Aftermath

by BMP

Summary

ATF AU. A bust goes bad. People get hurt. The team does --or doesn't-- cope well.

Notes

I want to thank MOG for the ATF AU. She came up with it and graciously let others play there. Ryan Kelly, Kirk Gustin, Douglas Stone, and Team Eight are used with the permission of their creator, Heather Flaherty. Brett Jordan from Team Eight is used with the permission of Celeste, as are her men from Team Five. General Matthew Larabee is used with the permission of Q'Mar. Although the author realizes and recognizes that there have been several authors that have used a similar character for Chris's father, the character herein was patterned from Q'Mar's. The Larabee-Wilmington Fist Dialect mentioned herein came from A Gift from an Old Friend by Cassie. Any similarities between this story and Sage's 'Hole in the World' are purely coincidental. This story was started before that one was posted, but Sage has been made aware of the possible similarity of plot. Special thanks to anyone else who created little sayings or nuances that I may have used.

I stole 'em from someone who stole 'em first. There's no honor among thieves, so steal 'em from me if you want 'em. ~BMP
Chapter 1

The tall mustached ATF agent ran warm water into a paper cup and leaned heavily on the bathroom sink. He didn’t look into the mirror, not wanting to see what would be staring back at him. He poured a drop of mouthwash into the water, the act of bending down to get the bottle costing him dearly.

His head was pounding. Again.

The remains of what little he had eaten for dinner floated next to him in the toilet along with both sleeping pills the doctor had prescribed. Not that there’d be any more sleeping for him tonight. At least awake he had a little control over the images that flitted through his head. Unfortunately, their accuracy was no less gut wrenching when he was awake.

“They’re just dreams,” he had told himself the first night when they awakened him, sweating, shouting, fists clenched and tangled in the bed sheets, his pillow wet with sweat and tears, fury still pounding in his chest. They’re just dreams. And then the thought had hit him like a sledgehammer. Except when the dreams are true.

He swished and spat. Then he reached for the bottle of aspirin and poured six of them into his hand.

“Buck?”

The voice was outside of his bathroom door. It was filled with concern.

He swore to himself, eyes squeezed shut against the pain. It was sometime after 3:30 in the morning. He had tried, really tried, to be quiet about it, not wanting to wake his roommate. One of them ought to get some sleep. He swore again. You’d think a man could heave his guts out in his own upstairs bathroom without waking up another man sleeping downstairs, he thought.

He swallowed his anger. “I’m fine, J.D.,” he said in as even a voice as he could muster with his raw throat.

The young black-haired agent settled back against the hallway wall. “Open the door, Buck,” he said, with a sigh.

To the youth’s immense relief the door opened. Buck leaned in the doorway, as J.D. raked over the image of his best friend with eyes that were getting far too much practice. Sweat soaked the tall man’s gray t-shirt and his dark hair. He stood slump-shouldered. He was pale beneath his tan and dark circles had taken up residence under his eyes. He was starting to lose weight.

“You want to talk?” J.D. Dunne asked, trying his best not to sound hopeful

Buck reared back and grimaced. “No, I don’t,” he said flatly.

J.D. pushed himself off the wall and stood in front of his taller, older friend. “You gotta talk about it,” he said. A note of pleading had crept into his voice, and he hated it. How much longer could this go on?

“No, I don’t,” Buck Wilmington replied. His voice was hard. Flat. That was a warning. Two days ago, dead drunk, he had taken a swing at another member of their team, when he had suggested the same thing. J.D. didn’t really think Buck would take a swing at him—drunk or sober—but he wasn’t sure he wanted to take the chance.
Normally, Buck was an affable, even affectionate man, who was fond of women, loved to tell stories that inflated his own reputation, habitually teased J.D., and took great pride in his position on the finest ATF team in the Western region. As easygoing as he was normally, the man could become the devil himself in a fist or fire fight. J.D.’s mind wandered to a time he had personally seen Buck take out their formidable team leader with a single solid punch to the jaw. Of course, Chris had been drunk…

Chris…

J.D.’s stomach lurched.

Buck didn’t miss the sudden pallor that came over his young friend’s face.

“You can’t help me, kid,” he said softly. He squeezed past J.D. and moved toward the stairs, aspirin still in hand. He wondered what the medical cautions against swallowing aspirin with a full glass of whiskey were. He reminded himself that he had some portion of two sleeping pills still in his system.

_Then why the hell am I still awake? He wondered. And what would it take to be able to sleep and not dream that goddamn dream?_

Almost like a physical presence, he sensed the dark behind him, dogging him, pursuing him, threatening to swallow him. Of all the emotions that competed to engulf him, anger was the one he feared least. So he let the anger take him. Flood him. He turned it on himself. And was rewarded with a brief bitter flash of humor as he mused that getting cold-cocked with his service revolver might just do the trick. He wondered what he’d have to say to J.D. to push him far enough to do it. He smiled a bitter inward smile.

Buck grabbed a bottle of whiskey from the liquor cabinet. He didn’t bother with a glass. He swallowed the aspirin along with a gullet full of the fiery liquid, shoved open the living room drapes and dropped into a chair that he had pulled up to the window. He propped his feet up on the windowsill and stared out across the orange and yellow-lit buildings of suburban Denver, a view that was beginning to take on a painful familiarity.

Behind him, J.D. had returned to his room. Certain that Buck could not hear him, he dialed his cell phone.

“Nathan?” he whispered urgently, as the team medic’s sleepy voice answered. “I didn’t know who else to call…”

The 11th floor of the Federal Building was silent when he got off the elevator. It surprised him until he remembered it was Saturday. He balanced a very large, very strong, very hot coffee in his hand, while his other hand dug for the keys to the door that would let him into the bullpen—the large space where his team had their offices and base of operations. Before he could get to the door, though, a gray-haired figure intercepted him. The man was considerably shorter than Buck, but nonetheless, he cut an imposing figure. Buck sighed and came to a halt.

“Judge,” he said, warily.

“It’s Saturday, Buck,” said Assistant Director Orin Travis, warily. He looked over the agent who stood before him: ATF Team Seven’s second in command. He looked a little better than he had the last time Travis had seen him, but that wasn’t saying much. He looked haggard, unshaven, on edge. That wasn’t going to make what he had to say any easier. In fact, Travis thought with regret, he hadn’t planned to say it today at all, but here Wilmington was.
ATF Team Seven was Travis’s dominion. He had been there from the beginning, when Senator Wilkey Redd had proposed putting the volatile Chris Larabee in charge of a brand new and experimental Regional Mobile Enforcement Team. Based on Larabee’s reputation, Travis had had some reservations, especially when Larabee demanded—and received—the right to recruit his men from anywhere he wanted. His reservations escalated when those agents all turned out to be mavericks and misfits—including an FBI agent whose own office was investigating him for corruption. But his enormous respect for Larabee’s personal integrity and tactical skills, if not his methods, eventually earned the hard-eyed former Navy SEAL a fond place in the judge’s circle of affection, something he regretted now that he had never mentioned.

Not that trying to oversee Chris Larabee had ever been easy. In the three years since the team’s inception, Larabee had demanded and received an awful lot of things, not the least of which was an unprecedented autonomy in enacting policy and discipline within his team. Many of the assistant directors joked that it was because the brass was a little afraid of the former military officer, with his flash temper, and loose-cannon reputation. Travis knew this was not wholly a joke. He also knew first hand that the team had earned their nickname, the Magnificent Seven.

For a time, they had seemed untouchable, the men of Team Seven. As long as Larabee and his team got the job done, the chains of command contained their grumbling. They were willing to wear the laurels brought on by the team’s reputation and to take the black eyes reasonably quietly. But Larabee’s disdain for chains of command—and in particular any authority that had not yet earned his respect, had also earned him a lot of enemies.

This was precisely Travis’s current problem. The team’s reputation outside the bureau for efficient, effective law enforcement work made it a plum command for a patronage position. Its maverick reputation inside the bureau made it a headache that needed to be reined in. Now the headache threatened to turn dangerous. One of the directors had gone so far as to refer to the team as a hydra with its leading head cut off, a singularly tactless comment—given the circumstances—that had made Travis and several of the directors blanch. But no one had argued the veracity of the statement.

Travis brought his focus back to the man in front of him, who was waiting with ill-concealed impatience. Anger simmered below the surface, Travis noted. He dropped the small talk. “Come to my office,” he said and turned away. The tall agent cast a glance at the bullpen door and then followed the AD upstairs.

* * *

“You can’t do that!” Wilmington shouted. The air in Travis’s office reverberated with the sound. The mustached agent was on his feet, staring at Travis, betrayal and astonishment etched on his face. “That’s not what he wanted and you know it!”

The AD remained calmly seated behind his desk. Wilmington was shouting at the top of his lungs. A good sign. Had the agent been using his quiet voice, Travis would have wasted no time in calling for security and backup.

He, Travis noted. Buck had not spoken his name.

Travis took a patient breath. “This is not about what Agent Larabee would have wanted.” He carefully avoided calling the agent by his first name. Travis’s own sense of loss was intense, but in no way compared to what the man before him was going through. Wilmington and Larabee had been friends and colleagues for a good many years. The fires that had forged and hardened their friendship had been theirs alone to share. Fires, Travis thought again, kicking himself. Another poor choice of metaphors.
Wilmington clenched and unclenched his large fists. He was clearly making an effort to control his temper. Travis resisted the urge to look toward his phone.

“If you do this,” the big man breathed, his voice softening to a conversational volume, “the team will walk.”

Travis’s gray eyes bore an oddly intense expression as he returned Buck’s gaze. “I’m counting on you not to let that happen,” he said, the softness of his tone belying the force behind them.

