ached in the cold. An ache made worse by the fact that the cold air seemed to find its way directly to his broken tooth, seeking out the nerve and sending jolts of pain through his upper jaw every time he breathed in. Folding his arms across his chest, he stuck his hands into his armpits and bent his head as he hunched his shoulders against the stiff breeze coming off the water. He didn't want to look at Ezra

anymore. Seeing him so still, frighteningly passive as Buck continued to hold onto him only increased his own misery. He looked dead, and the harsh but inescapable truth was that the possibility haunted him. Losing a crewmember was hardly a new experience; in less than a year he had lost more good men than he ever wanted to think about, but he had never before felt directly responsible for any man's death. This time it was different. Ezra was lying with a bullet in his back because of him, and if he died...

"Chris?"

Larabee had to make an effort to look up, almost afraid of what was going to follow Buck's softly spoken alert but the gunner responded to his questioning glance with nothing more ominous than a tired smile and a slight jerk of his head. Following the direction of Buck's brief nod, Chris hastily drew back uttering a short, sharp, obscenity as the rowboat gently bumped against the hull of a much larger vessel, startled by its sudden and unexpected nearness.

The Dutchman grinned broadly, showing uneven but surprisingly white teeth through his beard, as he expertly manoeuvred the rowboat before finally shipping the oars and quickly securing the rowboat to a rope trailing over the fishing boat's port gunwale. He stood, moving easily with the motion of the boat and tapped Chris on the shoulder.

"Kom op."

With a nod he stood up, more than happy to accept the big man's steadying hand on his arm, and after taking a moment to gain his balance, dutifully scrambled up the side of the moored vessel. He had already decided that he would not insult the man by debating the issue of getting Ezra on board; after all this was his boat, and he was in charge, but he couldn't help but feel some concern for the wounded Southerner. As it was, boarding the fishing boat proved less of a challenge than it had first appeared. The gunwales conveniently swept down from a high bow to a low point amidships before curving gently upwards again towards the stern and at the lowest point the freeboard between waterline and gunwale was no more than six feet. Chris knew it was designed to ease the physical work of hauling loaded nets on board, but it might just as easily have been tailor-made for bringing a wounded man aboard.

Ezra had been so silent and still during the last part of the journey downstream that Chris thought he had finally slipped into unconsciousness but he was responding now to Buck's quietly persuasive encouragement, although it was obviously an effort for him to move. Once he was on his feet it was almost possible to pretend that he was the same old Ezra Standish but the tightness around his lips and eyes told a different story, and Chris wondered at what cost the Southerner was keeping up appearances. As if it mattered now. At that moment Ezra glanced up and Chris found himself looking straight into the Southerner's startlingly

green eyes, dulled now with pain but no less compelling for that. Without breaking eye contact Ezra raised his right arm, extending it towards Chris as he braced one foot against the hull and Buck prepared to boost him up. He heard Wilmington softly ask: "You sure you can do this, pard?" as he reached out and captured Ezra's wrist, feeling the Southerner's fingers grip his own wrist in return with surprising strength. A fleeting smile appeared on the lieutenant's face but it did nothing to chase away the shadows in his eyes.

"Piece of cake."

Larabee was almost prepared to believe him.

Ezra somehow had the capacity to make it look easy, but the sudden drag Chris felt on his shoulder as he took up the Southerner's weight betrayed the fact that the lieutenant was completely exhausted. Muscles straining, Larabee wasted no time in dragging him unceremoniously over the side the boat. To hell with appearances. For a moment Ezra balanced awkwardly with his belly across the gunwale before gravity took over and he slid clumsily to the deck. Landing heavily with an explosive grunt, he remained just as he had fallen, unable or unwilling to move as he sucked in short, sharp bursts of air. Chris quickly turned and dropped to one knee, carefully easing the pilot off his back, and feeling a sudden rush of affection for the gritty Southerner.

"Piece of cake, huh? You dumb bastard!"

Ezra opened his eyes and started to laugh, a restrained wheeze that he fought hard to control, one arm cradling his ribs as the spasmodic movement of his chest clearly caused him additional pain. Between guarded paroxysms he finally managed a breathless response. "So I'm a liar...made it...didn't I?"

"Yeah," Chris answered softly, moving to support the lieutenant's shoulders, "You made it." He was relieved when Buck thudded to the deck beside him, quickly followed by the Dutchman, interrupting the exchange yet Chris could not avoid completing the qualifying thought which had gone unsaid but which he was sure had already been echoed in Ezra's own mind: *This far*.

An elbow in his side from an impatient Buck rapidly gained his attention and he was shoved almost off balance as the gunner thrust his jacket at him. "Here. You might wanna think about putting this on, Larabee. It ain't gonna get any warmer once we hit open water, and it's a long way home." Chris curbed his first impulse to protest and instead dutifully shrugged into the sheepskin-lined leather. Buck certainly had a way of putting things in perspective that brooked no argument. "Now," the sergeant continued, with a quick and meaningful smile, "how about getting your ass into gear and giving me a hand with the lieutenant?"

The mission had been aborted. Stood down at last, an uncharacteristically restless Vin had been the first to leave the plane. Eager to escape the confines of his bombardier's compartment, he had quickly put distance between himself and not only the aircraft but also the crew, shunning any company as he strode away from the flight line. If a few critical looks were thrown in his direction, what did he care? They were strangers to him. It was cold and he had to strain against the force of the wind as he walked, obliged to lean into it to make any significant forward progress, but he welcomed the sting of the icy rain on his face. The weather matched his mood.

The Texan stopped off at the barracks just long enough to change. Staying in vacant quarters, haunted by the quietly mocking emptiness, held no appeal for Tanner although he found the idea of dealing with the crowd that was sure to gravitate towards the mess to be no more inviting. But, right now, he needed something to warm his belly and thaw the solid core of ice that seemed to have settled there.

Sitting alone, he nursed a cup of coffee till it went cold then, unable to bear the buzz of constant chatter that flowed around and over him like a verbal juggernaut, he shoved his way through the press of men with no apology, daring anyone to challenge him. No one did. He was almost disappointed; the need to vent some of his mounting frustration had grown strong enough for him to welcome confrontation. Any confrontation. All he needed was an excuse.

Outside the sky had turned darker, the blue-back of a fresh bruise, and the air fairly crackled with electricity. For a moment he turned his face to the wind and squinted towards the horizon. Unless he was very much mistaken they were about to bear the brunt of the mother of all storms.

"Hey, Vin! You planning on joining the navy or d'you wanna ride?"

Tanner swung around at the familiar voice. He had not heard the jeep pull up outside the mess and Josiah's shout coming out of the blue had startled him. For a moment he hesitated, then as a sudden squall blasted him with icy rain he jogged across to the jeep and climbed in beside the sergeant, shaking the rain from his hat. "Thanks." He wasn't sure yet if he meant it.

Sanchez let out the clutch and moved off, wiping the condensation off the inside of the windshield with his sleeve as he drove. After a few minutes he turned his attention back to the lieutenant. "Anywhere in particular you want to be?"

Vin shrugged and thought for a moment before answering truthfully: "Nope."

"Good, 'cause we're taking a run down to the village." He swung the vehicle round in a wide arc and splashed through puddles already ankle deep to brake in front of the non-coms quarters. The 'we' turned out, unsurprisingly, to include Jackson and Dunne. As two figures

sprinted from the questionable shelter of the barracks towards the jeep, Sanchez turned his head to fix the Texan with an appraising stare that left Tanner feeling uncomfortably exposed; reading into the look the older man's silent admonishment for having isolated himself from the rest of Larabee's remaining crew. Suddenly he reached across and lightly punched the Texan in the arm. "Should just get there for opening time." In spite of his mood Tanner found the sergeant's grin infectious and gave a quick smile of his own. Opening time sounded just fine to him.

There was something warm and companionable about the pub that Vin had found lacking in the mess and he felt a lightening of spirit that had less to do with the several pints he had already drunk than the tacit understanding of his friends. Although, realistically, he guessed that the beer had played its part. Leaning back and stretching out his legs, he looked at the half-empty pint of pale ale on the table in front of him. He had found English beer hard to get used to but he had soon discovered that he could get drunk on it surprisingly quickly and with a quiet sigh, he picked up the glass and swallowed another generous measure. The quiet buzz of conversation was a soporific and he found himself pleasantly drifting, more relaxed than he had felt in days. Jackson and Sanchez had become involved in a game of darts, leaving only JD at the table and he, decided Vin, was looking like a lost puppy.

"Vin, d'you think Buck..."

Dunne's voice sliced deeply into the most delicate fabric of his emotions, unwelcome and intrusive, and he didn't try to control the sudden resentment that welled to the surface. In a swift and violent movement he slammed his glass down on the table before the young gunner could complete what he had been going to say, oblivious to the turned heads of curious patrons as he snarled: "I'm trying not to think, kid!"

The moment stretched, an exclamation mark in the sudden, shocked, silence, and he felt an odd sense of detachment as the blood drained from his face, and his gut contracted to fill his throat with acid. Sickened, he felt a large hand on his shoulder. "Easy now, Vin." Josiah filled his field of vision and the big sergeant almost effortlessly brought him to his feet. Tanner had no will to resist, but even if he had he didn't believe it would have made any difference. "Reckon you could do with a bit of fresh air, son."

The blast of frigid air that greeted the Texan as he was steered out of the cosy warmth of the pub and onto the street was like a cold shower on his flushed and heated skin. He shivered involuntarily, reluctant to proceed but, feeling Josiah's hand still firmly gripping his arm and effectively blocking any hope of retreat, he stepped onto the footpath. He was certain that if there had been a horse trough out front, that Sanchez would have been dunking his head in it.

The rain had eased a little although the sky held promise of more to come and the

grizzled engineer drew the miserable Texan into the meager shelter of the eaves. "Feel better?"

"No," mumbled Vin, not wanting to admit that rather than feeling better, he felt like a fool, and worse, the cold was having an adverse effect on his kidneys and the pressure on his bladder had become almost painful. He wanted to go back inside.

Sanchez said nothing for several minutes and Vin started to feel as uncomfortable mentally as he did physically, wondering if this was the equivalent of an unruly child being given time to think about his most recent misdemeanour. In a distant corner of his mind he could hear a part of him saying: *if the shoe fits, Tanner...* Finally with a sigh, Josiah broke the silence. "You know, not talking about it doesn't make it go away." Vin said nothing. Instead he turned to look down the street, focusing on a dog sitting forlornly outside the corner shop. "JD's trying to deal with this the only way he knows how, Vin," he paused before adding: "Same as we all are."

Vin finally turned to level a critical stare at the older man, blue eyes hard and bright as sapphires. "It was supposed to be a milk run, Josiah." He dug his hands in his pockets and looked away, not trusting himself to maintain his composure. "What a fucking waste."

He was surprised when instead of the expected words of wisdom from the older man came a solitary, resigned yet heartfelt: "Yeah."

Ezra felt clumsy, and it concerned him that something as simple as putting one foot in front of the other had become almost unachievable without a concentrated effort on his part but, sadly, it seemed that his brain and his body were no longer on speaking terms. As much as it pained him to be so dependent, he was ready to admit that without Chris and Buck to support him he would, at best, have been obliged to crawl to the shelter of the wheelhouse; either that, or just flounder pathetically on deck like a landed fish. The indignity of it just didn't bear thinking about.

The sudden cough of the diesel engine firing into life seemed far too loud in the stillness of the morning. There was no escaping the fact that the sound would draw unwelcome attention but as the motor settled into a throbbing beat and the boat started to move in the water, Ezra found he no longer cared. He felt sick, and the cold, it seemed, had numbed every part of him except the bullet wound in his back, which had seared a path into his chest that burned with every breath he took. He had given everything he had and more than he could spare. Whatever happened now was up to fate.

The not altogether unpleasant feeling of disconnection had its advantages. He was still conscious and aware but just far enough removed from reality to be unconcerned by the activity going on around him. He had other, more important, considerations on his mind. Like

breathing.

He submitted without protest as Chris and Buck stripped him first of his jacket, then his uncomfortably sodden shirt and finally his undershirt, understanding too well the need but wanting nothing more than to be allowed to rest. The rational part of his mind told him that if he was left untended then the rest he craved might just be the last rest he ever took, but it didn't stop him from feeling an almost childish resentment towards the two men. *Sweet Jesus, but it hurt!* He drew a sharp breath as the pressure dressing was quickly taken down and, although he tried to stifle it, he was forced to cough as he felt, again, the soft liquid purr of fluid in his chest.

"Bleeding's stopped." The relief in Larabee's voice was unmistakable. Ezra already knew he had lost a lot of blood; his racing heart and the cold, clamminess of his skin alone told him that but perhaps it was just as well that he hadn't seen the physical evidence for himself. The very fact that it had shaken Chris was more than enough to add fuel to his own fears and he found himself swallowing, not certain if the faint metallic taint in the back of his throat was real or imagined.

"Ezra?" Buck this time. Wanting some response. Taking a breath he raised his head, and promptly broke out in a sweat as his vision receded, a flare of white, softening to grey but not quite fading out completely. Whatever he had been going to say evaporated on his tongue as he felt his hold on reality slipping dangerously away. "Better work fast, Chris. Reckon he's just about done in."

Done in. Yes. That was it exactly. He couldn't have described it better himself.

"You wanna do this?" Larabee's voice snapped irritably from behind him. "I'm no goddamned medic!"

Buck shifted, still keeping an arm across his chest to hold him up but leaning over his good shoulder. "Easy pard," he murmured, and this time Ezra wasn't sure if he was referring to him or Chris, "Just clean it up and cover it. No one's asking you do be a fucking surgeon."

Ezra sighed, dredging up the energy to speak with a degree of composure he did not feel.

"Perhaps, gentlemen, you could come to some agreement..." He paused as much to catch his breath as for effect. "Before it becomes necessary to add exposure to the diagnosis."

There was a sudden, pregnant, silence before Chris gave a gentle laugh at the unexpected but typically sardonic comment and the moment of tension dissolved. "Sorry, Ezra. Promise not to sue me for malpractice?" Standish felt a moment of sympathy for Larabee; it wasn't often the self-assured pilot found himself so far out of his depth. He smiled crookedly. "I give you my word." The Southerner felt the pilot's not quite steady hands on his

back and the sharp bite of iodine forced a grunt from him as he braced against the sudden sting of it and, as Buck chimed in with a doubtful: "I'd get that in writing if I were you", he recognised in the banter, the unspoken bond of true friendship. He closed his eyes as Chris started to bandage his chest. Sad that just as he had found it, he was going to lose it.

"You want to lie down now?"

He realised then that Larabee had finished his handiwork, and gave a slight shake of his head, a bare movement without opening his eyes as a blanket, smelling of camphor and diesel fumes, was wrapped around him.

"Harder to breathe," he confessed finally, desperately tired but afraid that if he were to lie down that he would soon be drowning in his own blood. But that was one fear he was not about to share.

"Does it hurt much?"

The question, coming from Chris, surprised him. He thought about the pulsing throb of the wound in his back and the deep, sharp pain that stabbed in his chest with every breath he took. "If I said no would you believe me?"

Larabee sighed heavily. "No. Guess I wouldn't at that."

"Then to be brutally honest..." Ezra sucked in a painful breath. "...it hurts like hell!"

"Wish there was more I could do, Ezra," The genuine pain and regret in Larabee's voice touched the Southerner, and he guessed the pilot was going through his own kind of hell. It didn't take a genius to figure that sooner or later Chris was going to start blaming himself. Larabee forced a quiet laugh. "but about all I can offer you is to let Buck here kiss it better."

The Southerner's eyes remained closed but he smiled wearily. "Kiss my ass."

"Hey, now wait a goddamn minute," protested Wilmington, indignantly, but his voice was tight with emotion, "Reckon that might just be stretchin' the friendship a little bit too far, Lieutenant!"

Chris had no love of boats. His experience with anything nautical was confined to having once travelled down a stretch of the Mississippi on a paddle wheeler, and the stately progression of the riverboat down an inland waterway was no preparation for heading out into open sea in a fishing trawler. The skipper of the vessel skilfully handled the boat with a confident ease that came from years of practice, and he seemed to take the foul weather and poor visibility in his stride, but for Chris the rolling deck beneath his feet left him feeling ill at ease. He was out of his element and out of sorts.

He was still amazed that their exodus had, as yet, gone unchallenged. There had been brief interludes of sporadic gunfire, some which had sounded too close for comfort, but if any of it had been aimed at them then it had missed the mark. He could only guess that those

still following their trail had heard the trawler's engines start but had not managed to get an accurate fix on their position and again he had reason to give thanks for the dense fog that had so effectively concealed them. But the thick mist was a double-edged sword and Chris wondered how much their Dutch pilot was relying on blind luck rather than skill in order to navigate their course. Edgy now, no longer fuelled by the adrenaline that had dulled his awareness of his own discomforts while allowing his mind and body to operate in overdrive, he found himself tensely anticipating either the boat running aground or a burst of machine gun fire raking the wooden wheelhouse.

Glancing over his shoulder to where Buck sat in one corner with the wounded lieutenant, he felt a pang of guilt. *His fault.* The two men leaned shoulder-to-shoulder and Ezra, having given up any pretence at maintaining appearances, had finally succumbed to exhaustion and was resting easily against the gunner. The Southerner's face was shiny with sweat but Chris knew very well that, rather than being too warm, Ezra's skin would be cold and clammy as his body diverted much-needed blood from its extremities to its core. With a heavy sigh he looked away again. Buck was right; it was a long way home. Perhaps too far for Ezra.

Chris felt a surge of helpless anger. Goddamn it! This was not how it was supposed to end. He glanced down at his hands, still streaked with Ezra's blood, and bitterly recognised the irony of the symbolism. Almost without thinking, he hastily wiped his palms down his pants and focused instead on the forward view across the bows of the sturdy vessel. There was no doubt that they were close to open water now, the roll of the trawler's deck becoming ever more exaggerated as they met the tidal current. A moment later the mist thinned suddenly before them and out of the murk loomed a rusted but still brightly coloured buoy so close on the starboard side that Chris took an involuntary step back as it bumped and scraped along the fenders, before he was able to brace himself. The Dutchman reacted by deftly spinning the wheel with a low whistle and a shake of his head, muttering under his breath as the boat slowly responded, reluctantly coming around to leave the wildly dancing marker in its wake.

For Larabee the very real fear of running aground or colliding with another vessel resurfaced and with it came the uncertainty of whether or not they had merely traded one impossible situation for another. Abruptly, he turned away, rubbing eyes that ached from lack of sleep and the strain of staring for too long into nothing, and crossed the deck with a sudden sense of purpose. Whichever way he looked at it, there was nothing that he could now do to change what had already happened, any more than he had any control over the immediate future, but he owed Ezra. And he owed Ezra more than a cold and lonely struggle to survive in a crummy corner of some stinking fishing boat.

Wilmington looked up with a ghost of smile and Larabee noticed for the first time the

shadows circling the sergeant's eyes. "Wondered when you'd finally stop beating yourself up." His voice was a murmur, intended not to disturb the man whose head rested against his shoulder.

"Just had some thinking to do," answered Chris, but he found he was unable to meet Buck's shrewd gaze.

"Bullshit," the gunner countered, softly, "I know that look."

Chris shrugged, admitting nothing. "You okay?" He switched the focus back to Buck, who responded by waving a dismissive hand.

"Nothing a seventy-two hour pass won't cure." He leaned back and carefully scrutinised the pilot before grinning broadly. "Reckon you could use some work though, pard."

Larabee found himself responding with a reluctant smile of his own as he lowered himself to the deck and eased into a space between Ezra and the wall, suddenly very much aware of the battering he had taken as abused muscles in his back and belly protested. "Yeah. Just a little."

Ezra stirred restlessly and Chris wedged himself uncomfortably into the corner of the wheelhouse, loath to unsettle the Southerner further by crowding him. Buck shot him a quick glance of amusement as he in turn was forced to adjust his position, and the three men finally settled into an uneasy compromise, the physical closeness something that none of them felt comfortable with but which each tolerated out of necessity. "Kinda cosy ain't it?"

A quiet chuckle from Ezra surprised Chris. "Dear Lord, if only Mother could see me now."

"Hell, Ezra," Wilmington grinned, making light of the fact that he still held the lieutenant in a close embrace, "I won't tell if you don't. You know, I got a reputation to maintain!"

"Believe me, Sergeant...Wilmington..." The Southerner paused to draw careful breath. "...nothing on this earth...would ever possess me..." He stopped abruptly and Chris anxiously leaned forward as the lieutenant briefly arched his back, obviously in pain, white-knuckled fingers gripping the edge of the blanket. "Ezra?" The lieutenant wordlessly shook his head in a quick dismissal of Larabee's concern, and with grim persistence pressed on, completing what he had started to say, although it was clearly a struggle for him. "...to make any such confession."

It was a measure of his distress that he had resorted to talking in short, sharp bursts, each word an effort, and Chris suspected that Ezra was not only badly hurt but also more than a little afraid. He impulsively closed his fingers around Ezra's cold hand, feeling the fine tremor that fairly hummed through the tensed muscles and tendons as Ezra clutched the blanket with remarkable strength. Chris started to speak but the words died on his lips as a feeling of absolute powerlessness washed over him. He could do nothing. The reality was that Ezra could die, slowly and painfully, as he watched, and all he had to offer was empty

words. Cold comfort for a man with a bullet in the back.

Tanner braced his thighs against the washbasin in readiness to draw the straight-edged razor across the stubble on his chin, his hand not quite as steady as he would have liked given the task he was about to perform. He raked the blade across his tensed jaw, relieved that at the end of the first downward stroke he had managed to leave the skin intact. He rinsed the soap from the razor and tried not to look too closely at the face that stared back at him from the small shaving mirror propped at eye level on the shelf. Yesterday, he had tried to get drunk, and he had succeeded. In fact he achieved a degree of inebriation far beyond anything he could have possibly wished for. His memory of the evening was, at best, sketchy although he did have a startlingly clear recollection of throwing up quite spectacularly in the gutter outside the pub. After that he remembered nothing and came to the conclusion that at that point he had passed out, probably also in the gutter.

He had wakened in his own bed, with a pounding head, a painfully aching gut and the grimly depressing realisation that nothing had changed. Not the room, not the world outside, not him. Getting drunk had gained him nothing but a few hours of oblivion and an unwelcome hangover. He methodically scraped at the fuzz on his cheeks and felt again the impotent anger that had been eating away at him since he had first learned that the plane carrying Chris, Buck and Ezra had gone down over enemy territory. It happened. Jesus, it happened ever single goddamned day! He could only hope that they had managed to bail in time. He allowed himself a wry smile, contemplating Ezra as a prisoner of war. Somehow he had an idea that the shrewd Southerner would be able to put his natural talents for running a scam to good use in any situation; probably manage to turn a profit even behind barbed wire. Sighing, he finished shaving, letting some of the frustration leach out of him as he performed the comfortingly familiar ritual.

It was another dark and dreary day of low cloud and incessant rain, which matched his mood almost too well. He wondered where the ever-pragmatic Vin Tanner had suddenly gone and the very fact that he lost his customary objectivity disturbed him. An orphaned bastard at five, he had spent a lifetime cultivating a fiercely independent spirit that had shielded him from the complications of being reliant on anyone but himself. That he had always been tagged a loner, an outsider, had never meant much to him; they were hollow words from people who mattered nothing to him. He had never wanted or needed anyone's approval. Then he had joined Chris Larabee's crew.

Back in his quarters he dressed slowly, partly in deference to the jackhammer pounding in his skull but also because he could find no particular reason to hurry. Breakfast was definitely not anywhere on his agenda, in fact his stomach quivered threateningly at the very

idea of food, but he was more than ready to make inroads into a pot of coffee. He bent to tie his shoelaces, instantly regretting the sudden move as the little man who had taken up residence in his head switched from using the jackhammer to pounding a metal spike into the back of his skull. Moving with the exaggerated deliberateness of the severely hung-over he managed to find his comb and rake his still-damp hair into some order before easing into his jacket and finally moving with studied care to the door, reminding himself to get some aspirin to go with that coffee.

Five minutes in the mess and he knew he had made a mistake. The smell of food alone nauseated him but the sight of so many airmen enthusiastically shovelling down a greasy combination of ham, eggs, biscuits and hash browns almost undid him. Pouring a mug of strong, black, coffee he retreated to the furthest corner of the hall and sat with his back to the room, wondering if he looked half as bad as he felt.

“Hey, Vin!” Tanner groaned inwardly. JD. The last thing he wanted was either conversation or company. Without lifting his head he raised one hand, just enough to acknowledge Dunne, but sincerely hoping that the kid was smart enough to move on. He vaguely seemed to remember having some sort of disagreement with Dunne the night before but the details eluded him. Still, he reasoned, if the kid was willing to seek him out now, it couldn’t have been anything too damaging. He slowly raised the cup to his lips as the young gunner sat down. There was a moment of silence before JD spoke again. “Geez, you look awful.”

The Texan gave a slight shake of his head as he smiled wryly. As always, JD was just being honest. “Thanks, kid!”

Dunne flushed and ducked his head, evidently embarrassed by his own candour. “Sorry, Vin.”

The lieutenant dismissed the protest with a wave of his hand and a sigh. “I already feel crappy seven different ways, JD, you ain’t hurting my feelings none.”

A tentative smile crept across JD’s face. “Boy, you really tied one on! Nearly got us all thrown out of the pub.”

Vin rubbed a hand across his gritty eyes. That he could believe. “Look, kid, I’m sorry...”

Dunne laughed. “Hell, no! Best thing I ever saw was when you took on those two Limey MPs...”

Tanner felt a sinking in the pit of his stomach. “I what?” He wrestled with his memory but had no recollection of any such incident, before squinting suspiciously at the young airman. “You winding me up, kid?”

It was obvious Dunne was enjoying himself. “Me? Shoot! Would I lie to you, Vin?”

Vin groaned, and cradled his head in his hands. “So what happened?”

“You’ve got Josiah to thank for that...Josiah!”

It took a few moments for it to penetrate Tanner’s brain that JD had stopped talking. Slowly raising his head, he looked straight at Dunne but, unable to read the expression on his face as he looked steadily over Vin’s left shoulder, he took a deep breath and turned to look behind him. Sure enough, the big sergeant himself stood there with Nathan a bare step behind him. Vin knew then that he didn’t want to hear what Sanchez had to say. There was something in his guardedly neutral expression that started alarm bells ringing. He was trying too hard. Tanner turned away and took a long drink of his coffee, barely tasting it as his stomach churned in anticipation, not doubting for one minute that this was something to do with Chris.

“So, tell me the bad news.”

“Bad news?” Jackson moved closer. “Don’t know as you’d consider this bad news.”

“The Major just got an intelligence report,” continued Josiah, “and although it’s unconfirmed, seems that it’s been reported by the resistance that a B-17 was shot down by anti-aircraft fire crossing the border into Holland and that three parachutes were sighted.”

Tanner pushed himself up from the table. “That’s it? Three parachutes? How many crew on board?”

“Four.”

“And that’s pretty good odds if you ask me,” said Jackson, quietly.

Vin stared at the gunner, a spark of outrage igniting suddenly in his belly. “Reckon not if you happen to be the fourth!”

Sanchez took a step forward and put a hand on Vin’s arm. “Hey, man. Take it easy. This is the first real news we’ve had and it looks promising. At least they didn’t all go down with the plane.”

He felt more than saw JD come up to stand beside him. “That’s right, Vin. Guess that’s something to be thankful for.”

“Well, forgive me if I don’t celebrate just yet!” Vin glanced quickly at the faces of the three men. “You just don’t see it, do you? Any of you? One unlucky son-of-a-bitch bought the goddamn farm! Wanna take book on that Nathan? Maybe take a wager on which one it might be?”

Jackson shook his head, frowning. “Vin, that’s not...”

“No! Tell me, Nathan!” He pulled his arm free of Josiah’s grip. “How am I supposed to feel knowing that one of them is probably dead? If I want it to be Chris, or Buck, or Ezra who made it does that mean it doesn’t matter that the other poor schmuck was killed, huh, does it?”

Nathan swapped a quick look with Josiah, and the bigger man moved in to intercede,

reaching out a hand to take Vin by the shoulder. “Now wait a minute, Vin, to me that’s you seeing the glass as half empty while Nathan’s just seeing it as half full.”

“Ah, fuck that!” He wheeled on JD. “You’re hoping to God that Buck made it,, right? So would it bother you if Ezra died so that could happen? Would it? Or Chris? How about you trade Chris?”

JD took a step back, shocked by the sudden and unexpected attack. “That’s not fair, Vin.”