Buck didn’t move. Didn’t trust himself even to twitch. This wasn’t happening. It was not the first time he had thought that very thought in the last week. Not the first time he let himself hope it for a fraction of a second. Reality betrayed him again.

The expression that formed in the agent’s deep blue eyes was bleak.

For a moment Travis considered not finishing what he had to say, but the man had a right to know why he was asking this of him. “You know he’d want the team to survive this.”

Wilmington recoiled as if Travis had hit him. Outrage filled his face. His fist clenched.

Travis tensed.

But Buck turned abruptly on his heel and went out the way he came in, through the door back into Travis’s outer office reception room. Barely pausing, the big agent swept a glass coffee table up in both hands and flung it against the far wall. Glass showered the waiting room. He followed after it with two long strides, grabbing the empty frame, lifting it above his head by two legs and swinging it blindly. With the screech of rending metal, the frame broke against the secretary’s desk, taking a myriad of small objects with it.

The silence that followed was deafening. The only sound for long seconds was Buck’s hard, harsh breathing.

“Sure, Judge,” he said finally, his voice a brittle parody of his usual bantering tone. “I’ll do that for ya.”

He went out of the office again, slamming the door behind him.

“That went well,” Travis sighed angrily. But it was hard to say who he was angry at. He kicked at the shards of glass that littered his waiting room floor, briefly considering leaving them there for Monday morning, as a monument to show his boss. Then he gave a deep resigned sigh and returned to his office to call someone to come clean it up.

Buck returned to the bullpen. When he stuck his key in the door, he discovered it was unlocked. He glowered at the door as if it were the door’s fault, before pushing it open. He stopped dead in his tracks. Ezra Standish, undercover agent, self-proclaimed independent operator, and notorious late sleeper was in the office. Before noon. On a Saturday. At his desk. Staring intently at his screen. Typing.

The undercover agent glanced up. “Mr. Wilmington,” he drawled in greeting, his Georgia accent marked with the slightest tinge of world-weariness. Buck was not fooled. An indecipherable emotion crossed the undercover agent’s face before he carefully concealed it under his practiced, professional mask. He looked Buck over once from head to toe, noting the wrinkled clothes, and the hollow, dark circles under the tall man’s eyes.

“You’re looking rested. Enjoying our enforced time off?” the undercover agent said dryly and
returned to his typing,

Buck sought and found a smart remark to make, but it died in his throat as he noticed Chris’s office door, standing open. His feet took him to the doorway almost against his will.

He stared into the spare, orderly interior: shelves bending under the weight of reference books; couch resting against the large window, a wool blanket folded neatly against one arm. Drawn blinds. Metal filing cabinet. Big black desk chair. Coffee cup, washed, rinsed and sitting upside down on a well-worn rubber coaster marked with a U.S. Navy insignia. Inbox empty. Outbox empty. All files and papers locked up neat and tidy in the desk drawer. The desk should have been immaculate. But it wasn’t.

It was covered. In cards, handwritten notes, tiny mementos. And worse yet, photos. Vases and vases of flowers, some fresh, some clearly past their prime adorned the desk and spilled over to sit on the floor.

Chris would’ve hated it, Buck thought, leaning against the doorframe.

As if reading his mind, Ezra’s voice carried across the bullpen. “Appalling, isn’t it?” he said flatly.

Buck nodded.

He moved away from the senior agent’s office and back out into the common area, where the rest of the team had their desks.

“What are you doing here, Ez?” he asked.

The undercover agent rolled his eyes at the much-protested shortening of his first name. But it was only a half-hearted roll. He turned back to his typing.

Buck cocked his head to one side and waited. Any explanation from Ezra was likely to take twice as long as was necessary.

Standish did not disappoint. “As you are already well aware, Mr. Wilmington, it would normally be against my principles to spend any more time than necessary in the office unless coerced,” he said, “but since my home computer refuses to indulge me by turning on, this seemed the most reasonable place to accomplish my task.”

Ezra looked up again from his computer and pursed his lips thoughtfully before launching into something that seemed like he had been rehearsing it or at least formulating it for quite some time.

“In no way should you misconstrue my resignation to be casting aspersions on your leadership abilities, which are formidable,” he explained. “It simply has to do with a promise I made to myself…”

The undercover agent stopped, suddenly, backtracking in his mind and realizing that he had heard Buck snort and loudly, at that.

Buck was looking back at him, a hard glint in his eyes, where there had been a twinkle only a week ago.

Has it only been a week? Ezra asked himself, unaware that he was running a hand slowly across his face.

“It’s not MY leadership abilities you have to worry about, Ez,” Buck said flatly.
Ezra stared at him now, taking full notice of the man’s eyes, shadowed and angry. He hardly dared to admit to himself how much he missed that twinkle.

“I shudder to ask,” Ezra said. “But what do you mean by that?”

“They’re sending in a replacement,” Buck said, hooking his own chair back from his desk with his foot and slouching his lanky frame into it.

Shock showed plainly in the undercover agent’s green eyes. The fact that he didn’t bother to hide it was a testament to how much he had grown to trust his teammates in the last few years.

“A replacement?” Standish repeated in astonishment. He shook his head in wonder. “And who, pray tell, do they think will be capable of filling this…” he paused, looking for the words. Incredible, gaping, festering, bleeding hole, came to mind. “Vacancy,” he finished.

Buck did not miss the look of outrage that passed through Standish’s remarkable green eyes.

He leaned forward in his chair. “Does it matter?” he asked.

“No,” Ezra said, leaning away and returning to his typing. “Especially as I am tendering my resignation first thing Monday morning.”

“Travis wants us to play nice,” Buck said.

Ezra continued typing. “So generous of him to ask, but in case you didn’t hear me, I said I am resigning.”

“I figure we’ll play nice. On the surface, anyway,” Buck said, scratching his chin and staring off into space.

Ezra wondered whether the man was deliberately trying to irritate him or just didn’t want to hear. “Who is this ‘we’ you keep going on about? You appear to have lost your hearing, along with your ironing board and your mind,” he snapped. “I repeat, I am signing, sealing, and delivering my resignation from this team, from the ATF, and from law enforcement period first thing Monday morning.”

“Right up until this clown officially tells us we can’t pursue this,” Buck finished, as if he had never heard a word Ezra said.

Ezra stopped typing abruptly. He stared at Buck. An odd mixture of emotions played across his face. They were all replaced by a cold, hard realism.

“Buck,” Ezra said. He dropped the formal terms he usually used, indicating his seriousness on this subject.

Buck turned his full attention to Standish.

“They are never going to let us pursue this matter,” Ezra said with absolute certainty.

“What do you mean ‘us’?” Buck asked flatly. “You won’t be pursuing anything after you resign.”

What Buck was proposing was impossible—not to mention dangerous—and Ezra knew it. The voice of self-preservation that had been his lifeline and reason for survival for many years rose up inside him. He willed himself to agree with Buck’s simple statement of fact. To simply reply, “That’s right. I will not be pursuing anything after I resign.”
But when he opened his mouth, it was the other voice that answered, the one that had developed suddenly two minutes after he had run out on his team during his very first mission. The one that took root the very moment Chris Larabee had pinned him with his green-eyed glare and said “Don’t you ever run out on me again.” Again, he had said. A gift of a second chance, an offer of redemption, a statement of faith. Faith. In him. Something Ezra had never dreamed to encounter. And something he could not sacrifice now.

He spoke quietly, but with conviction evident in each word. “I would be willing to delay my resignation long enough to catch the foul, loathsome beings who perpetrated this disaster.”

Buck smiled—dangerously. “I knew I could count on you, Ez,” he said.

“When does our new leader start?” Ezra asked, with no small amount of sarcastic emphasis on the word ‘leader.’

“Well, then,” Ezra said, tilting his head thoughtfully at Chris’s office. “Let us give him a welcome worthy of the team he is about to command.”

For the first time in days, Buck felt a grin slide across his face. “What’d you have in mind?”

It took only a few minutes of preparation.

“Are you ready?” Ezra asked, surveying the inside of the office, which smelled revoltingly of florists’ arrangements.

Buck nodded. “There’s only a few things I want,” he said, removing the framed silver picture of Sarah and Adam Larabee from Chris’s desk. He took the picture of the seven members of Team Seven down off the bookshelf, along with the single spur that hung on the picture’s simple wooden frame.

As an afterthought, he picked the blanket up off the couch and pressed it into Ezra’s hands.

“Coffee cup,” Ezra said. Buck took it, too. Then they shut the office door behind them.

The two men leaned back against the closed door, side by side, each lost in his own thoughts.

Ezra’s carefully chosen words broke the silence. “It wasn’t your fault, Buck,” he said.

Buck scowled down at his feet. He didn’t want to talk about this.

His teammate seemed not to notice, continuing. “There was no choice. Mr. Larabee knew that when he gave the order.”

The undercover agent leaned over to try to gauge his friend’s expression.

Buck shook his head. When he looked up at Ezra, his eyes were haunted. “Anyone try explainin’ that to Vin?” he replied, his voice hollow.

Ezra winced. “Mr. Tanner heard the order, too,” he said simply. “In time he will come to realize there were no other options.”

Yeah, Buck thought bitterly. No other options but to hurl himself into the flames and burn in hell beside him. He could still hear Vin’s unintelligible shouting, struggling as Nathan and Josiah held him back. He could still feel the heat from the flames that devoured the building before them, as he
held J.D. back against the communications van, blocking the youth’s view of the inferno.

The thought brought up another, long-suppressed image of flames, and his stomach turned over as he remembered pinning Chris bodily down on the pavement of his own driveway, while the man fought, screaming, to leap into the flames and join his wife and son in their fiery death at the hands of an unnamed, unknown—and still uncaught—car bomber.

That was before Team Seven, when he and Chris had been partners in the Denver PD. He hadn’t thought their friendship would survive the aftermath of that terrible day. He was sure for a while that it hadn’t—until Chris came to him, literally, with the offer to join his new ATF team.

For Buck it had been like seeing the dead rise again. He had accepted joyfully and had watched with pleasure as his old friend had gradually learned to take part in life again.

The office before him blurred as he came back to the present. He blinked rapidly. “Thanks, Ez,” he said hurriedly, still looking at his shoes.

He did not hear the grim sigh that escaped Standish as the undercover agent awkwardly reached out and squeezed the taller man’s shoulder.

Buck looked up suddenly, his mustache twitching upward. “So how long before this stuff dries?”

Ezra grinned back. “It should be quite safely adhered now,” he said consulting the empty tube in his hand. “By Monday morning, our new leader will have to cut a brand new doorway if he wants to use this office.”

Buck smirked.

Ezra smirked back.

“By that time, Mr. Wilmington,” he drawled lazily, “I should hope that you would have gathered the troops, so we can present our proper parade dress to our new commander.”

Buck’s smirk slowly spread into a smile. “Oh, I will,” he said. He cradled the pictures and the coffee cup in his arms. “But first I’ll have to take care of a few things.”

Buck had gone first to Vin’s run-down apartment building in the gang-ridden neighborhood called Purgatorio, but the wary-eyed child on the downstairs stoop had recognized him and informed him that Señor Vin was not there—and had not been all week. Buck held his swear words until he got back in the truck. Then he made the long drive out to Chris’s ranch.

He had gone there, their first night back, for the same reason the others had, each drawn there instinctively, needing to be together and close to Chris. But the bond had been shattered. With red-rimmed, blazing eyes Tanner stood on the porch and told Buck in a deadly voice to get out. Get out. Don’t show yer face here again.

Buck had backed down the steps at those words, those very words, spoken once before on the very same porch of the house that had once been like home to him, by another friend as close as a brother. A past image of a grief-ravaged, raging Chris Larabee overlaid Tanner’s furious form.

“You don’t mean that!” J. D. had protested in shocked defense of his friend.

Buck answered quickly, preventing Tanner from turning that anger on the young agent. “It’s alright,” he had said simply, amazed at the steadiness of his own voice. “I’ll just go.”
He turned back once, asking no one in particular, “Make sure someone sees to my horse.”

Vin’s venomous final words shot through him like hot lead. “Bet on it. I wouldn’t turn my back on an animal.”

Buck had climbed into his truck. He drove off, hands shaking. He hadn’t returned to the ranch, although he had longed to, every single day. But he knew that Vin needed it more than he did. He only hoped that Tanner had not shut out all of his teammates.

The ranch came into view at the bend at the top of the road, laid out neatly before him at the end of a long curving driveway: White, clapboard ranch house, two stories with a rambling front porch and a side deck that shone like honey in the late afternoon sun; a white shed that matched the house; and a weathered white barn that stood neatly across the gravel driveway from the house, its far end opening onto a tidy, fenced paddock. Vin’s beat-up Jeep was parked in the front.

Buck sighed as he pulled up next to the Jeep. A quick glance in the row of darkened windows showed Chris’s truck was parked in the garage. The will would offer the truck to Vin—part of a long-standing, semi-serious joke about the reliability, or lack thereof, of Vin’s beloved Jeep, and the inherent danger of his coveted motorcycle. In spite of himself, Buck smiled as he recalled how Sarah Larabee had staunchly substituted the title of “death machine” into every conversation Chris had ever started about getting a motorcycle. He knew better than to bring up the truck with Vin.

He reminded himself with a pang that, as executor of Larabee’s estate, which held the ranch and its contents in trust, he had not yet done more than arrange for the bills to be paid on time. As he surveyed the property now from the front porch, he tried—again—to consider how to begin. How to decide what to do with the house and its contents. As before, his mind refused to focus. And he didn’t have the heart to raise the question with his teammates.

Hell, if he wanted to be honest, he hadn’t even read the will. He’d put the appointment off twice. Told the attorney he was ill. He knew what Chris had wanted. He didn’t need some damn lawyer to tell him.

He rang the doorbell, then knocked softly, before letting himself in with his key. He entered his security code into the alarm system.

One Christmas shortly after the team was formed, Chris had presented each of them with a key and a personal code for the alarm. It was his way of telling them that his home was now their home. Buck had joked that the individual codes were so Chris would know whose pay to dock if anything got broken. A small smile flitted across his face at the memory.

Making his way through the front hall he noticed the clean dishes drying beside the sink. The mail was on a telephone table in the hall. He made a note to himself to pick it up on his way out.

A quick check through the house showed that Vin was nowhere to be seen about the property. *Probably gone for a ride,* Buck reasoned. He shook his head as he looked around. Every last dish, piece of paper, and stick of furniture was in place, just as Chris had kept it.

He found the first sign of Vin in the upstairs hallway. His sleeping bag was rolled out on the carpeted hardwood floor in front of the master bedroom door. Buck winced. Three bedrooms in this house, two of them guest rooms, and Vin was camped in the hall. Unable to move in. And unable to move away.

He hurried back down the stairs, pausing only to look at the pictures above the fireplace. Pictures of Sarah and Adam. Pictures of the team. Then he wrote a quick note.
New boss. Monday morning. Be on your best behavior.

That last part should guarantee Vin’s arrival, if anything will, Buck thought.

He folded the note and tucked it carefully in the rowels of the spur he had taken from Chris’s office. He left them in the center of the dining room table, where Vin would be sure to find them.

He stopped at the barn on his way out. Buck’s big gray mare whickered a greeting, and he paused to feed her a carrot and check her over. True to his word, Tanner had taken good care of her. Or someone else had. Her stall was clean and she had been brushed until her coat shone.

With apologies for his absence, he left her again, taking a quick look around at the other horses. They had all been brought into the barn for the evening. Only Chris’s big black gelding was missing. As he suspected, Tanner was out for a ride. He headed back to his truck, wanting to be away before Vin returned.

By Sunday evening, Buck had left a message similar to the one he had given Vin for every member of the team, ensuring that every man would be present to meet their new boss on Monday.

He was the first to arrive on Monday morning, nosing in just ahead of J.D. on his Ninja bike. They did not talk on their way up in the elevator. Other agents who knew them seemed uncomfortable with the unaccustomed silence and moved none too subtly away from them. By now, there was not a man or woman who worked in the building who had not heard what had happened or who did not know what was bound to happen today.

Buck did not have to wait long for the others to arrive, but, to his surprise, it was Vin who arrived next. He wasn’t sure why he was surprised. After all, Vin had always been an early arrival to the office, sometimes even getting there before Chris. When this happened, of course, it meant that Vin made the coffee, a horrendously, indigestible, undrinkable brew that Buck and Chris had joked would eat right through a normal spoon. On a normal day, J.D. would have expressed his gratitude that Buck made the coffee today. But today was not a normal day.

Vin approached Buck’s desk, eyes harder than Buck had ever seen them. He did not speak. He stretched his arm out over Buck’s desk and opened his fist. The shredded pieces of Buck’s note fluttered down onto the center of Buck’s desk. And he turned away again. But Buck noticed, with no small amount of gratitude, that the sharpshooter held onto the spur, placing it carefully, almost reverently, on his own desk next to its matching mate. A pair. Buck had given Chris and Vin each one spur from the pair. It was Buck’s way of blessing a friendship that had helped his oldest friend learn how to live again.

The other members of the team arrived with little comment.

Josiah and Nathan arrived almost together. Both looked tired. They nodded once to each of their teammates, Nathan’s brown eyes raking over each one in turn.

Even Ezra made his appearance on time.

This time, J.D. did express his amazement.

Ezra winked and adjusted his immaculate tie. “Must make a proper first impression,” he drawled.

J.D. puzzled at the gleam in Ezra’s eye and Buck had to duck his head to keep from smiling. Vin stared at the undercover agent, as if in anticipation.

The elevator bank in the hallway dinged again, and they heard Travis’s voice in the hall beyond the
bullpen door.

As one, they stood and faced the door.

* * *

To say that Senior Agent Jack Dawson’s introduction to Team Seven was hostile would have been an understatement. And Travis had the guilty feeling that he had just led a lamb to slaughter. Travis introduced each member of the team to him, and each man offered a polite greeting or at least a civil nod. But it did not escape Travis that their eyes were much too hard and their smiles showed far too many teeth. For just a moment, Travis envisioned Dawson surrounded by a snarling wolf pack.

Dawson was a decorated former soldier. True he had not been in law enforcement long, but his career was on the rise. His friends in high places had assured him that taking command of this team was a plum assignment that would guarantee him an extraordinary career resume. He felt certain that the team’s evident hostility would fade once they got used to his style.

Travis turned to the closed office. “This will be your office,” he said. Dawson put his key in the door, while Travis shot a warning glare at the standing men behind Dawson’s back. They key turned, but the door refused to budge.

“I’ll have someone check that,” Travis said. “In the meantime, there’s a table in the conference room as well as a small one in the coffee room.”

Dawson went on ahead into the conference room and then into the tiny kitchenette. Travis looked over at Buck and didn’t care for the innocent smile he received in return. Then again, he mused, all six remaining members of the team were here. In the office. And that was a damn sight more than he had really expected.

He left Dawson in the kitchenette and headed back for his office, shaking his head. Whoever had connected Dawson had unwittingly hung the man out to dry.