“You’re way outta line, Vin.” Nathan roughly caught his arm and jerked him back. “Don’t try telling me you ain’t glad that some of them made it, or you ain’t hoping yourself that one of them’s Chris, ‘cause that’s just bullshit, man, and I ain’t listening to none...”

Tanner swung round, uncoiling like a tightly wound spring and unleashing all his frustration and anger in a single punch that caught Nathan squarely on the jaw, snapping his head back with a satisfying crack and lifting the big man off his feet before he crashed heavily to the floor. Rubbing his skinned knuckles, the Texan took a deep breath and, ignoring the hundreds of eyes now turned in his direction, he stepped over the untidy sprawl of Jackson’s legs, to stride out of the mess without a backward glance.

Josiah watched the lieutenant walk away, before stooping to help Jackson sit up. “Well, I’m sure glad he got that out of his system.”

Nathan, struggling to get his eyes back in focus, rubbed his chin and threw a doubtful glance at Sanchez. “Any other time I might agree with you.”

Sanchez slapped him on the shoulder and offered his other hand to lever him off the ground. “Come on, brother, you’ll live.” He hauled Jackson to his feet and made a quick inspection of his jaw. “Don’t take it too personally, Nathan, that boy’s been spoiling for a fight for a coupla days now.”

JD, undecided as to whether he should stay or follow Vin, looked helplessly at Sanchez and Jackson. “Are you just going to let him go?”

Both men flicked a glance at JD, who was keeping an anxious eye on Tanner as he pushed his way out of the crowded mess hall.

“Yep,” answered Josiah, bluntly, “He ain’t gonna be listening to anyone till he cools off, son.”

“But we can’t...he’s...”

“Listen, JD,” interrupted Josiah, gruffly, “I played nursemaid yesterday. You wanna take a turn? Go right ahead and be my guest.”

Dunne shook his head, not so much in denial but rather not quite believing what he was hearing, before his face took on a look of stubborn determination. “Okay, I will. That’s exactly what I’ll do!” He started to move away then abruptly turned back to Jackson, unable to hide his concern. “You sure you’re okay, Nathan?”

The sergeant waved a dismissive hand and gave a lopsided grin. "Yeah, yeah. But JD..."

"What?"

"Just watch out for that right hook, okay? It's a doozy."

Dunne gave a smile and a quick nod, breaking into a run as the Texan disappeared from view.

"Vin!"

The Texan's shoulders remained set, the walk as purposeful as ever and Dunne was not sure that Tanner had even heard him over the gusting of the wind. He sprinted after the lieutenant, not caring if Vin was unhappy at being pursued. "Vin, wait!" Cursing under his breath, the young gunner picked up his pace as it became quite clear that Tanner was going to wait for no one. A sudden surge of anger flared in Dunne. Goddamnit, but Vin wasn't the only one who was feeling the strain. His own feelings had been hovering uncertainly halfway between hope and dread since the aircraft had first been logged as overdue. No one had bothered to ask him how he felt.

JD overtook the bombardier and, in an abrupt about-face, came to a halt in front of him giving Tanner little choice but to stop or plough straight into him. Dunne accepted that as a definite possibility but the Texan merely stood for a second before sighing and uttering a weary: "Go away, kid," as he moved to sidestep the younger man. Mustering his resolve, JD stood his ground and blocked Vin's escape.

"And if I don't? You'll punch me out too? Might make me go away but it won't change nothing."

Vin stared evenly at him for several moments then, without a word, wheeled and changed direction, turning his back in a rebuff that both hurt and infuriated Dunne. Darting forward, JD grabbed Tanner by the arm and spun him round to face him again.

"Fuck you, Vin!" His voice cracked with suppressed emotion. "You think you're the only one who gives a damn about them? The only one who's feeling like crap? Well, damnit, they're my friends too!" He ignored the rain and wind gusting into his face, trying to snatch his breath away, and gripped the Texan harder, his fingers crushing into muscle and bone like a vice. "And you know what Vin? I'm sick of your bullshit! I can't change what happened but I can't change how I feel either. I'm telling you right here and right now that I really do hope Buck is alive, and if that means that someone else had to die then I'm sorry, but I didn't make it happen! Is that wrong? Does that make me some kind of fucking freak, Vin? Does it? Answer me, goddamn it!"

He stopped, out of breath and embarrassed by the fact that, entirely against his will, he had started to cry. Already several errant tears had spilled down his cheeks that were

already wet with rain. Annoyed at himself, he quickly released the lieutenant's arm and, turning aside, hastily wiped his face. Jesus Christ! Now he was snivelling like some snot-nosed kid. For a moment he wondered why he had bothered coming after the Texan. All he had wanted to do was talk but he had achieved nothing, except to make a complete fool of himself and be insubordinate into the bargain.

The pressure of Vin's hand on his shoulder was unexpected and he tensed, responding to his first instinct to shrug it off, to repay Tanner in kind, but he didn't, any more than he resisted when the lieutenant roughly pulled him into an awkward embrace. Instead he found himself clinging fiercely to the Texan, returning the briefly intense hug that was as much a mutual apology as an expression of understanding and consolation. With a sigh, the lieutenant relinquished his grip. "Ah, kid," he breathed quietly, "What a fucking mess."

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The suddenness of his waking made him feel slightly sick; head thudding and pulse racing as he struggled with a split second of disorientation, but soon enough the distinctive rolling motion triggered all the right mental switches and he remembered. With a guilty start, he glanced quickly at his two companions then at the helmsman. Nothing seemed to have changed, except that the deck was heaving even more violently than he remembered. At the wheel the Dutchman stood with the confident ease of a born sailor, constantly adjusting his position to allow for the roll and pitch of the deck beneath his feet without ever appearing to move. With a sigh he relaxed again, feeling his heart settle into a less frantic rhythm as the moment of panic dissipated, although the unpleasant queasiness in his stomach lingered.

Chris looked exhausted and although he had his eyes closed, Buck knew that he was not asleep. There was nothing remotely relaxed in the pilot's attitude. He looked sadly for a moment at his friend and commanding officer, knowing that responsibility weighed heavily on him and that he would never forgive himself if anything should happen to Ezra. Fortunes of war or not, Chris would take it personally. Larabee's battered face told its own story though and Buck guessed that the hours he had spent as a prisoner had been no picnic for the blond pilot. Chris was as hard-boiled as they come but this time the cracks were starting to show.

Flexing numb fingers, he gently repositioned a bloodless arm that had been compressed under Ezra's unmoving form for longer than he cared to remember, and felt the exquisite pain of suddenly restored circulation. The Southerner's torso flexed unresistingly in response to the movement and Buck, feeling a sudden chill that had little to do with the near freezing temperature, quickly touched a hand first to the wounded man's cheek, then to a thin slice of

exposed neck where the rough blanket had fallen open. There was no warmth in the pale and clammy skin but he felt the reassuring flutter of a racing heartbeat against his fingers. The touch was enough to rouse the lieutenant and Buck instantly regretted having disturbed him, but with a soft, moist, sigh and a restless movement of his head, Ezra once again settled. However, the movement, subtle as it was, had been enough to provoke a response from Chris.

“Buck?” There was an entire dialogue couched in that one, questioning, syllable.

“Thought you were asleep, pard.” It was a lie but Buck had known Chris long enough to know how the game was played.

Larabee didn't answer but on finding that Ezra was resting peacefully and there was no immediate cause for concern, he sighed and rested the back of his head against the wooden planks of the wheelhouse superstructure as he stared up at the roof. Buck let the silence go on, knowing that Chris would talk when he was ready, instead listening to the howl of the wind outside and the lash of the rain as it attacked the boat in an ongoing sequence of short-lived but frenzied squalls. At the wheel, the Dutchman ignored his passengers, his concentration focused exclusively on steering the trawler through the heavy seas, never seeming to fight the storm but rather yielding to it and then taking the advantage wherever he could. The deck rolled alarmingly, canting over thirty degrees to port as an errant wave smashed the trawler amidships. Buck braced himself, tightening his hold on the sleeping Southerner, and heard the fisherman swear as he spun the wheel and struggled to bring the wallowing vessel around and back onto an even keel. As the trawler bucked and rolled, responding sluggishly to the helm, Buck gave heartfelt thanks, and not for the first time, that his stomach was empty. He found it incredibly ironic that they had bailed out of a plane to jump to questionable safety on land, only to be faced with the very real prospect of drowning at sea, and he was beginning to feel a newfound appreciation for the Navy boys with each passing minute.

“It's my fault that Ezra got shot, Buck.”

There it was, finally out in the open, the thorn in Larabee's side.

“Is that right? Funny, but I didn't see no gun in your hand.”

“I just couldn't do it.” Chris continued as if he hadn't spoken. “But Ezra waited. Wouldn't go first.”

Larabee had already lost him, but he knew it had something to do with what had happened back at the mansion, and it was something that was eating away at him. “Couldn't do what, Chris?”

“You know, when I was fifteen I had an accident. A fall. In the high school gym.”

Larabee's sudden change in direction momentarily baffled Wilmington but he listened,

allowing Chris to find his way, accepting that the non sequitur was a starting point and trusting that his friend would get to what was really troubling him in his own time. With any luck he'd be able to fit the pieces together as they went along.

"Broke my back." He paused and sighed. "Haven't thought about it in years." He went quiet again, thinking about it now, before giving a brief and bitter laugh. "Then Ezra wants me to climb down a goddamn rope and what do you know? I'm fucked!" He turned to Buck, his eyes deeply shadowed and lines of fatigue clearly etched on his face. "I froze."

"You fell from a rope broke your back? You kept that one pretty well hid." Buck had trouble keeping the surprise from his voice. He and Chris had a friendship that went back a decade or more but he knew nothing of either the fall or the fear to which he had just confessed.

Head bowed, Larabee nodded slowly, lost in a memory. Then he sighed again. "Couldn't do it, Buck. I just didn't have the balls to take hold of that rope." The sergeant knew the cost of that admission for Larabee. "I panicked and it got Ezra shot."

"Chris..."

"Don't say it, Buck," he warned, "Don't say, it's not your fault, because I know what I did and I know it cost us time we didn't have."

Buck sighed. "For Christ's sake, Chris, cut yourself a little slack and join the rest of us in the human race. So you choked..."

Chris slowly raised his head. "You're not listening, Buck." The bruising on his face gave him a sinister, almost menacing look, yet the eyes told another story, betraying not only his anguish but the pain of regret. "I nearly got us all killed."

Buck looked evenly at his friend, a gentle rebuke in his voice. "Hell, Chris, don't you know by now that nearlies don't count for nothin'." He knew that little he said would have an impact on Larabee. Chris was too stubborn, and the experience too fresh, for the barbed hooks of guilt, shame and remorse not to have penetrate deeply. He tried anyway. "Reckon it's time to start thinking about what's up ahead, not what's gone before. Ain't nothing gonna change that now, pard, not even you. And I may be outta line here, Chris, but sittin' there, beating yourself up ain't helpin' Ezra none."

The sudden flash of irritation in Larabee's eyes was unmistakable, but it lasted no longer than a heartbeat before the spark flickered out and the pilot turned away, the tension receding as quickly as it had flared, fatigue and apathy winning out over anger. Passing a hand over his face, Chris gave a deep, shuddering sigh.

"Ah, Buck. What a fucking mess."

He woke, a sense of alarm and foreboding overwhelming him as he struggled quietly but

desperately to catch his breath. Something was terribly wrong and the fear that he had been firmly holding in check since the moment he had been shot, flared suddenly, slipping out of his control. No longer able to contain the rising panic, he sharply sucked in the air his body craved and felt an instant of crushing dread at the wet, gurgle of sluggishly moving fluid in his chest. He stifled a cough but the pain was acute, sharp as a knife slicing through his lung, and he doubled over, uttering a small cry that he no longer had any power to check. Against his back he felt Buck abruptly shift in response to his own erratic movements and he wondered briefly if the gunner had been holding him all the time he had been asleep. Instead of being disturbed by the thought, he found the sergeant's continuing presence oddly reassuring. On his right, Chris seemed to be sleeping but as Ezra tried to sit upright and hold back the pressure that was steadily building in his chest, the pilot roused and, opening his eyes, looked anxiously into his face. At that moment Ezra seriously doubted that Larabee had relaxed his guard even for a second since they had boarded the boat.

"Ezra? What is it?"

Unable to fight the urge any longer, he levered himself up and leaned forward, finally succumbing to a violent and exhausting fit of coughing that left him pale and shaking in its wake. The sharp, coppery taste of blood filled his mouth and he curbed a natural urge to spit, reluctant to so readily broadcast the fact that he was now, without any possible doubt, bleeding into his lung. He sank back again only to find that the slightest pressure against the wound in his back had become intolerable and instead he turned to lean wearily against Chris, no longer concerned with appearances, just needing to ease the pain in any way he could.

"I'm fine," he breathed, knowing perfectly well that his words held neither truth nor conviction.

"No, you're not. Christ! Just listen to you." Chris slipped a cool hand under the blanket, placing it over Ezra's chest low on the left side. The Southerner flinched at the touch, reacting to the pilot's chilled fingers on his skin, but Chris pressed his palm flat against his ribcage. Ezra knew exactly what he would feel; the unmistakable bubbling of air moving through liquid. His Captain's response was not unexpected. "Goddamn, Ezra. How long have you been like this? Why didn't you say something?"

Ezra couldn't bring himself to tell Chris that to admit what he already knew to someone else, would have made it too real and that he, the man never at a loss for something to say, had no words to tell them that he thought he was dying. "Would it have made any difference?" He sighed, a combination of resignation and utter weariness. "Does it make any difference now?"

The look on Chris's face was enough for him. He was right. It made no difference at all,

because there was nothing anyone could do. He would slowly bleed into his chest until his lungs finally collapsed under the pressure and he could no longer breathe. And then he would die. The co-pilot leaned forward again, grimacing as he tried to smother another cough but his body won and he was forced to respond to the urgent demands of his body to clear his congested lung. Finally, spent, out of breath and with bright, frothing, blood on his lips and chin, he briefly closed his eyes and sank back, guiltily wiping the damning evidence from mouth with the back of a shaking hand.