Considering how best to get to know his men, Dawson decided that his first course of action would be to get himself a cup of coffee. He paused at the small sink. Six coffee cups sat on a drain board. The seventh one sat apart, smashed, its pieces artfully arranged on the countertop. Puzzled, Dawson pulled out the garbage pail and reached for the pieces.

“Leave it,” a low voice growled, so close to his ear it made the hair on his neck stand up. Despite himself, he froze, drawing his hand back, and he knew he had made his first mistake. He turned slowly, pulling his face together to greet the fiercest pair of blue eyes he had ever seen, glaring out from the face of the team’s young, long-haired sharpshooter. It was the first time in Dawson’s career as a soldier or in his short time in law enforcement that he actually felt afraid of another man.

One by one, each of the others came into the kitchen and retrieved their cups, their voices low and bantering around him. They poured their coffee and filed out again, leaving Dawson staring at the broken cup. He left it right where it was.

Later that morning, maintenance came up to open the door. First they tried another key. It didn’t take them long to realize the lock worked just fine. They promised to return with tools to take the door off the hinges.

After lunch, they arrived. They removed the hinges. Still the door stuck in the frame. Dawson noticed his agents ducked their heads as the maintenance staff left. The maintenance crew promised to try again, but wouldn’t make it back until sometime tomorrow.
Dawson busied himself studying the dossiers on his agents, choosing to start by breaking the ice with his second in command. In fifteen minutes of conversation, Dawson had not managed to elicit more than a terse, “Yes sir”, “No sir”, or “I’ll find out sir” from the tall mustached agent. He was perplexed. The building was rife with stories about the man’s affable, talkative nature.

Things went much worse with the sharpshooter. Agent Tanner had stared at him, unblinking, throughout the entire conversation. He did not utter a word, make a gesture, or even change his facial expression. When Dawson dismissed him, the sharpshooter went out as silently as he came in.

The next two he couldn’t get to stop talking, although he could not fathom what either was talking about. Agent Sanchez, the team’s mountain-sized profiler was an ex-soldier and an ex-priest. He was a trained anthropologist and apparently something of a philosopher, for he completely ignored Dawson’s very first question and instead began a lengthy, convoluted parable that took up the whole interview. At its end, Dawson had not an inkling what it meant. He only knew that he felt vaguely uneasy with Sanchez’s single reference to his trouble turning the other cheek.

Agent Standish was even worse. He answered all the questions, but in such vague, and long-winded terms that Dawson couldn’t tell exactly what he meant. Dawson had intended to try to subtly gather some information from him about his career in the FBI and the rumors about his “misconduct”. But something in the way the undercover agent looked at him made him suddenly look at his watch and end the interview.

He decided to postpone his interviews with the others until the next day.

By Tuesday, the offices that shared the same ventilation conduit with Team Seven began to complain about an unpleasant odor. The agents of Team Seven looked puzzled. They maintained that they didn’t smell anything. Well five of them did. Vin Tanner still had not said a word to Dawson since that first day in the kitchenette.

Later that day, the heat was mysteriously jacked up, and by afternoon, the stench both in the bullpen and the outer offices had become thick enough to choke on. The maintenance staff arrived shortly thereafter with several hand held saws. They cut away the door, the frame, and a good part of the office wall. As the door to the office came down, out rolled the stench of rotting floral arrangements. Dead and dying plants drooped from the desk and along the floor. Dawson recoiled from the odor, fighting the urge to gag.

“Oh that smell,” the young computer expert said suddenly.

“Oh yes,” said the ex-priest sagely. “Something is indeed rotten in the state of Denmark.”

Dawson sent both men a glare that should have set their hair on fire. For reasons he couldn’t understand, both men looked at each other and began to laugh.

Only Tanner blanched at the sight. “Jesus,” the sharpshooter muttered and left the office. He did not return for the rest of the day.

Custodians came to remove the dead flowers, but J.D. Dunne carefully gathered up every last card, note, memento, and photograph. Standish muttered something about burning them, and Dunne threw him a reproachful look and packed them carefully into his backpack. Then he returned to the office. He came out again with the battered U.S. NAVY coaster. He held it in his hands a moment before placing it carefully on top of his own desk.

All afternoon, Dawson sat in his reeking office and wondered how he was going to tell his new boss on his second day that an agent had already gone AWOL.
On Wednesday, Dawson resigned his position with Team Seven.

Travis brought Buck the news with a stern warning. The team hung their heads and looked chagrined. Travis was not fooled.

After Travis left, Buck leaned over toward Tanner and softly said, “Missed you yesterday afternoon, Pard.”

Tanner grimaced but said nothing.

“Your conspicuous absence was much commented on by the Senior Agent,” Ezra added.

Tanner muttered a suggestion that would have been physically impossible for either the Senior Agent or Ezra to accomplish.

“What happened?” J.D. asked.

Tanner shook his head, still staring at his computer screen. “I didn’t know there would be so many flowers,” he said finally, his voice no more than a whisper.

“Revolting, wasn’t it,” Ezra said.

Tanner exchanged a look with J.D. that said they both thought otherwise.

Buck smiled to himself. It was the first complete sentence he had heard from Vin in more than a week.

* * *

Wednesday afternoon, Nathan was called up to Travis’s office. The AD called the medic into his office and offered him a seat, getting a good look at him for the first time in a few days. He looked damn tired.

“How are you?” Travis asked.

The medic sighed. Silence hung heavy in the air between them until at last Travis said, “They’ll send someone new tomorrow”.

Nathan nodded. He knew they would, but that didn’t mean they had to like it. Or make it easy.

Travis leaned forward to look Nathan in the eye. He was not accustomed to beating around the bush, so he came straight out with it. “I’m telling you what I already told Agent Wilmington. The powers that be are not happy about what happened with Dawson. The more you resist getting a new Senior Agent, the harder they’re going to make it on you. If you make it too hard, they will disband the team.” He thought but did not add, That’s not how Chris would have wanted this to go.

He searched the medic’s face for an indication of what action he might take. Jackson had been a steady voice of reason over the last few years and Travis depended on his judgment and his gift for handing the volatile men he worked with.

Nathan knew this. He found it almost funny, since it had been his politics and known associates that had made it politically hard for him to advance—until Chris. At first Nathan thought he was being recruited as window dressing, a nice African-American agent to make the team look politically correct and appropriately multicultural. He was prepared to tell the man precisely what he thought of that, but Chris, in his terse way, had made it immediately clear that what he wanted was a medic with
military training. Period.

By the end of the interview process, Nathan, perplexed, for no reason he could fathom, blurted out the very reasons why Chris might not want to hire him: his past activism, participation in protests and Civil Rights demonstrations, his support of several groups with socialist leanings.

It was the first time he had seen the Larabee smile, the one that promised the man could fight the devil and win. *You could be a card-carrying member of the Communist Party, read sheep entrails for Druids, and have voted for Satan in every election since you turned 18 for all I care,* Chris had said. *I’m not interested in your politics. I’m interested in your skills*

Jackson shook his head, thinking back. He had never met anybody less interested in making a good first impression than Chris Larabee, and yet no one had ever won his loyalty so completely in such a short time.

“I hear what you’re saying,” Nathan said to Travis at last, his voice low and rough. “But I don’t lead them. I just put the pieces back together when they get themselves shot up.”

Nathan might be practical enough to agree with him, but Travis could see the medic’s concerns were elsewhere right now. His voice softened. “Are the pieces fitting back together?”

Nathan’s sight turned inward. Every day last week he had seen to his teammates. He had come to Buck and J.D.’s townhouse in response to J.D.’s middle-of-the-night phone calls. He had assured J.D. repeatedly that no one would think less of him for crying. He had tried to convince Buck that it was not his fault. He had watched Josiah ransack his own living room, tearing it apart with his bare hands as he railed against his God for letting this happen. He had urged Vin to scream, cry, yell, talk—about anything! He had begged Ezra to wipe off his professional poker face and stop blathering about anything and everything except what had happened. In the end, he had put Ezra and Vin together at the ranch, hoping they would talk about what happened—or at the very least yell at each other. And every night, Rain’s loving arms had held him, rocked him while his tears silently soaked the pillow and he bled invisibly for himself and for each of his teammates.

“I don’t know,” Nathan said looking up from his hands, sorrow filling the deep brown eyes. “There’s nothing in my medical kit that can help with this.”

Travis sighed. Despite his irritation, the shenanigans that had driven Dawson from the office were the first sign he had seen that they were still working as a team. “I had hoped,” he said finally, “that supergluing the door shut was a healthy sign.”

Nathan’s face twisted suddenly into a smile. His deep chuckle brought Travis a momentary sense of solace.

After Jackson left, Travis read the file profiling Team Seven’s next new leader. He put it away again, shaking his head.

* * *

Thursday morning the replacement—or as Ezra preferred to term it ‘the moron of the moment’—arrived. He was, by reputation, a no-nonsense, hard-boiled, old school, ex-military commander who ate upstarts for breakfast. He looked about two years from retirement. All this led Buck to wonder where they had dug him up—and so quickly. He decided that the man must have pissed someone off royally to get exiled to Team Seven. Normally that would have been a point in the man’s favor—since it was one of the personality traits that had made working with Chris Larabee so uniquely interesting. Unfortunately, the new Senior Agent also pissed off Buck and the rest of the boys in
record time.

First he had escorted himself to the bullpen, without Travis. As if he owned it.

He stood in the bullpen doorway and regarded them balefully through icy blue eyes under steely gray brows. He looked unimpressed. And indeed he was, announcing as came toward them, “I am Senior Agent Grayson Mueller. I’ve come here from Oregon to take charge of Team Seven. I’ve read your files and your records, so I know all about you. All you need to know about me is that I expect you to work and work hard. I expect you to follow orders, do your jobs, and leave the crap at home. Do that and we’ll get along fine.”

With that he moved out of the bullpen to inspect the conference room and the kitchen. The men of Team Seven stared after him, open-mouthed. Ezra recovered first. His face twisted up in disdain and he inhaled deeply, but Vin reached across his desk and grabbed the undercover agent by the back of the collar, cutting off Standish’s air before he could let fly with his free opinion of Agent Mueller’s personal and professional qualities.

Ezra sat abruptly in his chair, straightening his collar and glaring at Vin.

Buck shook his head nearly imperceptibly.

Nathan and Josiah caught the signal and exchanged a glance. Nathan had filled Josiah in on his meeting with Travis. A sardonic smile tilted up Sanchez’s lips, as he said, “So much for playing nice.”

Mueller came out of the conference room and moved into the kitchenette. They all leaned over to watch.

Mueller eyed the pieces of the coffee cup still on the counter. Without hesitation, he picked up the garbage and swept the pieces into the bin with one arm. Buck instinctively grabbed Vin’s arm and was gratified to note that the sharpshooter did not pull away. They watched Mueller search for and find a spare cup in the cabinet. He rinsed it and poured himself a cup of coffee before coming back out into the bullpen. He surveyed the agents, still watching him. Good, he thought. I’ve got their attention.

“We’ll have a meeting in ten minutes to discuss our current case load,” Mueller said. As one, their heads swiveled to watch him walk into his doorless office. He was not intimidated. Until he choked on his first swallow of coffee.

Red faced, he emerged from the office and poured the cup angrily out into the nearest potted plant, which happened to be a tiny cactus on the edge of Vin’s desk. “Is this someone’s idiot idea of a joke?” he snapped, fixing each man with a soul-searing glare that promised retribution.

The six agents looked at each other. “Joke, sir?” Ezra asked innocently. He stared at Mueller quizzically. Then suddenly his face lit up in understanding. “You mean the coffee!” he exclaimed, in a performance so perfect J.D. had to duck his head to keep from laughing.

The six agents looked at each other. “Joke, sir?” Ezra asked innocently. He stared at Mueller quizzically. Then suddenly his face lit up in understanding. “You mean the coffee!” he exclaimed, in a performance so perfect J.D. had to duck his head to keep from laughing.

“Actually Mr. Tanner made it,” Ezra continued most helpfully. “Some say it’s a bit strong, but we like it.” He turned to his teammates and raised his cup. “Gentlemen,” he said. “To our new leader.”

Right on cue, the six agents lifted their cups and drank to Mueller’s health. All of them managed to keep a straight face as he glowered threateningly at them. Then he turned on his heel and thundered into the outer office to look for coffee elsewhere.

The instant Mueller was out of earshot, four of the six agents choked, spluttered, and held their hands
to their throats in exaggerated death throes.

“Vin,” J.D. rasped. “Better check to see if your cactus is still breathing.”

Impervious, Vin and Josiah raised their cups to each other and drank.

“Don’t know what yer problem is,” Vin muttered darkly into his cup. “Make a damn fine cup of coffee.”

“Amen, Brother,” Josiah said, seating himself at his desk, as the other four agents went to dump the undrinkable brew into the sink.

A few minutes later, they noticed Sanchez in the kitchenette rummaging through the garbage. They watched in silence as he retrieved the pieces of the shattered mug, methodically rinsed and dried each one, and then placed them in an envelope in his desk drawer.

They met to discuss their current caseload, what had not been taken away from them when they had been ordered to take time off. Compassionate leave they called it. Buck’s term for it was less tactful. Nothing in hell was going to prevent him from going after those bastards.

Mueller found the team to be efficient and knowledgeable despite their obvious resentment.

His grudging respect was replaced by gnawing doubt when he arrived early the following morning and found his agents already gathered around the conference table. Although their voices were too low to hear what they said as he lurked outside the room, it was quite clear that Buck Wilmington was running a tactical meeting. It was also clear that this was a case they had already begun working on—one they had no intention of sharing with their team leader.

He stepped into the room and manila folders snapped shut. “Good morning,” he said, eyeing them suspiciously. “I'll take a look at those.”

Of the six agents in the room, only one flinched. The youngest. He turned toward J.D. Dunne and held out his hand, glaring fiercely. A strange look came over the young man, as if Mueller had asked him to cut off his own hand.

It was then that the undercover agent interfered. He reached over and took the folder from Dunne. Mueller turned slowly toward him. After reading the man’s file, he had his doubts about the man’s integrity. After first-hand experience, he had labeled the agent as mouthy and insubordinate. Possibly a ringleader.

“Hand over the file, Agent Standish,” he said, his voice soft and promising an unspoken punishment for disobedience.

He did not expect the response he got from the flowery-spoken man. “I think not,” Standish stated simply, tucking both folders under his arm, his green eyes hard and flat.

Mueller refused to show his surprise. Without a word, the others slid their folders into their notepads and case rosters. Now he knew for certain. This insubordination had to be nipped in the bud. And he would start with Standish.

Later that day, he returned from a lunchtime meeting with the other team leaders under Travis’s dominion to find the coffee cup he had been using smashed, the pieces left on his desk and artfully laid out to resemble a fist, a single finger raised in a gesture that was hard not to recognize and even harder to ignore. Burning with fury, he noticed that Standish was the only one in the room. His desire for control turned to a desire for retribution.
Josiah and Buck returned from picking up sandwiches in time to see Ezra, face turning purple suspended by the collar from Mueller’s meaty fist, Mueller’s face a mere inch away and spitting obscenities into the undercover agent’s face. It took both men to pry them apart.

“Jesus Ezra,” Buck said as Mueller regained his composure and stormed from the office. “Why didn’t you just lay him out?” After all, Standish was proficient in several different forms of hand-to-hand combat.

“And hit a superior officer?” Ezra gasped, yanking his collar loose, an ugly red line appearing around his neck. “Have you any idea of the paperwork involved in that?”

Josiah chuckled. *How would Buck know?* he thought. Although the mustached agent had actually hit his long-time friend turned boss more than once during their time as a team, it was not Chris’s style to settle the matter with paperwork. Besides, God only knew what Wilmington would have written in explanation. *He asked for it.*? *Someone needed to do it.*? *He’s had it coming for 15 years.*? Or the most likely option: *Ask him. He’s the asshole who started it.*

“What set him off?” Buck asked, looking from Ezra to the hall door and back.

“The coffee cup,” Ezra replied. Then with a snort of disdain, he added, “As if I would have had the bad taste to choose such a vulgar design.”

It didn’t take long for Travis to hear what had happened. A meeting was called. Strange, he reflected. He was certain that Chris and his agents had manhandled each other from time to time over the past few years. The proof was in the black eyes and split lips—and the complete denials. Complaints and paper trails were not exactly their style. This time, Travis knew without doubt, things would not be so easily smoothed over.

“I refuse to endure unprovoked assaults on my person,” Standish said as they stood before Travis and two of the directors.

“Unprovoked?” Mueller said dangerously, his face turning an unhealthy red.

At that, Ezra gave a surprisingly succinct verbal resignation on the spot.

The directors exchanged glances.

It was Mueller who did not return that afternoon.

* * *

Travis came down to the bullpen—again. Ezra was dramatically cleaning out his desk.

“Agent Standish,” he said. “A word, please.”

“Certainly, sir,” Standish said, his exaggerated courtesy a marked contrast to the scowl on his face.

Travis eyed him carefully. Standish was renowned for his poker face, and Travis was never certain whether any emotion he saw was real or just put on for his sake.

Travis was about to suggest they use the team leader’s office, but then he noticed the gaping hole where the door used to be. He made a mental note to push the maintenance staff to get that fixed. Since he couldn’t use Team Seven’s bullpen, he led Standish back upstairs to his own office.

“I meant to ask,” Standish drawled, looking around him as they passed through Travis’s outer office.
“What happened to your coffee table?”

And again Travis was reminded why he was not surprised it only took Mueller two days to try to throttle the man.

Standish returned to the bullpen a mere fifteen minutes later, looking like he wasn’t sure whether to be smug or upset. In truth he wasn’t.

“What happened?” J.D. burst out, unable to contain his curiosity.

Ezra snorted. “For three years the powers that be have been looking for a reason to fire me. And now they won’t let me resign.”

Buck and Nathan exchanged a knowing smirk. “Too valuable to let go, huh?” Buck asked.

“Actually,” Ezra replied. “What our esteemed AD said was if I am really determined to go through with this, he would not take part. I would have to submit the necessary paperwork to my direct superior for submission to the directors themselves.”

The team glanced over at the vacant office. “Guess you’re out of luck then,” J.D. snorted.

“I am,” Ezra said, suddenly quiet. “Since there is only one individual I have ever been willing to recognize as my direct superior. And I am NOT submitting my resignation to the approval or disapproval of the arrogant, authority-driven, tactless buffoons we are required to call our chain of command.” He paused thoughtfully then added, “AD Travis notwithstanding.”

“Oh by the way,” the undercover agent added as an afterthought. “One Jackson Henderson is next in line to assume the position of ‘moron of the moment.’ Perhaps a few minutes of research would turn this miserable situation to our advantage.”

“I’ll get on it,” J.D. said at once, glad to take a break from the frustrating task of trying to hack into information on their last case—information that other agencies were trying very hard to keep to a “need to know” basis. To a man Team Seven felt that if anyone “needed to know,” they did.

They went home on Friday not knowing much more than they had when they had come back to Denver a week ago. Frustrated.

For the second weekend in a row, Buck had not even thought of making a date. In fact, he had declined one of his Saturday night usuals for the second time. He hadn’t even explained. It was still too hard to say the words.