Buck appeared, kneeling worriedly beside him, although Ezra had barely noticed him move and he tried to establish how the sergeant had managed to change position so quickly without him being aware of it. At the back of his mind, that small fact worried him, but it worried him less than the gunner's expression, which the Southerner could, even now, read like an open book. The hopelessness he could bear, but the undisguised sadness he saw there both touched and frightened him. He looked quickly away, unwilling to follow where his thoughts were leading as the sergeant firmly but with great care gathered him up and tried to make him comfortable. Ezra gave a tired smile, as a few seconds later Buck demanded Chris give over his jacket once again, amused that Larabee did so without question.

"Buck," he began, "You don't have to..."

"Shut up, Ezra. You ain't got no say in this." Wilmington continued to adjust the blankets, adding his own fleece-lined jacket to Larabee's in an attempt to not only provide additional warmth but also to buffer the hardness of the deck. "Goddamned officers. No fucking sense," he continued, muttering, as he worked with a sureness and speed that in itself began to ease some of Ezra's apprehension. "What's with this stoical shit anyway? You learn that sufferin' in silence crap from the limey's, huh?" Ezra knew he was not expecting any answers, just venting his own obvious frustration in a way that only Buck Wilmington could. Oddly enough the Southerner found the ongoing litany of well-intentioned abuse had a calming effect, as the sergeant's words flowed over and around him. Finally the gunner stopped, and with a firm hand on his shoulder looked him straight in the eye. "You hang in there, you hear?" His voice dropped to little more than a whisper. "Didn't get you this far for you to go running out on us now, pard." The fingers tightened briefly in an affectionate squeeze, and suddenly he smiled. "We're in this lousy fix together and you ain't getting off the hook so easy. Hell, you already owe me for carryin' you that last mile..."

Ezra reached up and clasped the sergeant's forearm. "Thank you. And Buck..." he took a cautious breath, unwilling to trigger any further coughing, as he tried to find the right words "...whatever happens..."

Wilmington quickly broke eye contact and looked away, not allowing him to finish. "Hey, enough talk already, lieutenant! Doctor Buck is telling you to rest up now, okay?"

Ezra sighed. Perhaps it was easier for everyone if the charade that he was going to be fine continued but, whether Buck and Chris were willing to acknowledge it or not, he was under no illusions that his time was fast running out; a fluttering heart, already tripping in its haste to compensate for the blood he had lost, and the sinister bubbling deep in his chest told their own grim story. Beside him, Larabee sat in silence, but the Southerner could feel his eyes on him and he turned his head just enough to bring the captain into his field of vision. He half expected Chris to look away but the older man, his eyes deeply shadowed with fatigue, met and held his gaze. Unlike Buck, Larabee was a difficult one to read but it didn't take a genius to work out that Chris was a man at the end of his rope. At any other time he might have viewed the sheer irony of that particular analogy with a degree of humour but there was nothing remotely funny about Larabee's guardedly intense expression. He was carrying responsibility like a crushing weight on his shoulders; assuming with the mantle of command, the burden of guilt.

"Captain Larabee. You look like shit."

He heard Buck give a surprised snort of laughter, and was gratified to see Chris struggle with a moment of confusion before he allowed himself a wry grin, his lopsided smile exaggerated by the uneven swelling of his lip. "Thanks, Ezra. I really needed to know that."

The Southerner lips curved in the slightest of smiles then he sobered as he concentrated on controlling his breathing enough to allow him to talk. "Tell me, Chris," he began conversationally, "Didn't the krauts do a good enough job?"

The pilot frowned and tilted his head, caught off guard by the unexpected challenge. "Uh, want to run that by me again?"

"Beating up on you." He paused, as much to conserve his energy as to give Larabee a moment to get over the indignation that he already knew would be the pilot's first reaction. Predictably Larabee's face darkened, although he said nothing, waiting instead for Ezra finish what he had to say. A courtesy he knew he would not have been granted at any other time. "So you just go right on and finish the job yourself, correct?" But there was no censure in the softly spoken accusation.

Tight-lipped, Chris looked away in stony silence, and the Southerner used the interval to take a calmly measured breath, allowing himself a few seconds respite. He had found the effort of talking more taxing than he would have thought possible but there were things that needed to be said and he didn't have the luxury of time.

"Goddamn it, I know what you're thinking..."

"Let it go, Ezra." He sounded tired.

"And you're wrong, Chris."

"And you're out of line, Lieutenant."

Ezra smiled, recognising the defensiveness in his words. "Pulling rank, Captain Larabee? Decidedly unfair tactics..." He stopped abruptly as, without warning, he coughed explosively, a harsh, hacking, sound that dredged the pooled blood from his lungs and sent shockwaves of pain through his chest. A thrill of fear went through him as he fought for air, but he was drowning and blood was in his throat, filling his mouth and he retched convulsively as his body tried to purge itself. He reached out clumsily, his fingers clutching at Larabee's shirt but his fingers felt numb and he could not hold on. Instead he snatched at air and with a terrible sense of sadness and loss, he understood that he was alone. With a frantic effort of will he hawked and spat, choking on a spray of bloody phlegm but driven by the compulsion that he had to let Chris know that he wasn't to blame. Vision spinning into a darkening spiral he felt himself falling backwards from a great height and through the gathering mist he focused the last of his energy on the pilot's shocked, white, face, forcing out the three words that he needed Chris to hear: "Not...your fault."

He didn't remember exactly how he came to be on deck, but he did know that he had obeyed a blind and unreasoning instinct to be free of the suddenly claustrophobic confines of the wheelhouse. To escape. *Run away?* He gulped down clean, cold, draughts of frigid air; the force of the wind stealing his breath away as he was assaulted by icy barbs of driving rain and sea spray that stung his face and quickly soaked him to the skin. He didn't care. In fact he welcomed the almost brutal physical shock of it as, for a moment, everything but the need to hold on and stop himself being swept overboard was driven from his mind. He grabbed for a deck line, adrenaline coursing through his veins as he fought the raw power of the storm but the emotions raging within him were more than a match for the storm raging without. Bracing himself he edged forward, momentarily questioning his sanity, as a wave smashed into the bow and sent thousands of gallons of water cascading over the vessel in a drenching spume that crashed noisily to the deck, before draining quickly away through the scuppers.

Chris sank back against the reassuringly solid structure of the wheelhouse and flicked a strand of wet hair off his forehead, recognising the madness in trying to cross the open deck; guilty of poor judgement he may be, suicidal he was not. Wiping salt spray from his face in a gesture of weary resignation he allowed his shoulders to slump and tried to dismiss the all-too vivid picture from his mind of Ezra, wide-eyed and stricken with undisguised fear, choking on his own blood. Impossible. It was seared into his brain as surely as the imprint of a branding iron. He pushed down the urge to shout his frustration and anger to the wind as Ezra's last words gnawed relentlessly at him, slowly twisting the knife of self-loathing in his guts. *Not your fault.* He shivered and hunched his shoulders against the wind and rain, knowing that to remain for any length of time on the open deck in such conditions was not

only dangerous but stupid. After only a few minutes he was soaked to the skin, and while exposure to the elements had quickly succeeded in neutralising his own raging emotions and gone a long way towards clearing his head, it had done nothing to clear his conscience. He would have to go back, simply because it was madness not to, but he needed just another few moments to prepare himself. He already felt foolish for having given in so readily to sentiment and reacted with his heart rather than his head. He was a Captain in the United States Army Air Force, for God's sake! *And Ezra was going to die because of him.*

He slammed his fist into the wheelhouse and felt the wooden panel give under the force of the punch, perversely satisfied with the jolt of pain that shot along the back of his hand and into his wrist. He deserved that. Although at the back of his mind he knew that such a juvenile exhibition of temper was going to benefit no one in the long run, for now it just felt good. He sighed again. If only he had not hesitated at the window...*if only.* He closed his eyes, heedless of the storm raging around him. 'If onlies' ranked right up there with the 'what ifs'; a pointless exercise in second guessing what might have been the outcome given a different set of circumstances. He had played that game when his wife and son had died in the fire. What if he'd been home that night...what if he had checked that faulty gas burner...what if...But he had eventually learned then that it changed nothing, except perhaps the amount of pain it was possible for one man to inflict on himself. Chris thoughtfully flexed his fingers and suddenly let go of his anger. Buck was right: there was no going back. Ever. Larabee took a deep breath, connecting again with the here and now, and feeling for the first time the numbing cold that had already stiffened his muscles and set his teeth chattering. He was soaked to the skin, his thin shirt offering no protection from the rain as it clung wetly to his body. Time to move.

The sound, at once familiar yet not immediately identifiable, stopped him in his tracks. Not of the storm the low rumbling purr at seemed to be no more than an echo of the trawler's labouring diesel engine thrown back by the howling gale. Chris tilted his head, senses suddenly heightened and his pulse quickening, as the purr became a growl. There was no doubt in his mind that there was something else out there. Another vessel. He launched himself forward, ears straining as he tried to filter out the extraneous noise of the weather, feeling first a surge of anticipation as the rumble grew steadily louder then, deep in his belly, an inexplicable and undeniably primal sense of impending danger.

The dull grey shape, as solid and immovable as a mountain, loomed out of the storm, sharply raked lines cleaving through the waves as over three hundred feet of riveted steel crossed the trawler's bows. That they would collide was never in question for, even as the fishing boat heeled hard over to port, responding to the Dutch pilot's desperate attempt at evasive action, the wind and waves drove them relentlessly forwards.

JD felt awkward in the face of Vin's continuing silence, not sure if he should say anything or whether it was better to leave well alone and let the Texan talk when he was ready. Tanner was not known to be a great conversationalist, but they had been walking together for a good five minutes and the bombardier had yet to utter a single word. JD sighed and decided that he didn't know what to say anyway. He already felt foolish for having cried in front of the older man, although he didn't think that Vin would hold it against him. The rain had eased but it was still drizzling steadily and Dunne was beginning to feel uncomfortably damp. The rain seemed to be able to find its way down his shirt collar whatever he did to try and stop it and, even now, he could feel droplets of icy rain trickling down his neck. He cast a surreptitious glance at Vin, but if he was in any discomfort he didn't show it. Instead he walked with his head down and his hands shoved deep in his pockets, lost in his own thoughts, obviously still not feeling any pressing urge to speak. The young gunner waited a few more minutes before finally working up enough courage to break the silence.

"I didn't think it would be like this."

Vin lifted his head and gave a wry smile. "You're not Robinson Crusoe, kid. Hell, d'you think any of us would be here if we'd known?"

JD hesitated a moment. "Yeah, I reckon we'd still be here."

Tanner sighed; a deep, tired sound. "Maybe. Guess deep down we all still wanna be heroes. Knights in shining armour looking for, and never finding, the holy grail."

Dunne was surprised by the depth of feeling in the lieutenant's words and at the same time recognised a profound weariness in the Texan. Vin, he knew, was on his second tour. He could have gone home, yet he had chosen to stay. The young gunner had a sudden desire to understand what drove a man like Vin Tanner but instead of asking any of the dozen questions that leapt into his mind, he lapsed into thoughtful silence, having no wish to break the fragile alliance that had somehow developed between the two of them. An alliance based more on what had not been said rather than what had.

"Vin?"

"What?" "Do you ever..." He stopped abruptly, and then fuelled by a quick, deep breath, he rushed on. "D'you ever get scared, Vin?"

JD thought for a moment he had gone too far. It was not a question one man asked of another and Vin had stopped dead in his tracks. Dunne found his eye wandering to Tanner's hands -- *just watch out for that right hook* -- but they were still in his pockets and when he looked up again, Vin was watching him with what might have been a hint of amusement. He flinched as Tanner's hand snaked out, but it settled on his shoulder and he felt the bite of the slim fingers through the fabric of his uniform.

"All the time, kid." His voice was soft and JD understood that the words were from the

heart not just a platitude to soothe his own fears. "All the time." The voice dropped almost to a whisper as he suddenly bowed his head. "But, God help me, never as much as I am right now."

The brutal shock of being pitched into the churning and foaming sea was matched only by the shock of the heart-stopping frigidity of the water that enveloped him as he was eagerly snatched up and just as quickly thrust downwards by an angry, passing wave. Salt water filled his mouth and nose, forcing its way down his throat and suffocating him, as the violently breaking crests swept him along and drove him deep underwater. Instinctively he kicked out, fighting against the crushing weight of the waves and struggling to reach the surface, pure adrenaline shooting through his veins as the initial shock of being hurled overboard quickly turned to unrestrained panic. Clawing his way upwards, limbs already heavy from the numbing cold, he broke the surface just long enough to fill his tortured and oxygen-starved lungs before the pounding waves smashed him under again. Thrashing wildly, and goaded as much by raw fear as the will to survive, he forced his arms and legs to keep moving until once again he broke free of the water's clinging and deadly pull to suck in a draft of precious air. Something struck his shoulder and he cried out, choking and gagging as he swallowed another generous serving of seawater in payment for his moment of inattention. Pain, sharp and intense, speared through his right arm and upper chest but rapidly became a trifling distraction in the greater scheme of things as he focused all his energy and determination on staying afloat and, more importantly, staying alive but the cold was quickly robbing him of his stamina and his arms and legs were no longer responding as readily to he would have liked.

As the seconds passed, too quickly, into minutes he finally stopped fighting the ceaselessly rolling waves, recognising that it was a battle he could never win, and suddenly the panic that had consumed him gave way to a chilling calm. He was going to die. In the same moment that he accepted the idea as incontrovertible fact, a spark of rebellion flared, the pure instinct to survive coupled with a nameless primal emotion wrestling logic and reason into submission. *Fuck that!* Struggling to keep his head above the water and avoid swallowing any more seawater, he took several deep breaths and, ignoring the fact that he was shuddering convulsively with cold, turned lazily with the roll of the swells to try and locate the one of the boats. Remembering the sickening force with which the trawler had struck the warship, he was forced to consider the disagreeable fact that the Dutch fishing boat may already have sunk. *Ezra and Buck*. He swallowed the bile that rose in his throat and again anxiously raked his eyes over the choppy and unfriendly sea as he trod water and, calling on the last resource available to him, he prayed.

The boat was lying low in the water, taking on water fast and listing dangerously to

starboard. It was so close that Chris wondered how he had not seen it before. *So close, yet he might as well be reaching for the moon.* Each successive wave was carrying him a little further from the stricken vessel and, although he had the will, he no longer had the energy to make any headway against the mighty juggernaut that was the North Sea. His eyes scoured the endless grey mass of heaving water for any sign of movement; any sign of life. For Christ's sake where was the goddamn ship they had rammed into? It had been real enough when the trawler had ploughed into its armour-plated hull. A vindictive wave reared overhead before collapsing in on itself and crashing down on him, tons of foaming water submerging him again, stealing his breath away and trying to force liquid fingers deep down into his straining lungs. He fought with every ounce of his rapidly dwindling strength as, in a remote part of his brain, he understood that he was drowning.