He tried staying up late enough to wear out his frayed nerves then taking his pills. He hoped for dreamless oblivion. But still the images came.

“All teams pull back! All teams pull back!” an urgent voice on the headset.

“No shit!” the typically agitated response. “You got that Buck? Pull the team back.”

The hair standing up on the back of his neck. New combatants in khaki and camo pouring into the warehouse, from three points of entry, taking up strategic positions as if planned. Where the hell were they coming from? There was no intelligence on this. “Where are you, Chris? We’ll cover your position.”

A bark of laughter. “Thanks, but these assholes are doing that just fine on their own. Get the team out of here. Now.”
Straining his eyes in the dim light of the loading bay, trying to see the position Chris had taken. The position the rest of them were supposed to take. Except Chris had refused to comply with orders. Couldn’t see. The area was alive with gunfire.

Cracking automatic weapons. A flinch, as a flying shard of wooden crate stung his cheek. Again. More urgent now. “What’s your position?”

“Fuck my position!” A garbled grunt and a swear word. “I’m overrun.”

The voice now strained and angry. “Retreat, Buck. Take the team and retreat.”

Vin’s voice, cutting through. “Gimme a target. I’ll…”

“Get your stubborn Texan ass down off that rafter and cover the team’s retreat. That’s a goddamn order!”

Silence.

Another grunt. The voice quiet. “Regroup at the van. I think I can break a line out of here. I’ll meet you at the van in ten.”

Nathan’s voice. “Just so you do.”

A muttered, “God be with you, Brother.”

A reluctant “I’ll hold you to that, Cowboy.” Then, “Hold your position. I’m coming down.”

The sharpshooter comes spiraling down off a rafter to their rear, on a spider line. Nathan and Josiah cover his descent.

The lucid part of his mind wanted to scream out then: Give me your position! We’ll charge in there. We’ll go down together. Anything. Just don’t make us leave!

But that’s not what had happened. He had obeyed the order.

_Fighting their way to the doors. Nathan and Josiah dropping their empty clips where they stood._

His heart in his mouth as Vin slipped and dropped several feet to the concrete floor. Then the Texas sharpshooter’s arm was in his hand as he dragged him toward the door. Hauling him back with them still somehow firing with the other hand. Goddamn door out in the open.

“Lay down cover fire. J.D. get a fix on Chris.”

“Can’t get him, Buck. His headset’s gone off line.”

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck!

Shoving Ezra behind him. Last out, Vin pressed so close he was nearly in his pocket, using the door as a shield.

Squinting in the too-bright sunlight. Smell of dust and gunsmoke in the air.

Across the parking lot. J.D. in the door of the van. Looking nearly frantic.

“Nobody move. He said he’ll meet us here in ten.”
Jesus! How do I sound so calm? Oh God! I didn’t know. Don’t let it happen. Not again. Don’t, don’t…

He woke up, sweating, before he had to relive the last scene. His hand shook as he ran it over his face. He knew he should get up out of the armchair, go to bed, change the channel in his head, turn the TV back up, but he couldn’t get his body to move. Without his knowing, his eyes slid shut and dropped him right back into the hell he had just left.

“Ten minutes, Buck. Still offline.”

Gunfire still cracking from inside.

Shifting his feet. His team looking at him now. Waiting to hear a plan.

The site commander came into view forty yards up, waving his arms as he spoke. Dug in positions up front moving suddenly backward. Vans and equipment trucks starting away from the building. Sirens in the distance. Approaching fast. Fire trucks?

He felt his body came fully upright.

Orders from someone hollering out, “Get your men under cover!”

Then amazement from J.D. “What the hell is that?”

On the left. A van. Rolling in from the west, out from under an even lower level, turning back toward the building. Mounted on top with a device he had seen before but never on a city street—in the U.S. anyway.

Shit!

Perplexed southern drawl. “Is that a rocket launcher?”

More amazement from the kid. “But they’ll blow up their own arsenal!”

Harsh surprise from Nathan, “That’ll take out half this city block.”

Cold realization descends on everyone at the same time.

Khaki clad militants begin to pour from the building, hands in the air, guns flung away. ATF and FBI waving them to get down. Get down.

Eyes scanning for one familiar, running figure. Dammit, Chris, don’t fuck around with this…

J.D.’s eyes go white. From the open doorway, militants inside the building begin mowing down their surrendering comrades. Parking lot shrapnel pushes back the ATF and FBI SWAT team pinned down. Frontline ATF hits the deck. At least two definitely dead.

Sudden fire from the rocket launcher. Flinch. Flash. Rumbled roar. Then the explosion.

The concussion rolls across the parking lot, knocking back fleeing police, nearly taking him off his feet. He staggers back, surprised to find one arm holding J.D. up, pinned back against the van.

Someone is hollering Chris’s name. Maybe it's his own voice. Maybe it's Vin. He can’t tell. Maybe it’s all of them.

The fireball shoots up three stories into the sky, rolling out the door toward them, overtaking
everything in its path, man, metal, machine.

J.D. bolts two steps forward. He slams him back pressing with more weight. Josiah and Nathan have tackled Vin. They are dragging him backward. Screaming. Fighting. They fight to hold him back. They pin him down.

J.D. is talking, sounds like he’s strangling. Ezra just standing there, face blank, staring at the flames, his gun dangling from one limp finger. His eyes are blank, like he has gone somewhere and left his body behind.

It takes seconds more to understand…

It is happening again.

This time he did scream out. J.D. came flying out of his bedroom at the end of the hall. But Buck didn’t have time to calm him. He staggered to the downstairs bathroom, hitting it just in time to heave up everything he had eaten. Again and again. Wishing he could just turn himself inside out, like a glove, empty everything out and get rid of it. Empty out the dreams. Empty out the memories. All of it. Empty. He wanted to be empty.

Not for the first time he wondered if this was how Chris had felt after the car bomb. After Sarah and Adam.

Bile rose up again, and though he had nothing left to lose, he bent low and retched violently into the toilet.

J.D. leaned back against the wall outside the door, tears stinging his eyes. He wanted nothing more than to go in there, hold his friend’s shoulder, tell him that he wasn’t alone. But he knew, because he knew Buck, that Buck wanted to be alone. Alone with this violent grief that threatened to tear him apart.

* * *

The gray light of dawn found him at the cemetery, again, as the first pink fingers began to touch the gray and white stones, one by one, then row by row.

He had come here the very day they returned. He had come to tell her, to tell Sarah what had happened. Although if Josiah was right and there really was a hereafter, he hoped with all his heart that his friend was already safe in Sarah’s loving arms. He swallowed thinking of it. It was the only image that brought him peace. He fought to hold onto it through the days, but it eluded him at night.

He stared down at the two headstones. Sarah Larabee. Adam Larabee. Both ripped from him. He had loved them like family. They had been his family. He thought of them now.

He thought of the three of them, remembering Sarah’s kindness and laughter, her stubborn streak and sharp humor—even her quick Irish temper. A small smile lingered on his lips.

Adam’s toddler grin, smelling of baby shampoo, delighted squeals, his face lit with the joy of some new discovery, some new skill conquered. The way he cocked his head to one side when he was thinking—just like his father.

Buck gulped.

He tried to bring to mind the Chris Larabee he had known for more than half his life: The cocky, reckless youth, the brash Navy SEAL team leader, the wily cop, the fierce, protective ATF team
leader. He tried to picture the trademark cocky grin, the one that made bad guys run, the one Chris couldn’t help wearing whenever he was facing down danger, or the way Chris’s green eyes looked at you as if he could see right through you. He tried to picture the mischievous smart-ass smirk or the gleam of pride or contentment that he hid under lazy half-mast eyes that weren’t lazy at all. He tried, but he failed.

Of all his memories, the only image he could call forth clearly was Chris standing there in his flak jacket, changing the deployment of the team.

“This shit-for-brains plan is going to get someone killed,” he had muttered.

Vin snorted in response.

Larabee had two great gifts: leadership and tactics. But Team Seven had not been invited here to offer an opinion. They had been brought in because of their collective military and Special Forces experience, valuable experience when facing down a well-supplied paramilitary squad. They had been brought in to do the dirty work, to root out the head of the squad and preserve the weapons for recovery. Naturally, Chris ignored the plan completely, choosing instead to deploy his team in what he judged to be a safer position. One that would still let them get the job done. Except one angle still needed to be covered. So he assigned the remaining position to himself. A good idea—except the intelligence had turned out to be horribly wrong.

“I lost him, Sarah,” the mustached agent blurted out suddenly, hoarsely. Tears burst from his eyes, rolling down his cheeks. Even as his eyes swept over to the third, still unbroken plot in the line, he tried to remind himself that this was how Chris would have wanted it.

You wanted to go first, Pard, he thought. But I wasn’t ready.

Now it was too late.

And he still wasn’t ready.

Monday, they dragged themselves back into the office, looking more exhausted now. They had worked all weekend at the ranch, going through reams of papers and files. J.D. had set up a temporary computer system and linked in the computer in Chris’s den. They hardly spoke except to exchange information, as bit by bit they clawed through files and dug out the information they wanted. Now they needed a plan of attack. And a way to get back to Texas, back to that warehouse and the militants that had taken them down.

They were no longer concerned about having a new team leader. That problem had taken a second priority.

* * *

They were in the conference room, arguing over approach strategies, when Jackson Henderson arrived. Alone. He was tall, handsome, well-groomed and reeked of old money and well-heeled friends who pulled strings to get him here.

He had barely appeared in the conference room doorway, had hardly begun to wonder what case they were arguing about, when the six voices stopped talking at once and looked over at him. He could feel the intensity of their gaze as if it were one single fixed glare. And just as palpably he could feel how deeply unwelcome he was here. Nothing was said.

He went to the kitchenette, took a Styrofoam cup out of a cabinet, poured himself a cup of coffee, his mind rolling slowly around the situation he found himself in, with no little pushing from Dad, his
connections, and his image of who and what his son should be. *My career in law enforcement is not worth getting my ass kicked*, he decided. And he knew beyond certainty that these six men could and would do just that if pushed. He, however, could always go into business as a skydiving instructor. And for that, he’d prefer to have all his limbs intact.

*Screw ’em*, he thought to himself, the thought encompassing the men of Team Seven, his father, AD Travis, and all his new bosses. *Don’t ask. Don’t tell, I always say.*

He went into the office without the door without saying a word.

It took Team Seven some time to realize that their new team leader had not been back in to bother them. They had been too busy to notice. But they had come to an impasse now in determining how next to proceed. They sent Ezra out to check on the new Senior Agent, to speak Southerner to Southerner, to scope him out.

Ezra came back to them with a puzzled shrug.

They worked the day. It ended. Henderson flicked off the lights in his office, bid them goodnight offhandedly and went out the door at five o’clock.

The agents of Team Seven closed up their folders and exchanged looks.

It was Buck who proposed a trip to the Saloon. They agreed unanimously.

* * *

It was the first time they had been in since they had returned, and Inez Recillos, proprietor, head bartender, and chief cook was relieved to see them. In the three years since Team Seven had made this their gathering place, she had slowly come to view them as her own. And they had helped her out in many small, private ways.

It was Ryan Kelly, leader of ATF Team Eight, someone they trusted, who had told her what happened in Texas. He had made a special trip. He knew she’d want to know. The bar was not yet open. She had thought he was making a bad joke, but the look in his eyes told her he wasn’t.

She remembered sitting down suddenly on the nearest chair, while the world swam for a minute. Occasionally when she heard that one or the other was hurt, curiosity led her to wonder how she’d react if it happened. But she hadn’t really expected it to happen. And she hadn’t expected it to hit her so hard.

They slid into the back table they had long ago staked as their own: Five tough-looking law enforcement agents and the boy, who was older than he looked, and growing more like his friends every day. An icy lump threatened suddenly to choke her. In the corner of the bench they had left a space. His space. Her eyes blurred and she brought six beers, a bottle of whiskey, and seven shot glasses to their table.

“On the house,” she said, looking each man over. God they looked tired. She poured each of them a whiskey and one for herself.

She did not drink with patrons. She hardly drank at all. This was different.

They all looked to Josiah.

He held his glass aloft. “To Chris,” he said solemnly. “Our leader, our brother, our protector, our friend. His light will never leave us.”
They tilted the glasses back and set them on the tray, thanking her, softly, politely in that surprising way they had.

She assured them there was nothing to thank her for and squeezed the nearest of their shoulders before she moved on to other tables.

After Inez moved off, Buck leaned in close. A dangerous smile spread across his face. “Third time’s a charm, boys. Our new team leader’s just what we need to get this done.”

“To paraphrase an immortal piece of literature,” Josiah said philosophically, “the first replacement was too soft. The second replacement was too hard. This one seems to be…”

“Just right,” the other voices chorused with evil grins. They clinked their beers together.

The teams at nearby tables glanced over, knowing Team Seven well enough to realize they were up to something. Best to just try to avoid the inevitable crossfire.

They left the Saloon early—for them—and went their separate ways. There was much work to be done and they each had a job to do. Operation Divine Retribution was under way.

At home in his living room, AD Travis was not aware that Team Seven was in such a comparatively good mood. Had he known, he would have been more nervous than he was. He knew that Henderson’s first day had gone off without a hitch. It was more than he had hoped for. In fact, after Dawson and Mueller, he was downright relieved this one had lasted the day. Some found Henderson’s southern good nature ingratiating. In his opinion, Jackson Henderson was so easy going as to be almost comatose. He had no idea what Henderson’s connections were thinking when they pulled strings to put him on Team Seven. But then again, right now, maybe hands-off was just what the team needed.

Travis’s current nervousness had very little to do with the bad behavior of Team Seven, not directly anyway. It had to do with a phone call from Senator Wilkey Redd. A courtesy call from the man who had talked Chris into starting the team. An old friend of Chris’s parents. He had given Travis the heads up to expect a phone call from the General. The AD had never spoken to the General, but he could guess the contents of the message that would be waiting for him when he got into the office.

Fortunately, he had a full agenda out of the building for Tuesday. He checked in early on Henderson. The man was at his desk in the still doorless office, working apparently. Jackson, Wilmington, Dunne, Sanchez, and Tanner. They nodded a greeting to Travis and continued working. Standish was absent, but he seldom graced the office before 9 AM even under Chris Larabee’s command. There was no reason to expect him to show up early now.

Looks like a good start, the AD noted warily. He stopped briefly in the doorless office and told Henderson where to reach him if absolutely necessary. He offered his own secretary to accommodate his questions. Henderson thanked him politely and bid him good day. The man didn’t seem overly concerned. Travis didn’t know whether to relax or to worry.

It was late when he got home, his fist clutched around the message from General Larabee. He had tried before he left the office, but it was two hours later in D.C. There was nothing to do but phone first thing in the morning.
Before heading into his office, Travis made an unusual, unscheduled stop in the building’s cafeteria, feeling the need for fortification before he faced the task of calling General Larabee. The cafeteria was busy as usual. It was convenient, fairly cheap, and had good food. As a result, many of the agents and other staff in the building usually ended up there at some point during the day.

It was not the breakfast offerings that caught his eye so much as a piece of tasteful linen stationery tacked to a bulletin board filled with employee notices. It was dated Tuesday, and it was easy to read, having been written in 18-point bold face type.

To all concerned:

For reasons that elude me, despite having diligently searched for and, when necessary, actually contrived justifications to forcibly remove me from my present employment, it appears that those same powers are now unwilling to accept my resignation from said position. Since oral declarations have fallen on deaf ears and written declarations have been summarily ignored, I have no recourse but to make public announcement of my intention to step down from my position as an agent of the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms.

I understand that it is customary to make public legal notices in the local newspaper, but, as I doubt the proclivity of those most concerned to read said legal section and because despite slanderous rumors to the contrary, I am not in a financial position to purchase an advertising space large enough to get their attention, I am employing this public notice board as a suitable substitute.

My reasons for this abrupt departure are both personal and professional. As such, I refuse to elucidate them here for the benefit of the curious. Those closest to me are already aware of them. The rest need not concern themselves.

Please note that I consider this resignation to be effective immediately, with or without consent or approval from the appropriate chains of command. Naturally, I also hereby rescind all rights, duties, benefits, obligations, and privileges arising from said position.

Sincerely,

Ezra P. Standish

P.S. For those of you who lack dictionaries or a good thesaurus—
I QUIT!

Travis’s eyes narrowed. Standish had audacity; that was for sure.
He read the whole thing again twice more. Then he took it off the board, but not because he was angry—Standish’s public thumbing of his nose gave him his first real laugh in over two weeks. He took the letter back to his office. He was going to need a good laugh after he returned the General’s phone call. He could deal with Standish later.

Travis waited while the phone rang through an adjutant and a receptionist before the General’s clipped tone came on. He had never met the man, could count on one hand the number of times Chris had mentioned him, calling him only the General. But in his mind, Travis pictured the same blond hair and glittering green eyes he had come to equate with Chris.

“General Larabee? This is Orin Travis with the Denver ATF.” He began with the usual polite apologies and formal statements of regret.

“I didn’t call for your condolences,” the General cut him off and Travis nearly smiled. The father was as direct as the son. “I called you because I want my son’s remains released for burial.”

Travis sighed, but was careful not to let the General hear. He had been expecting this.

The General continued. “I think I have been more than patient. Now his family wants him home, to be buried in the family plot in Indiana.”

Travis closed his eyes. Chris would have said his family was here in Denver.

He collected his patience. “As you know,” he said not unkindly, “they can only release the body on approval of the next of kin. And Chris’s next of kin has refused to accept the body without conclusive evidence of its identity.”

There was a silence, during which Travis imagined he could actually hear the anger crackling through the telephone line. The members of Team Seven had chosen their next of kin from among themselves, believing that it would allow them to make emergency medical decisions more quickly. They had good reason, after a doctor tried to give Vin a treatment that would have killed him. Chris and Nathan couldn’t convince him Vin was allergic, and in the end, Chris had simply taken hold of the doctor’s hand and quietly informed him that if he stuck that needle in Vin, Chris would break his hand in so many pieces that he would never write a prescription again. To his credit, the doctor had the guts to double-check the records and returned to apologize. He was the one who suggested that they could avoid problems like this in the future if they made each other their next of kin and assigned power of attorney.

“Mr. Travis,” came the voice, taking on an edge now. Mr. Travis. Not AD Travis. “I am well aware that Mr. Tanner is formally listed as the next of kin. However, Christopher is my son. And his family wants him home. Agent Tanner is only delaying the inevitable.”

There was a disdainful note on the word “Agent.” The General’s disdain was not just for Vin, but for law enforcement in general.

Travis chose his words carefully, clinically. “Agent Tanner has requested conclusive evidence of the identity of the body.”

“Mr. Travis,” the General stated flatly. “I understand the body was found wearing my son’s bulletproof vest and ATF jacket. His badge and gun were found beneath the body. And it was located within twenty feet of my son’s last reported position. Your men identified the jacket, the vest, the badge, and the gun.”