His body was sending him urgent signals to take a breath as the carbon dioxide in his blood triggered the automatic response to rid his body of the build up of harmful gas and take on board life-giving oxygen. Only, there was no oxygen, there was only endless gallons of water ready to occupy his lungs in its place. His vision sparkled; bright pinpoints of light exploding in a fusillade of rainbow colours, and as the rush of water and the rhythmic pounding of his own heart drummed in his ears he felt himself falling.

"Larabee! Can you hear me Larabee?" The voice, which seemed to come from a long way off, was urgent, frightened even. "Don't try to move, son." Move? No. Couldn't move. Couldn't speak. Couldn't breathe. For a moment he seemed to exist outside of himself; detached; suspended in time. Then he screamed and the pain rushed in to fill the void, consuming him, the sheer weight of it pinning him helplessly to the ground. The sound was that of a wounded animal – not him. Couldn't be him. Was him. A sea of faces; white; shocked; frightened; embarrassed; classmates, looked down on him and still the scream went on until there was nothing left inside him to sustain it and it diminished into a ragged succession of sobs. "What happened here, Coach?" "He fell." "Goddamn!" Fell. Yes. He fell. Sweet Jesus! His back. The pain rolled over him in waves. Waves...

The sea held him, caressed him, enfolded him, possessed him and he surrendered. Safe. Nothing mattered now. No pain. Drifting. Detached and suspended in time....

"Okay, you go first, Chris. There's a fair drop at the end but you should be okay." No. He fell. "Chris. We don't have much time." No! "What the hell's wrong with you?" "I can't do it, Ezra." Can't do it. Too high. He fell. "So what's it to be, Captain Larabee? There are only two choices. We can go, or we can stay; but either way we do it together."...

The light burned bright, swelling from a pinpoint to a dazzling blaze that blinded him, yet drew him forward. There was no cold. No fear. No danger here...

"Not...your fault." "...you're out of line, Lieutenant." "Not...your fault." Not...your fault." "...your fault."...

The light flickered; wavered; ...I'm sorry... Went out.

A babble of words from a dozen voices he could not understand assaulted his ears as his waterlogged body convulsed and his stomach attempted to turn itself inside out, seawater and bile jetting out of his nose and mouth, as his body violently rebelled and instinctively purged itself. Senses reeling in utter confusion he was helpless, dominated by purely physical reactions as he choked and coughed, unable to draw breath as he painfully brought up the salt water that had infiltrated his lungs. A succession of brutal, heaving, paroxysms left him shuddering violently, gasping and floundering like a landed fish, unable to either control his movements or speak as he weakly puked the last of the seawater from his painfully aching gut, but his first convulsive and agonisingly tortured breath, tainted as it was with diesel fumes, brine and the sourness of bile, was the sweetest he ever remembered.

Disorientated, and with his mind filled with confusingly unrelated bursts of random images and sensations, a blind and unreasoning panic seized him as urgent and intrusive hands moved over him, roughly stripping him of his clothes. He wanted desperately to resist but the ability to achieve any purposeful movement continued to elude him and he was obliged to submit as he frantically struggled to bring his disordered thoughts under control. A terrible sense of urgency picked insistently at the ragged edges of his awareness; something he needed to remember but could not quite get a grip on before it slipped maddeningly away and out of reach again. Someone was talking to him but his teeth were chattering so violently that he could not have answered even if he had been able to make any sense of what was being said. He focused on catching his breath, snatching gulps of air between fits of coughing until, drained of all energy and cold beyond belief, he finally accepted that he was at least safe, if not entirely well.

Shivering convulsively he found himself being hastily bundled into several layers of blankets and while he could feel the rough texture against his naked skin there was no sensation of warmth. He closed his eyes, feeling sick, exhausted and so terribly cold that it hurt. *And he'd left his jacket in the wheelhouse.* The scattered pieces of his memory flew together and meshed in the space of a heartbeat, triggered by a single image, and his stomach lurched sickeningly in a reaction that had nothing to do with the amount of seawater he had swallowed. *Dear God! Ezra. Buck.* How could he have forgotten? He wanted to shout, to make someone hear, but his throat was burning and all he could manage was a rasping, croak that ended in a hacking cough. Driven by a quiet desperation to make someone understand, he summoned enough strength to buck against his helpers but it was no contest. In spite of his struggles he was quickly moved to a stretcher and as straps were buckled firmly around his chest and thighs he could only choke back the rising flood of

frustration, unfocused rage and grief that now threatened to overwhelm him. Head spinning as he was manhandled below decks, unable to orientate himself to either place or time and incapable of articulating his worst fears, his only instinct was to fight.

“Chris! Easy, pard, it’s okay. Chris, listen to me. It’s Buck. Now settle down for Christ’s sake! You’re okay. I’m okay. So quit fussin’ and lie still, goddamn it!” The familiar voice, at once chastising and reassuring, smashed effortlessly through the mindless panic and confusion, and in that instant Chris’s resistance collapsed into an almost atonic state of shocked submission. *Buck*. The voice continued conversationally although he could hear the tightness of suppressed emotion in the sergeant’s words. “Thought we’d lost you, you dumb son-of-bitch. Taking a dip in the North Sea while the rest of us do all the hard work! Typical frigging officer.”

Chris blinked owlishly, slow to respond, and gradually a bedraggled and blanket-wrapped Wilmington came into focus. He swallowed hard, determined to reply, although his throat had constricted painfully and he found he was seeing his friend through a blur of tears. “Couldn’t resist a swim yourself, huh?” The words rasped hoarsely from a raw throat and he tried to smile, but he was having difficulty keeping any semblance of control over his wayward emotions and instead he squeezed his eyes tightly shut, suddenly afraid that he was going to embarrass himself and cry. He won that battle, but only just, after a brief struggle and with a ragged intake of breath he steadied his voice enough to mumble a cautiously apprehensive: “Ezra?”

He became aware of a vague sensation of increased pressure in his fingers and realised that Buck had clasped his hand as he leaned over the stretcher. He could barely feel his arms let alone anything as distant as his extremities, but he appreciated the gesture, experiencing an incredible rush of affection for his oldest friend. Realising that Buck had not made any attempt to answer him, he took another careful breath determined at all costs to remain calm although his heart was thudding hollowly in his chest. “Buck. What about Ezra?”

A brief flicker of undisguised concern crossed the gunner’s face and with his free hand he pulled the blanket closer around him. “He’s here.”

“But is he...?”

“Doc’s working on him,” interrupted the sergeant quickly, before giving a tired smile. “And right now I reckon he might in better shape than you are, pard.”

Shivering violently as his frozen body tried in vain to warm itself, and feeling the painful rawness in his throat and lungs, Chris was fully prepared to believe that for once Buck might actually be telling the truth.

He felt pressure on his ribs. At first only an uncomfortable sensation in his side that

intruded on his awareness but then quickly escalating until it bordered on being painful. Not the unrelenting tension inside his chest that had robbed him of the very capacity to breathe but something small, solid and unyielding, pushing hard and with steadily increasing force against a small area of his ribcage. He tried to draw back but the focus of his discomfort, concentrated in his left side, suddenly expanded into a vicious blossoming of sharply defined pain, which catapulted him back to consciousness in a single, nauseating, instant. *Jesus Christ!* He grunted, arching his back, the explosive sound prompted by the sudden and involuntary contraction of his diaphragm, as the 'something' punched through the very muscle of his chest wall. The intensity of the pain faded rapidly to a dull throb and he felt an almost immediate easing of the fullness in his chest and, while it was still a real effort for him to breathe, the crushing sensation of suffocation that had been so terrifying to experience began to relax its grip.

It took him several moments to adjust to the abrupt change in his state of awareness and although his eyes were open, he was having difficulty in trying to bring anything of his surroundings into focus. Instead, he laid perfectly still, each intake of breath a cautious experiment, and slowly began to absorb and decipher the sights, sounds and even the odours, around him. He had no idea where he was but he knew this was no fishing boat. After a few minutes his fingers instinctively crept to his side to investigate the newest source of pain but a firm hand blocked the action and while the accompanying words registered, it took him several attempts to attach any meaning to them. He considered the quietly spoken reassurance that he was doing fine and was debating whether to believe when he felt a quick nip in the crook of his right arm. A slow turn of his head brought him face to face with an earnest-looking sailor, who was securing a length of rubber tubing to his outstretched arm. He was talking quickly and Ezra could barely make sense of what he was saying but he managed to snatch at a half dozen familiar words and realise that he was being told that he had lost a lot of blood and was being given a plasma transfusion. He nodded. Understood. He remembered the warm, wetness flowing freely down his back after he had been shot and, later, the blood that had welled up from his lung in such a distressingly spectacular manner just before he had passed out, and there was no doubt in his mind that the medic was telling the truth.

He struggled to bring the scattered remnants of his memory into a meaningful whole but it was like trying to juggle a handful of eels and he soon gave up. Whatever had gone before, whatever had brought him to this moment, for now it was enough for him to know that he was alive. He closed his eyes and forced himself to rest. To trust. One never, he reminded himself, looked a gift horse in the mouth and this particular gift was one he was not inclined to refuse.

Buck could not recall a time when he had felt so utterly and completely drained and, sitting in a corner of the wardroom, wrapped in several blankets with a mug of steaming tea in his hands, he thought he might never be able to muster the energy to move again. Exhausted both in body and spirit, he had reached a stage of listless indifference that had become his meagre defence against the encroaching memories of the last seventy two hours which now threatened to come crashing down on him with no less fury than the awesome waves of the North Sea. He shuddered, partly because he was chilled to the bone and partly from the vivid recollection of being swamped by frigid waters as he had frantically tried to keep an unconscious Ezra's head above water and them both afloat.

It had happened too quickly for him to consider what might be the best thing for him to do. He had reacted, driven purely by instinct and no less by fear, and he wondered now that any of them had managed to avoid being drowned. He remembered thinking briefly about Chris, suddenly being desperately afraid for his best friend, but then there had been no time to dwell on Larabee's fate as events had quickly overtaken him. He knew that whatever had happened to Chris, there was nothing he could do to change it. His focus had then become centred on Ezra; a fierce sense of loyalty refusing to allow him to desert the wounded lieutenant after having gone through so much with him. He had made a promise not to leave him and he wasn't about to renege on that promise, even though he suspected that Ezra was already close to death.

The trawler had begun to sink more rapidly than Buck would have believed possible and he knew he probably owed not only Ezra's life but also his own to the enigmatic Dutch fisherman, whose name he had yet to discover. That first shocking moment, as the sea washed over him, had taken his breath away and it had taken him several seconds to start functioning again, paralysed by the shock of the freezing water, which he was sure had briefly stopped his heart. By the time he had taken his next gasping breath, choking as he inadvertently inhaled a generous helping of salt water at the same time, the fisherman had Ezra supported by a lifebuoy and Buck had found himself being hauled by the Dutchman into a protective huddle with the wounded airman between them.

It had seemed an eternity yet no time at all before the crew of the British destroyer into which they had just ploughed, efficiently snatched the three of them from the icy grip of the North Sea. Even now, he could not easily rid himself of the picture of Ezra, lying inert on the storm-lashed deck, as pale and as cold as a corpse; the wound in his back leached of all colour save the shadow of bruising forming a darker rim around the bullet hole while, in stark contrast, bright blood slowly bubbled between his bloodless lips. Until that moment Buck had tried not to think about Chris but as he frantically stammered through chattering teeth that

there had been four of them aboard the stricken vessel and that another man was still lost, he found that he could no longer distance himself from the emotions that he had been so carefully guarding. A terrible sinking, sense of loss had swept over him then and, as he stood shivering in the bitter wind, he had scanned the churning sea for any sign of his friend, but had seen nothing but a rapidly sinking boat surrounded by scattered flotsam and a never-ending vista of rolling, crashing waves.

“Fill ‘er up for ya, mate?”

The voice startled him. An intrusion. He had been lost in his thoughts and for a moment he struggled to understand what the young seaman standing in front of him had said. Then he realised the significance of the teapot in the sailor’s hand and mutely shook his head; he had already drunk more than enough of the sweet, strong brew to last him a lifetime but the question served as a prompt and he sipped again at the still-scalding tea he had been nursing in his cupped hands. He felt its heat all the way to his stomach, but it only reminded him just how cold he still was. He glanced across the wardroom to where a navy medic still hovered attentively around Chris, thinking that if he felt frozen to the core after the mercifully brief time he had spent in the water how much worse must Larabee be feeling? Yet Chris was alive. Half drowned, bruised, battered and with a haunted and haggard look about him to be sure but still, alive and, miraculously, so was Ezra. He had been allowed to briefly look in on the lieutenant in the tiny, cramped and claustrophobic sickbay and he had been relieved to learn that Ezra was holding his own. Hard for him to believe but he could not deny the evidence of his own eyes. At first he had been disturbed by the tube in his chest that drained dark blood into a water-filled glass jar but took the surgeon’s word for it that it looked a lot worse than it really was. There had been no opportunity to talk, and the lieutenant had looked tired and sick, but as he had turned to leave the Southerner had given him a slow but unmistakable wink. That small gesture had been enough, not only to make him smile but also to convince him that Ezra Standish was going to be just fine; somehow, in his usual fashion, the cunning bastard had managed to cheat the odds yet again. Putting down the half-empty mug, he leaned back with a heavy sigh, relaxing his shoulders and tugging the scratchy wool blankets closer around his naked body. God, but he was tired.

As exhausted as he was, closing his eyes brought no rest. Instead it seemed to be an invitation for his overtired mind to run riot, to parade a catalogue of randomly selected moments before him that brought back with them an intensity of emotion that he had, until now, managed to keep at bay. With an effort, he shoved aside the unwanted reminders of the last few days that were starting to crowd in on him, and focused instead on the prospect of getting home – or at least what passed for home these days. Maybe one day, when time had blurred some of the razor-sharp edges of his memory and he could view events from a

distance, he would be able to revisit those moments. Maybe this would even be a story to tell his grandchildren. But for now those thoughts, those memories, those feelings, had to be constrained because he knew that if he once let go, that if he just once allowed the reality to take hold, then he would be damned. Stretching out on the makeshift bunk, he rolled the blankets tightly, cocoon-like, around himself. Home. Now what was the name of that cute little filly back in the village? The one the guys had nicknamed the Nutcracker? A smile crossed his lips. If he couldn't sleep, then the least he could do was dream.

oooOOOooo

Blue sky. Pale, washed-out blue, but for all that still blue. Ezra blinked several times. And clouds. He was looking straight up and the sky was a vast, watercolour, canopy overhead. He finally forced his heavy-lidded eyes to stay open for longer than half a second and managed to orientate himself. He was on a stretcher. Being carried. Vague recollections of a bumpy ride in the back of a van – an ambulance he supposed – and, with the impact of a biblical revelation, two and two suddenly made four. Hospital. Not quite where he wanted to be but at least one step closer to it. With a sigh he let his eyes slide closed again. Terra Firma.

His chest hurt. The morphine was wearing off and as if wasn't enough that he still had a bullet in his back, a sudden jerk of the stretcher tugged at the tube that was anchored in his side a few inches below his left nipple and his eyes flew open as he stifled a yelp of protest and pain. *Jesus Christ!* That was an attention-getter alright. The blue sky was too-quickly quickly replaced by a sadly uninspiring ceiling as he was moved indoors. Once stationary, he lifted his head and glanced around at an equally uninspiring and chillingly clinical room. No. Not quite where he wanted to be at all. Unsettled by the prospect of what was undoubtedly yet to come, he slowly lowered his head again, and was a little ashamed to find himself missing the reassuring presence of Buck Wilmington.

The reality was that he had no idea where Buck was. Or Chris for that matter. Hell, he had no idea where he was, let alone anyone else. He had briefly caught a glimpse of both men on the dock at Harwich before he had been spirited away with almost frightening efficiency by military ambulance. Now it seemed he was on his own. His recollection of events was at best sketchy and he seemed to have lost a significant slice of his memory between getting shot and waking up on board the Royal Navy destroyer, although single moments kept flashing on and off in his mind like an Aldis lamp signalling in a graphically visual Morse code. He recalled quite vividly an instant of raw panic when he had suddenly wakened in the sick bay, the fear so thick that he could taste it, as he surfaced from a

nightmare in which he was drowning. In a cold sweat, bug-eyed and gasping for breath, he had called out for Chris. He didn't know why. In fact he had been embarrassed by the outburst, but he had been left with an uneasy feeling that there was something important that he had forgotten.

"Lieutenant Ezra Standish."

He looked for the owner of the voice only to realise that the person wasn't talking to him but about him, and the pronouncement of his name was followed by a stream of medical jargon, which sounded suitably impressive to the Southerner even though he was not familiar with many of the terms. Already apprehensive, his unease gathered momentum as words became actions and his conviction that all doctors were sadists at heart was only strengthened over the course of the next fifteen minutes. He was thankful that the doctor didn't ask him too many questions since he had never quite mastered the art of being able to talk while he was holding his breath.

After a timely shot of morphine, he was inclined to be more charitable and rethink his earlier opinion of the medical profession, deciding that perhaps they were not completely devoid of compassion after all. The painkiller didn't make him feel any less lousy; but it did allow him to feel lousy in a state of relative comfort. As he drowsed, he slowly absorbed the fact that he was going to be left with a German bullet in his lung although he appreciated the fact that it was safer to leave it where it was than to try and remove it. As if memories weren't going to be enough of a reminder he would have a more concrete legacy to carry with him than most.

The shadows were lengthening before he roused again, his sense of disassociation stronger than ever, and it took him several minutes to separate the tangled threads of his consciousness. Reclining against a stack of pillows and staring vacantly at a shaft of light on the wall opposite his bed, he fancied he could hear the cogs of his mind engaging and slowly turning until, once again, he was able to orientate himself. He sighed, felt a tug in his side, and after a quick glance at the offending tubing that he both resented and yet recognised as the very thing that had saved his life, turned his head away. He couldn't ignore it but he didn't want to dwell on it either. Another sigh escaped him as he quickly discovered that his right arm was tethered to a bottle of blood. He suddenly felt sick, his stomach quivering threateningly and a rush of saliva flooding his mouth, finding something faintly nauseous in watching someone else's dark, viscous, blood flowing into his own veins. Taking and holding a deep breath he swallowed hard and succeeded in fighting and controlling the urge to throw up. He closed his eyes again and slowly exhaled. He should have stayed asleep.

The soothing buzz of muted conversation droned pleasantly around him and he was more than happy to drift along with it. He recognised that he owed his current lack of focus

and almost absurd sense of well being to the mellowing effects of the morphine he had been given, remembering well its seductive embrace from his spell in a Cyprus hospital after Ploesti. He had certainly been on familiar terms with the potent narcotic then. His mind skittered away from that particular memory like a cockroach escaping from under an upturned stone seeking a safer haven. He would not go there.

“Ezra?”

It was spoken so quietly that for a moment he thought his mind was playing tricks on him; a not unheard of phenomenon while nicely juiced if he remembered correctly, but a painfully hoarse cough, followed by a slightly louder but more rasping echo of the two syllables of his name, finally convinced him that he was not hallucinating and he responded by opening his eyes a fraction.

For a moment he was at a loss as a tangle of confused emotions vied for supremacy. Unable to find either his voice or any words worth a damn, he settled instead for a gesture. The handshake was awkward; left handed, both men restricted in their movements to some extent, but Chris’s grip was reassuringly firm as his fingers closed around Ezra’s own. The Southerner responded in kind as he concentrated on the figure standing beside his bed, disturbed by the haunted look in Larabee’s darkly shadowed eyes, which the smile that followed did nothing to erase. The pilot’s left arm was in a sling and there seemed to be more bruising than he remembered along his jaw line. Still more gaps in his memory needing to be filled. Leaning back he released Chris’s hand, the effort of keeping his arm outstretched finally proving too much of a strain on his ribs.

Larabee started to speak, coughed and started again. “You look a lot better than the last time I saw you.” His voice was gravely, little more than a painfully forced whisper.

Ezra tilted his head, a wry smile tugging at one corner of his mouth. “That’s a helluva more than I can say for you.” He lifted his hand in a small gesture that indicated the sling but suggested much more, then took a deep breath to fuel his next words. “I think I must’ve skipped a few chapters.”

Larabee’s shoulders slumped and he looked quickly down at the floor. “Jesus, Ezra...” He started with a rush but stopped abruptly, not willing or perhaps not able, to continue, then paused to dredge up a shuddering sigh before briefly closing his eyes and tapping his chest with his good hand. “Take my word for it, diesel oil and seawater...bad mix.”

“No match for a generous shot of Kentucky bourbon I’ll grant you,” murmured Ezra, covering his confusion as he hastily scabbled among the scattered fragments of his memory for points of reference that might allow him to make a logical connection. Oil and seawater? He came up empty handed and with a quick, almost embarrassed, shake of his head admitted defeat. “I don’t remember...”

Larabee cleared his throat again and his eyes slid away to focus on something outside the window. "My own fault."

My fault. A spark ignited in the back of Standish's mind and a fleeting image of Chris turning his back; walking away; a door slamming; flashed through his consciousness. A cog turned; clicked into place. *Déjà vu.*

"Went overboard," he continued, still staring into the distance, his voice flat and expressionless, "So fucking cold..."

So Chris had ended up in the drink. Another missing piece. Ezra waited, but Chris seemed to be lost in his own thoughts and he knew enough about reliving painful events to respect the momentary lapse. Some things were not meant for sharing; others needed time; Larabee would speak when he was ready. Shifting cautiously and ignoring the discomfort in his chest that the movement provoked, he transferred his weight from one numbed buttock to the other. His own experiences had taught him that all scars were not etched in skin and bone.

After a few minutes Chris turned back, refocused, a guilty smile on his lips. "Good thing we ran into that destroyer." He gave a jerky, self-conscious laugh and then shook his head as if regretting having spoken. "Sorry, bad joke."

Ezra smiled anyway, picking up on the cue that the meeting with the British ship had not been without drama. For a long time neither man spoke. In the intervening minutes a nurse came and went; returned a second time with a chair for Chris and a command to sit followed by a warning not to stay too long. He sat. Both of them knew that it didn't pay to argue with nurses, especially ones that outranked you. Finally Larabee looked up from diligently picking at a ragged cuticle.

"I thought you were going to die."

Standish had expected any number of opening remarks. That had not been one of them. He looked keenly at his commanding officer and wondered where the conversation was going to lead. "The thought crossed my mind more than once," he confessed softly, his familiar Southern drawl somehow emphasised by the sincerity with which he delivered the words.

Chris ducked his head and stared at the floor between his feet. "I nearly got you killed, Ezra." He worried at the now bloodied cuticle. "I just want to..."

"It's finished, Chris," interrupted the Southerner, smoothly, "Let it go."

The blond head came up sharply and Larabee shook his head. "No. You don't understand. I need to...you deserve to know why."

"Why?" repeated Ezra slowly, wishing he didn't feel quite so groggy as he tried to follow Chris's latest line of thought.

“Why I acted like a goddamn faggot, arguing the toss with you instead of shinning down that rope as fast as I could.”

Back again to that moment at a third storey window. A sharply defined memory, startling in its clarity. Two men caught between a rock and a hard place; one of them almost paralysed with dread over what he was being asked to do. Unable to go back, unwilling to go forward. Stalemate.

“Chris, it doesn’t matter now...”

“Yes, it does.” His already hoarse voice dropped to a tight whisper. “It matters to me.”

Standish stared for a moment at the pilot, surprised by the quiet anguish in his words, and then gave a nod. If it mattered that much to Larabee, then he felt an obligation to listen, if only to allow Chris to lay the ghosts that seemed to be haunting him to rest.

Larabee took a moment to gather his thoughts. Now the time had come, he felt awkward and unsure of the wisdom in unburdening himself to the Southerner. He was not a man who had ever been comfortable with revealing himself to others. In fact had always been a firm believer that his past was his own and not a subject for universal scrutiny but he owed Ezra an explanation. Looking up, he met the patiently expectant gaze of his exec and knew there was no turning back; a man deserved to know why he had almost died.

“When I was fifteen I had an accident. The bolt anchoring the rope I was climbing in the school gym gave way. Twenty feet straight down.” He swallowed hard, feeling a familiar hollow in the pit of his stomach as his words again conjured the memory. “Broke my back.” Ezra remained silently attentive but Chris was aware of a subtle flicker of emotion that momentarily tightened the fine muscles around the Southerner’s eyes. Understanding? Concern? He continued: “I didn’t even pass out; just laid there like I’d been poleaxed. Couldn’t move, couldn’t breathe. Everyone looking at me. You know how it is...” Perhaps he didn’t, but Chris knew. He remembered the ring of curious faces, some awed, some horrified, some uncomfortable, but all shocked. “Then you know what? I started screaming. Couldn’t stop.” He glanced away from the steady green eyes with the pupils widely dilated by the morphine, suddenly embarrassed by the admission even though it had been twenty-five years before. “Can’t say I remember much after that. Reckon they gave me something to shut me up.” He shrugged as if it was of no consequence but the hollow in his gut had been replaced by something hot and liquid, like molten lead. “I spent three months in traction being told just how lucky I was. I never climbed anything again.” He looked up again. Ezra said nothing but this time there was no mistaking either the attentiveness or the compassion in his uncharacteristically unguarded expression. “Until yesterday. Too fucking scared.” Chris felt a painful constriction in his throat and chest that had nothing at all to do with the potent

mix of diesel oil and seawater that had irritated his lungs and stomach. "And it almost got you dead."

Ezra lowered his gaze and his free hand edged towards his bandaged chest. "I know that's what you believe and I also know that nothing I can say will change your mind, so I won't even try." He paused for what seemed to Chris like an eternity, obviously taking the time to choose his next words carefully. "But however much you want to keep beating yourself over the head because you think you somehow failed, it took a lot of guts to do what you did." He flicked a sideways glance in Chris's direction. "You know, Chris, courage isn't about having no fear; it's deciding that something else is more important than fear."

Larabee gave a bitter and dismissive snort. "Yeah, I decided I wasn't ready to die!"

The Southerner relaxed against the pillows, suddenly looking very tired, a wry smile touching his lips. "Hell, sounds like a good enough reason to me."

Chris was not sure what kind of reaction he had expected from Ezra, or even if he had expected any reaction at all, but the Southerner's calm acceptance of everything he had said left him with nothing on which he could hang his guilt. Slightly at a loss as to what he should say next, he bowed his head and wearily rubbed at his forehead, feeling the dull thud of an impending headache building behind his eyes and an overwhelming urge to sleep. God, but he was tired. He sighed. There was just one more thing that he knew he could not leave unsaid. "For Christ's sake, Ezra, I'm trying to say I'm sorry."

"I know."

The quietly sincere words, loaded with understanding, hung between them for several heartbeats until Chris raised his head at last and met the other man's steady gaze. The green eyes held his for a long moment, intensely watchful, before the sombre expression relaxed, leaving Chris with the impression that Ezra had found whatever it was he had been looking for, and the certainty that finally, there was no more to be said.

"Goddamn it! What's wrong with the frigging phone system in this country? Pigeon post would be more reliable!"

Both men turned in unison as Buck Wilmington's voice carried clearly down the quiet ward, and although the sergeant was still a good distance away from them his frustration rolled ahead of him like the bow wave of a battleship under full steam. Chris frowned at the gunner as he approached. "Got a problem, Buck?"

Wilmington's expression changed quickly from irritation to undisguised pleasure as he reached the foot of Ezra's bed. "Hey, Lieutenant!" He perched one buttock on the corner of the mattress. "Someone should plug up that leak you got there." He indicated the chest tube and the blood transfusion in one grand, sweeping gesture. "What's going in one side just

keeps comin' out of the other!"

Ezra's face registered amused scepticism as both eyebrows raised in a familiar reaction to Buck's own particular brand of humour. "Thank you for the advice, Sergeant Wilmington," he responded, with deliberate indolence, "I'm sure your input will be greatly valued by the medical profession."

Buck laughed easily, turning to Chris as the captain repeated his original question in slightly different terms. "Buck, before you manage to get us thrown out of here, what's up?"

Wilmington's grin faded into a scowl, suddenly reminded of his original purpose. "Been trying to raise base for the last hour. Just thought I'd let the guys know to break open a keg when we get back! Can't get through though. Even tried the pub in the village. Some problem at the exchange." His smile returned. "You'd think there was a war on or something."

Larabee suddenly thought of his crew, the ones left behind, wondering if the squadron would have received any news of their rescue and he knew, without any doubt, that was exactly what had been on Buck's mind when he had tried to telephone. He remembered too well the long waits for missing aircraft, where hope quickly died with each passing hour; remembered the loss of friends and comrades. Wilmington had been ahead of him on that one. Good ol', Buck. Always there. He looked keenly at the lanky gunner, as he lounged on the end of Ezra's bed, thinking how much he owed to the sergeant for the last few days. Perhaps Buck should be the one wearing the captain's bars.

"Bandits at three o'clock." Ezra's smooth voice, pitched low, penetrated his consciousness and Chris quickly focused again, smiling as he saw the object of the Southerner's terse warning moving purposefully down the ward in their direction.

He rose from the chair with as much haste as he could safely manage. "Uh, Buck. I think it might be time for us to go look for those pigeons." He threw an apologetic look at his exec that needed no further explanation and to which Ezra responded with an understanding smile.

Wilmington glanced from the nurse rapidly bearing down on them back to Chris who was already starting to move away. "I think you might be right, pard. Kinda looks like we overstayed our welcome." He quickly straightened and stood up. "Sorry, Lieutenant. You're on your own. Time for us to bail out!"

Ezra dismissed the gunner with a casual wave. "Seems I've heard that somewhere before, Sergeant Wilmington." Buck grinned broadly as he turned to leave, then stopped abruptly and wheeled back as he dug into his pocket and flipped something shiny and metallic towards the Southerner. Instinctively Ezra snatched the spinning object out of the air, quickly uncurling his fingers to show what lay in his palm. A quarter. A slow smile spread

across his face as he turned it over. Not just any quarter.

“Thought you might want to have it back. Never know when you might need it again.”

Ezra closed his fist tightly around the coin and took a deep breath, before looking up at the smiling gunner. “Heads or tails, Sergeant Wilmington?”

“You make the call, Lieutenant.” He winked. “I always seem to lose.”

Standing off to one side Chris heard the Southerner laugh softly and as the gunner walked away he fell into step beside his friend. “What the hell was all that about?”

“Just returning Ezra’s...uh...good luck charm.”

Chris frowned. He had never known the Southerner to be superstitious. “Good luck charm? Always thought Ezra liked to make his own luck.”

Buck started to laugh as they walked slowly from the ward. “He sure as hell does. And you know what, Chris? He’s gotta be the luckiest son-of-a-bitch alive.”

It had been a long time since Vin Tanner had felt the need to utter a quick prayer for deliverance during a landing. It was even longer since he had a wish to be anything on God’s green earth other than a bombardier, but at that moment he would have traded places with anyone as long as he didn’t have to be the man in the ringside seat watching the earth rush up to meet them at an alarming rate. He wasn’t sure what the pilot was doing but it sure as hell wasn’t what he was supposed to, and he was beginning to think that maybe the new Lieutenant had his eyes closed. It came to him as the heavy bomber yawed disturbingly that perhaps it was a strategy he should also consider adopting. The approach was too much fast and Vin silently urged the pilot to take her around again but instead found himself bracing for the inevitable impact. This was going to be one hell of a landing.

The Fortress touched down with a predictably bone-jarring jolt, bounced, touched again and prayer was quickly exchanged for profanity as Vin bit down on his tongue and tasted blood. Goddamn! He’d seen Chris bring a crippled crate in on two engines and do a belly landing that was smoother than the one he had just been subject to. He ignored the hollow feeling that quickly took possession of his gut at the thought and waited with growing impatience for the B17 to finally taxi off the runway; the sooner he was free and clear of Georgia Girl the better as far as he was concerned. Just the debrief to get through and then he was going to put in some serious sack time.

Quick exits had become almost a trademark with him, prompted by the need to breathe fresh air again and stretch his muscles after long hours cramped in the Fortress, but today JD had almost matched him. The young Dunne was bristling with indignation as he fell in beside the Texan. “Goddamn it, Vin! Even I could make a better landing than that.”

The little ball-turret gunner reminded Tanner of a bantam rooster when he was riled and

while he agreed wholeheartedly with the sentiment behind the protest he couldn't resist a smile. "Yeah, kid, and you can't even reach the brake pedals."

JD shot a scathing look at Tanner. "Hey, enough with the short jokes, already! This is serious. If I'm gonna buy the farm, I don't want it to be because some wet-behind-the-ears frigging sky jockey flew me straight into the fucking ground!"

Vin gave a slight shake of his head, his grin broadening. Jesus! Wet-behind-the-ears sky jockey? JD himself had yet to see his 21st birthday. Still, Dunne had earned his stripes, and he had a purple heart and the scars to prove it, so he guessed that the Corporal had every right to feel a little pissed. He knew he certainly was. He also knew that part of his ill will had nothing at all to do with who was at the yoke today, but rather to do with who wasn't.

Tanner sighed. Five days. So what had changed? Nothing. And yet, everything. He still woke up each morning, he still checked for his name on the mission roster, he still did the job that was asked of him; still ate, slept and drank more than was good for him but he felt the absence of his friends so keenly that he knew he was just going through the motions. But it had reminded him one important truth that had somehow been pushed to the back of his mind since he had joined the crew of Larabee's Lady. It was a bad idea to get too close to anyone. Hadn't he had been though enough in his life to know that nothing was forever? Hell, life expectancy for a B17 crew was supposed to be four missions; they were all living on borrowed time.

He felt Dunne nudge him in the ribs. "Truck's here."

Vin nodded as if he hadn't already noticed the approach of the vehicle. Always the same routine to go through at the end of a mission. Back to the ready room to change and turn in their gear, then on to the debrief, and finally to the combat mess where they had started the day many hours earlier with a 4 am breakfast. Full circle. For some. He threw his gear into the back of the truck with more force than necessary and vaulted in behind it, joining the crush of airmen already aboard. Wedging himself into a space he squatted on his heels, rocking a little as JD squeezed into the merest suggestion of gap beside him, and shut out the buzz of voices allowing them to flow over and around him rather than slam up against him. A few, like him, withdrew into contemplative silence; old hands mainly, just glad to be home and with little more on their minds than getting some shuteye. Perhaps today, after the debriefing session, he would bypass the Red Cross doughnuts and coffee this time and instead take the medics up on their offer of a double-shot of Old Crow. Ezra never missed his ration. He smiled faintly, suddenly hearing the Southerner's familiar drawl as he reasoned that if Uncle Sam was giving away free liquor then who was he to decline such hospitality.

At the ready room he gratefully surrendered his gear, but his mellow mood turned darker as his eyes glossed over a sign that he had read and smiled over many times in the past but

which at this moment seemed to take on a decidedly sinister aspect. It was a typically macabre wartime joke meant for the airmen checking out parachutes: *If it doesn't work, bring it back*. Today it just wasn't funny anymore.

The debriefing was mercifully short but even so Vin found himself impatient to be free of the smoky confines of the room. He gave his own report in his usual concise manner; sparing with words, generous with fact. A trait which prompted one of his peers to murmur with grudging respect for the Texan's eye for detail and amazing recall: "Jesus, man. You take fucking notes or somethin'?" Someone else immediately picked up on the metaphor. "Yeah, don't you know he takes dictation too? Sixty words a minute." A lieutenant beside him laughed and made a familiar back and forth gesture with his closed fist. "More like sixty strokes a minute!" A ripple of laughter stirred the room, the airmen as restless as schoolboys on a Friday afternoon and ready for any diversion. With an easy smile, Tanner leaned a little way out of his seat and pinned his fellow bombardier with a coolly appraising stare before murmuring a response that, although conversational in tone, carried easily through the room. "Yeah, but at least I still have lead in my pencil, Murphy." As the gathering erupted into raucous laughter, the young lieutenant flushed but any opportunity he might have had for retaliation was lost as the room was quickly brought to order and the debrief resumed.

It was close to midday by the time they emerged from the stuffy smoke-hazed atmosphere and headed for the combat mess. Vin's temples were pounding, too long on oxygen, too much cigarette smoke and too little sleep. He was just debating whether to give food a miss and hit the sack instead when he came to an abrupt halt. JD, following closely behind, managed to sidestep and narrowly avoid a collision.

"Jesus, Vin..." Tanner stood transfixed, staring off into the distance. "Vin?"

The Texan's body tensed suddenly and he started forward. Then he stopped again and shot a quick glance, loaded with uncertainty, at Dunne before looking away once more, his brow furrowed in concentration as he focused intently on a group of men moving at a leisurely pace towards the combat mess. After a few minutes he slowly shook his head and punctuated a sudden, forceful, exhalation of air with a short, humourless laugh. "Son of a bitch!"

There had been a moment when he had doubted the accuracy of his own senses, not really believing what both his eyes and his gut were so urgently trying to tell him, but there was no mistake in his recognition of that familiar loose-hipped walk and his initial scepticism was quickly swept away in a rush of conflicting emotions. At the periphery of his awareness he felt JD's fingers grip his bicep and a sudden whoop of excitement from the young gunner was proof enough that he was not merely a victim of an overactive imagination. There was no mistake.

Chris.

Feeling as if his belly had just become home to a nest of writhing snakes, he concentrated on the cluster of airmen as they came closer, faces not yet distinguishable, and searched for the physical cues that would allow him to complete the trio and lay his worst fears to rest. Pausing briefly, the small band drew together, a scene that involved numerous instances of handshaking and more informal backslapping, before finally breaking up. The snakes in his gut suddenly multiplied as two figures detached themselves from the others and continued on towards the mess.

JD started to move forward, hesitantly at first then whooping and hollering like a cowboy at a rodeo as he sprinted forward. "Buck!"

Vin found he was incapable of movement. Frozen to the spot, he watched as the scene played out in slow motion before him, his brain homing in on minute detail as the seething mass in his belly threatened to crawl up his gullet and out of his throat. Chris, arm in a sling, purple knot of bruising on his temple, haunted eyes, a weary smile; Buck, grinning, teeth very white beneath his moustache, hand raised in greeting. The Texan swallowed hard and hung his head for a moment, looking at the ground between his feet. *Goddamn it, Ezra. Why you?*

He forced the sudden, sharp, flare of grief aside and looked up. JD and Buck were hugging each other like long lost brothers, grinning and mock wrestling in a display of open affection that Vin envied. His own natural reserve prevented him from engaging in any similar behaviour but his feelings were no less intense than those being shown so readily by the two gunners as he locked eyes with the blond pilot standing awkwardly with his right arm in a sling. Vin would never remember who made the first move but a moment later he held Chris in a tight clinch, made somehow more emotional by the mutual restraint that kept them both from putting their feelings on show.

Still maintaining a grip on Larabee's good shoulder he took a step back, holding the pilot at arm's length and quickly looking him up and down. "Word was that you had a run in with some flak."

Chris sighed. "Bastards took us down just as we hit the coast." He gave a tight smile. "And they told me it was gonna be a milk run."

Vin gave the pilot's shoulder a brief squeeze. "You okay, Chris?"

Larabee gave a one-shouldered shrug. "Good enough, I guess. I'm still in one piece." Suddenly the smile faded and he glanced away, lines of fatigue etched deeply into his features, as he slowly raked his fingers through his hair. "Christ! What a fucking waste."

Tanner felt the awkwardness of the moment again. What the hell was he supposed to say? Chris absently adjusted the sling supporting his right arm and winced as the movement obviously triggered a spasm of pain.

“Ezra...?” Vin silently cursed himself. That wasn’t what he had intended to come out. But it had escaped anyway. His greatest fear suddenly out in the open. Now he waited, anticipation and dread painfully tightening the already dense knot in his stomach. Distracted, Chris fidgeted with the edge of the sling, not looking up.

“Pissed as hell that we had to leave him. The motherfuckers shot him in the back and we nearly lost him. Reckon he’ll be laid up a couple more weeks yet.”

“So Ezra’s not...? He didn’t...? I thought...” Vin stopped abruptly, feeling the blood drain from his face, unable to form a coherent sentence as his mind struggled to grasp the implications of what Chris was saying.

He became aware of Larabee’s eyes boring into him and the rapidly changing emotions that flitted across the older man’s face. “Jesus, Vin! You thought Ezra...? Hell, I’m sorry. I just didn’t think.” The pilot took a hasty step forward and the Texan felt his fingers bite deep into his bicep as he spoke urgently. “Ezra’s at the 231st at Morley. He’s okay. Lost a lot more blood than was good for him but he’s gonna make it.”

Tanner found himself nodding as the truth sank in. “They told us only three parachute were sighted,” he managed finally, by way of explanation, “When I saw you and Buck...” His voice trailed off and he shrugged, “Well, you know how it is...”

Chris sighed heavily. “Yeah,” he breathed softly, “I know how it is.”

The two men exchanged self-conscious smiles, stepping away from each other as Buck and JD, their own noisy and energetic ritual of reunion at last completed, joined them. Wilmington threw an arm around Tanner’s shoulders in greeting and pulled him roughly into a one armed bear hug. “Hey, Lieutenant! Did you miss me?”

Vin eased out of the sergeant’s bone-crushing grip and feigned an indifference he did not feel. “Nah. Thought I might have waved goodbye to that twenty bucks you owe me though. Now that made me right sad.”

Buck punched him in the arm. “Bastard.”

The Texan turned back to Larabee. “So what the hell happened? Nearly five days without a goddamned word and suddenly you’re walking back into camp like you’ve been for a stroll to the village!”

Buck leaned on JD and cast a quick glance at Chris before fixing his gaze on Tanner. “You want it long drawn out or short and snappy?”

Vin raised an eyebrow. “Make it short for now.” He gestured to the line of airmen still filtering into the mess. “I haven’t eaten today yet.”

“Okay. Short it is. We baled out. Chris got caught. We sprang him. Ezra got shot. We hitched a ride on a fishing boat. The boat sank and the Navy picked us up. Docked at Harwich yesterday and here we are today. End of story.”

The Texan stared for a moment at the sergeant. “Thanks, Buck. That sure clears everything up.”

Wilmington laughed, ignoring the heavy sarcasm. “Well, you wanted short. You want details? You gotta buy me a beer or three. Hell, for this I reckon you should spring for a keg.”

Vin grinned. “For a keg it’d better be good, Buck.”

The gunner slapped him heavily on the shoulder. “You can bet your balls it is, Lieutenant!”

Tanner gave the sergeant a sceptical look. “If it was Ezra I wouldn’t risk it, but seeing as it’s you, I’ll take my chances.” He turned and walked towards the mess, his grin widening as he heard Chris and JD’s laughter as they fell into step behind him. He could imagine Buck’s expression without having to look back. Suddenly he found that he was ravenous.

oooOOOooo

The sky was dull, pewter grey; an unending expanse of low, dense, cloud that promised imminent rain. It reminded Ezra very much of the cheerless skies that had not only witnessed but also aided their miraculous escape across the bleak Dutch landscape. There was no fog today but the air held that same cool and clammy feel that he remembered so well. In turn other, more painful, memories tugged at his consciousness but he was able to put them aside. He had already experienced the dubious luxury of spending several weeks in a hospital bed with little to do but allow his thoughts to wander and find a path through the minefield that was his memory. At first there had been dreams. His sub-consciousness, demanding attention and fuelled by the narcotic circulating in his blood, had paraded bizarre scenarios before him. Sometimes they bordered on the nightmarish and in the beginning he had repeatedly dreamed that he was drowning, to suddenly wake in a lather of sweat, his heart hammering frantically in his chest, as he gasped for air. But as his body had healed, the sharp and painful reality of having been shot began to blur around the edges, and the dreams had gradually faded. Now he was back on home turf, but felt an almost dreamlike detachment from his surroundings. That unsettling sensation of not quite belonging that comes with an extended absence from a familiar place, as if seeing something for the first time yet already knowing every contour, every colour and shape, every subtle tone and shade of the environment.

He had spent more than an hour and a half dealing with the tedium of military

bureaucracy that accompanied his return to base and although he was not yet cleared for active duty, he was still well pleased to be at last rejoining the squadron. Flying combat missions might be denied to him for a time yet but at least he was back among familiar faces. Among friends. Not too long ago he would have rejected the very idea. He had always been a loner, brought up with the belief that people were either useful to you or they were not. The former were to be cultivated and exploited, the latter ignored. The notion of comradeship was something that had not come readily to him and it was still difficult for him to embrace the concept without reservation, but the shared experience of war had a way of changing things. There was no denying that it had changed him. Taking a deep breath, he shouldered his kit and started walking slowly towards the barracks.

The room was empty, as he knew it would be. The Lady and its crew was still airborne somewhere over Europe. On the home run now he guessed. He glanced quickly around, feeling a distinct sense of belonging as he looked at the four bunks, three of them immaculate and made to inspection standard. Larabee's appeared, as always, as if he had used a setsquare and protractor to achieve the precise angles and perfect lines. The fourth bunk had been stripped of its bed linen and the mattress had been rolled up with an awful finality that made his stomach flip even though he knew that was not his billet. His own bed stood just as he had left it yet at the back of his mind he was imagining his belongings being packed and his bed stripped; First Lieutenant Ezra Standish, rest in peace. He threw his kitbag onto the bed with a sigh and slammed the door on that particular line of thought. It was a little too close to the truth for him to contemplate right now.

Shifting his kitbag aside, he sat down on the edge of his bunk. He was tired and his chest hurt. On impulse, he had elected to walk the final leg back to base and the exertion had taxed his newly healed lung, but the Cambridgeshire countryside had never looked so beautiful and in spite of the overcast skies he had enjoyed every minute. It was a sobering thought, but he had finally understood that for some people it took a close encounter with death to truly appreciate life. Ploesti had been a near thing but at the time he had failed to put any real value on the experience. This time it had been different.

He rose slowly at the first distant sound that stirred the fine hair on the back of his neck and sent an anticipatory thrill through his belly. There was no mistaking the throaty resonance of the Curtiss-Wright engines that powered the big bombers. He knew that sound as well as he knew his own voice. The squadron, or what might be left of it, was coming in. He resisted the temptation to look for Larabee's Lady. Already anxious, for no other reason that he wasn't in his customary position beside Chris, he decided to forego the nerve-racking ordeal of counting the squadron in. If there had been any losses he would know soon enough. Peeling off his jacket with a quiet sigh, he fished in his pocket for a cigarette,

hesitating a moment as he recalled the doctor's advice to cut down on smoking, before giving a mental shrug and lighting up anyway. What the hell. You only live once.

From another pocket he took a pack of cards, smiling faintly as he recalled the moment Buck had tossed them onto his bed as he lay in hospital and with a wicked grin had told him that he might need something to keep his hands busy over the long and lonely nights. In spite of Wilmington's typically heavy-handed suggestiveness, he had been both surprised and touched by the gesture. His own, well used, deck had been lost at sea but the loss had not exactly been in the forefront of his own thoughts and he found it remarkable that the sergeant had remembered such a small detail. He slowly turned them over and again looked at the aircraft silhouettes imprinted on the faces. Spotters cards; supposedly designed to educate the player on military aircraft identification while assembling a winning poker hand. He found it fitting that the ace of spades, his own personal talisman, should not only be represented by the B17 but that it should be the first card he turned over. He took it as a good omen. Shaking his head at his own uncharacteristic drift into sentimentality, he began to shuffle.

After three frustrating rounds of solitaire, none of which played out, and on which he found it almost impossible to concentrate, he paused in his dealing. Ears tuned to the roar of the B17s still coming in to land, now just the stragglers limping home at wider and wider intervals, he absently riffled through the deck and let the cards slip easily through his fingers, annoyed that being relegated to the role of bystander was making him so edgy. Finally he reached for another Lucky Strike, promising himself he'd go easy after this one, and started laying out the grid for another game of Montana.

"Jesus Christ! Ezra!"

"Sonovabitch!"

The two men spoke simultaneously; surprise and undisguised pleasure couched in profanity as they both came to an abrupt halt in the doorway. The Southerner slowly turned his head towards the familiar voices, but not before completing the move he had already started to make, precisely and unhurriedly placing a card into one of the five gaps in the grid. But it was affected nonchalance. He knew it and perhaps the two men who had just entered knew it too, because he was having great difficulty in maintaining the neutral expression he was aiming for. He had greatly underestimated the impact of seeing Chris and Vin again and was caught off guard by the simple emotion of the moment. A slow smile crept across his face as he carefully regarded both men over his right shoulder, his attempt at studied indifference having failed completely, and the smile broadened into a grin.

"Mornin' gentlemen."

Tanner slowly shook his head and looked sombrely at Larabee. "Reckon you should be

thinking about putting this man on a charge, Captain..." he paused as his gaze slipped back to the Southerner and although his expression didn't alter, his eyes were alive with suppressed amusement. "...For impersonating an officer."

Chris studied his co-pilot with care as if seeing Standish for the first time. "Reckon you could be right, Lieutenant." He shifted his stance slightly and seemed to be considering the possibility before finally his self-control crumbled and he started to laugh. "Seeing as I can't put him on a charge for impersonating an asshole."

Ezra cocked an eyebrow as he rose to his feet and gathered up the cards in a deft sweep of his hand. "Ah, gentlemen," he sighed, with mock regret, although his own grin was still fixed in place. "I see nothing has changed in my absence. Small things still amuse small minds."

"You betcha!" agreed Vin, affably, then with a quick smile strode forward and clasped Ezra's hand, at the same time gripping his shoulder and drawing him into a brief but intense clinch. "Good to see ya, pard."

Chris stepped forward and offered his own hand. "Welcome home, Lieutenant. Gotta tell you, it's been a bitch flying with a rookie exec." He stepped back again, critically looking the Southerner up and down, mounting suspicion reflected in the hardening lines on his face as he tried to read Ezra's expression, then seeing the truth there. "Ah, Jesus, tell me you're cleared..."

Standish sighed, his smile strained. "Sadly, no, Captain Larabee. Perhaps you could put in a good word for me at the medical board next week."

"Shit." Chris wearily rubbed his eyes. "I'm sorry, Ezra."

The Southerner shrugged. "C'est la vie. Besides, I'm not in any hurry to get shot at again." But he was lying in the words and all three of them knew it. For a moment the lie hung in the air, a cloud passing over the sun, then Larabee, resurrecting his grin, slapped Ezra on the arm.

"What d'you think, Vin? Time for a celebration?"

Tanner nodded, his eyes meeting and holding Ezra's for a long moment. "Good enough reason as any and better than most, if you ask me."

Chris checked his watch. "Sounds like we've got ourselves a plan then. Vin, you get the others. Pub opens in ten minutes."

Ezra gave a lopsided smile. "What are we waiting for then? We're wasting valuable drinking time!"

Larabee grinned slyly as he quickly reached for the lieutenant's jacket and thrust it onto his hands before resting a friendly arm across the Southerner's shoulders. "Glad you feel that way, Ezra."

Standish narrowed his eyes and quickly glanced from one smiling face to the other,

suddenly feeling that he was being led like a lamb to the slaughter, part of a joke where he had yet to grasp the punch line. “Gentlemen, am I missing something here?”

Chris carefully steered the suddenly mistrustful Southerner towards the door. “You know the tradition, Ezra. Last man home pays for the drinks.”

Ezra halted on hearing Vin’s quiet laughter as he walked away, and gave Larabee an appraising look, something close to admiration in his eyes. “Captain Larabee, I get the distinct feeling that I’ve just been conned.”

The older man just kept smiling and urged him forward again. “Come on! And don’t feel too bad, Ezra. After all, I learned from the best.”

As the two pilots moved ahead of him to leave the room, Standish shrugged into his uniform jacket, his own expression subtly changing to one of calculating shrewdness as he dipped into his pocket and closed his fingers around the familiar shape of a quarter.

“Tell you what, Chris. I’ll toss you for it...”

oooOOOooo

The sound drilled into his head; unwelcome, persistent and merciless. It was a sound he could not ignore, and as much as he wanted to reach out and silence the offending alarm, then slip back under the covers and sleep, he knew that he had a job to do. With a soft groan, he pushed back the blankets and forced his eyes open. It was pitch black and he didn’t need to look at the luminous hands of the clock to know it was two-fifteen in the morning. He took a moment to orientate himself and finally, when he was sure that he was fully awake, he reached out and muted the alarm bell. Two fifteen. That was a time for going to bed not getting up. He swung his legs over the edge of the bed and ran his fingers through his hair. At least it used to be.

He blinked slowly and reached for the torch he had left beside the bunk. In a few minutes he was about to become one of the most hated men on the base. How many times would he shake men out of a deep sleep with the words: “Three o’clock breakfast, four o’clock briefing.”? Thumbing the torch on, he reached for a cigarette, and then with a sigh put it down again, already aware of the tightness in his chest. Damn it, no. He wanted to get back to flying, not ruin his chances of getting clearance at his upcoming medical review. Less than a week on wake-up duty and he was chafing at the bit. If he had to get up this goddamn early he at least wanted something more to show for it. He shivered. It was May but still cool in the early hours of the morning and he gave silent thanks that it wasn’t February.

He had been obliged to temporarily move his kit to another room, but as much as he resented the move, he could see the unfairness in subjecting the others to the unsociable

hours he was now keeping. Under any other circumstances he would not have minded the unasked for privacy but in all honesty he felt not so much that he was privileged but rather that he was a pariah.

As he dressed he could hear the faint but reassuring, everyday sounds from the flight line and hangars, carried clearly on the still night air; the ground crew readying the aircraft, loading bombs and ammunition, making final checks and adjustments to the heavy aircraft. He felt a pang of regret knowing that once again he was to be no part of it. One thing he had soon discovered was that if flying a mission was tough, being left behind was even tougher. Fifteen minutes later he was ready and it was with a certain sense of mischief that he trudged from his own solitary billet to his first objective of the day.

He smiled. Larabee's Lady was on the day's roster. He had already anticipated this moment and now the moment had arrived, he knew he was going to enjoy every minute of the early morning ritual, if only for the singular pleasure of being able to wake Chris Larabee at an ungodly hour with impunity.

Ezra kept his torch beam low. He had a personal dislike of being wakened by the glare of a maliciously aimed torch, and while he had every intention of relishing this particular duty, he was not about to be spiteful. Neither man had stirred. This was the time when the body was at its lowest ebb and although he knew Vin to be an especially light sleeper, the Texan remained burrowed deeply under the covers as if shielding himself from what he knew was to come. Chris shifted in his sleep and turned onto his side, disturbed by the change in light but not enough to fully rouse him.

The Southerner reached out and shook the older man's raised shoulder. "Up and at 'em, Captain. Breakfast at three, briefing at four!"

Larabee groaned as he rolled onto his back and shielded his eyes with a forearm over his face. He mumbled something, which Ezra couldn't quite hear but which he decided wasn't at all complimentary, and gradually lowered his arm. "Goddamn it, Ezra you're enjoying this aren't you?"

With contrived innocence that was completely at odds with the lively expression in his eyes, he studied the heavy-eyed pilot for a moment. "Why, Captain Larabee, whatever gives you that idea?"

Chris struggled to sit up, yawning as he raked his fingers through spiky hair. "That grin on your face kinda gives it away, you lousy bastard."

Ezra laughed softly and crossed the room to Tanner's bed, but a muffled: "I'm awake, so piss off," was the ungrateful response from the Texan.

Standish nudged the mound of blankets ignoring the bombardier's suggestion. "Not till I see the whites of your eyes, Lieutenant Tanner. I'd be derelict in my duty if you went back to

sleep.”

Vin’s response was short and to the point, as words with only four letters tended to be, but he emerged and sat rubbing his face, blinking owlshly in the pale light. “Happy now?”

“Perfectly,” replied Ezra dryly, “Satisfied with a job well done.”

Chris, already out of his bunk, cast a sceptical eye at his grounded co-pilot but a smile danced at the corners of his mouth. “Bullshit.”

Ezra feigned offence. “Well, if that’s all the thanks I get, I’ll be taking my leave.”

“Good,” murmured Vin, “and shut the door on the way out, will ya?”

Standish laughed again. “Fine! I get the message. I’m gone.” He moved towards the door, then hesitated and paused, turning to look back at the two men, his face suddenly serious as he spoke rapidly. “Take care, gentlemen.” He spun and walked out of the room, leaving Chris and Vin to exchange surprised glances at the Southerner’s unexpected parting words. Then, before either man could speak or make a movement, Ezra quickly ducked his head back around the door. “Oh, and Chris, this time don’t take the long way home.”

The blond pilot smiled and gave a quiet, almost embarrassed laugh but his eyes, locking with the Southerner’s for the briefest of moments, said much more than the words that followed: “I’ll try not to.”