Travis clenched his teeth. Buck and Vin had not been allowed to view the body. It would not have
been identifiable in any case. What little was left of it had to stay in place for evidence and no one was to disturb the crime scene. The jacket, vest, badge, and gun had been brought to them after forensics photographed the scene. That’s when they were told what happened.

The General spoke again. “I also understand that the authorities at the site are dealing with the identification of civilian casualties from the building next door, and have no intention of expediting DNA tests for a body that they already consider to be positively identified.”

According to the phone call from the irritated forensics team on site, what Tanner had actually said in his quiet but threatening way was “I ain’t buryin’ nothin’ that don’t come with DNA proof.” They had informed Agent Tanner and were now informing AD Travis that their first priority was the unidentified bodies, beginning with the civilians next door, who died when part of their building collapsed from the explosion. It would be some time before they could free up lab space to test a body that they already considered to be identified.

At that point Travis had offered to send dental records to speed the process up.

There was an awkward pause, as the forensics team attempted to tactfully explain that as the agent in question had been directly in the path of the rocket, given the condition of the body, dental records would be of absolutely no use.

It took Travis a minute to digest what they meant. He went cold at the thought.

The shred of vest with Chris’s id number and part of his name on it, and a charred piece of what was undeniably a black ATF jacket that was adhered to the vest stayed as evidence. The gun and badge came home with Buck. Vin had refused to touch them.

Travis took a deep breath and steadied himself. “General Larabee, sir, I understand your feelings. I know what it is like to lose a son.”

The General cut him off curtly. “No Mr. Travis, you don’t understand my feelings,” he said.

Funny, that was very nearly what Chris had said to Mary, the widow of Travis’s own murdered son, when she had attempted to interview him for the Clarion newspaper shortly after the team’s first successful mission. Travis kicked himself. Of course. Every father thought his grief was unique.

He tried again. “What I mean to say, sir, is that, as Agent Tanner is officially the next of kin, there is very little I can do to change the situation.”

“Isn’t there another next of kin listed?” The General asked finally.

“Agent Wilmington,” Travis replied.

“Buck,” the General snorted, a note of contempt creeping into his voice. “I might have known.”

Apparently, Buck had made a bad impression as a teenager, back when his friend’s father was a mere Colonel. The years had done nothing to change this impression.

“The legalities of the situation dictate that—” Travis began, but he was cut off—again.

“I am well aware of the legalities,” the General snapped. “I am simply asking you to use your professional influence to bring this to a satisfactory close.”

*Satisfactory for whom?* “I’ll do what I can, sir. But I can’t make any promises.”
“See that you do your best,” replied the General. He made no formal sign off. He simply hung up.

Travis hung up the phone and leaned his head into his palms. Clearly the General had done a lot of digging. The details he mentioned had been kept out of the press and out of general circulation. He wasn’t surprised. The man was an Air Force General based at the Pentagon. He had many resources at his disposal. And Travis had no doubt that the General was going to deploy whatever resources he needed to get Chris’s body shipped to Indiana.

And Buck Wilmington and the rest of Team Seven would fight to prevent that.

Travis drummed his fingers on his desk, considering how to begin to smooth this over. He knew that Chris and his father had never been close. It had only gotten worse after Chris left home. Buck had privately told Travis that the General had failed to make the trip to Denver for Sarah and Adam’s funeral. Their relationship already strained, Chris shut the General out of his life completely. But the man was still Chris’s father. Chris was still his son. So Travis got up and headed to the bullpen to have a gentle talk with Agent Tanner.

It was nearly 11 AM when Travis entered the bullpen. It was silent, except for the tapping of Henderson’s keyboard. He looked around. The bullpen was empty. The computers were off.

He turned to leave again, but called back in afterthought. “The boys are out?”

*That’s obvious, isn’t it?* thought Henderson, still typing, a little bit faster now.

At the silence, Travis frowned. “Do you know when they’ll be back?” he called from the hallway.

“No sure,” Henderson said slowly, thoughtfully.

Travis frowned a bit more. The Team Leader ought to know when to expect his agents back.

“Where were they headed?” Travis asked. Maybe they were milling about the other departments. It would be like Buck to be back in the lab trying to get a date with the receptionist. He hated to admit it, but that would be an improvement.

But that wasn’t the answer.

“They went to lunch,” came the casual reply.

Travis double-checked his watch. It wasn’t even 11 o’clock yet.

His brows knit together and he turned back into the bullpen. “When did they leave?” he asked suspiciously.

Henderson’s tone didn’t betray an iota of change as he replied matter of factly, “Yesterday afternoon.”

Henderson knew he was fired long before AD Travis had appeared in the doorway like an avenging angel. Fortunately, he had just negotiated himself a new position teaching sky diving at a resort near Tahoe.

“I’ll see myself out,” he said calmly, getting up and carrying his bag, the only item he had ever brought to the office. He kept everything in his bag. It arrived with him in the morning and left with him every night.

Travis stared at him, just stood and watched him brush past and move toward the elevators. A
strange sort of paralysis took him as he realized the implications of Henderson’s words. At the same time, he noticed that nothing about the office had changed an iota. Henderson had never put up a picture. Never set anything on the desk. He hadn’t even asked for the keys to the desk. Probably hadn’t used so much as a pencil. He clearly hadn’t planned on remaining long. Travis cursed, but before he recovered enough of his voice to call Henderson back to answer questions, the man was gone.

Jackson Henderson sagged back against the elevator wall in relief. For a moment he’d thought the AD was going to recover enough presence of mind to interrogate him. Or hit him. Either way he was screwed. Travis was going to kick him around until he told what he had heard. Then six agents armed to the teeth were going to beat the living hell out of him. Instead, his lucky stars had shone again, and he was in the parking garage, in one piece, and headed for freedom.

Henderson’s getaway elevator had barely begun its descent when Travis realized that he didn’t need Henderson to tell him where Team Seven had headed on their unsanctioned, impromptu mission. He was already halfway to his office when he remembered Standish’s resignation and swore. There would be no point trying to hunt down Ezra Standish because he would be with the rest of them—an unofficial member on an unofficial mission. The next breath brought a realization that made his teeth clamp together hard, as a wave of fury rolled over him followed by a wave of a nameless fear.

Standish’s resignation meant the man was a free agent. The barriers associated with proper law enforcement procedures no longer surrounded him. Granted, Team Seven was famous for pushing those barriers as far as they could go, but at least there had been boundaries. Now all bets were off for Standish. The rules no longer applied. He had just become a very dangerous player in what could turn out to be a very bad gamble. And Travis was pretty sure no one would come out the winner.

The first thing he needed to do was alert his superiors that Team Seven had gone AWOL, and to check their team gun locker to find out what sort of hardware they had taken. Then they would need to contact Texas authorities to be on the lookout.

His thoughts were interrupted by his own secretary, who met him at the door to his office suite. She was waving a small white message at him. She pressed it into his hand. It was from Director Savage, two levels up the food chain. Another curse formed on the tip of Travis’s tongue. He kept his teeth clamped together.

The angry red flush creeping up Travis’s neck did not go unnoticed. Nor did his effort to control his temper. Nevertheless, Director Savage was adamant that the message was extremely urgent and Orin should call him at once. Not a woman who was easily intimidated by the trappings of power or the men who bore them, the secretary gave AD Travis the message and passed on the urgency of Director Savage’s request. Then she turned briskly back to her own desk. “I’ll hold all your calls,” she said, predicting his needs as only a good professional secretary can.

He was on the phone for a long time. A steady stream of visitors were turned away. A list of messages were taken. Her long experience told her that the urgent phone calls, conferences and unusual bits of temper from Travis meant that something bad had happened. She only hoped it wasn’t as bad this time as two weeks ago, when the Texas ATF had called. That day, Travis did not emerge from his office for several minutes after his phone light had blinked off. When he finally did open his door, his face was strangely pinched—almost stricken. Then he told her the reason.

She gave him a few minutes of privacy. No calls. No visitors.

This time, with the dispassionate wisdom of someone who had been a professional secretary for a very long time, she realized that she would only be allowed to know that which she needed to know to get her job done. And sometimes that was a blessing. So she worked steadily and efficiently to
take care of her end of business so AD Travis could take care of his.

AD Travis’s phone light blinked off. A second later he opened the door. She didn’t know what had been said, but she didn’t like the look on his face.

“Get Senior Agent Kelly down here,” he barked out. “Call him. Page him. Whatever you have to do to find him. Get him here on the double.”

Then he closed the door.

She pulled out her list of contact numbers, dialed Team Eight’s bullpen and began methodically tracking Ryan Kelly down.

* * *

Buck paced the hotel room impatiently, occasionally pulling aside a corner of the curtain and checking up and down the parking lot.

From a chipped table in the corner, Josiah looked over the top of his cards and observed the tall, mustached agent, all one raw nerve, checking again for the fourth time in fifteen minutes. He lay down a card and raised his eyebrows at Nathan. Nathan picked up the discarded card and threw a glance backward over his shoulder.

J.D. did not look up from his position, seated at the end of one of the two double beds. He did not need to. He could clearly see Buck’s big feet go by him on the threadbare carpet with each pass. Without pausing in the note he was writing, he said, “He’ll be back soon.”

Buck turned restlessly away from the window again. “How long does it take?"

Josiah snorted. “Can take a long time. If you want to get it right.”

“You better be right about this,” Buck said, pointing a glare at Josiah. “He’s going to need to be real convincing.”

“You’re talking about a man who could sell sand to the Bedouins, brother,” Josiah said calmly. “Besides, I’ll tell him everything he’ll need to know.”

Buck sighed again and turned back to the window.

From the other bed, Vin turned his head to look at J.D., curiously. “What’re ya workin’ on?” rasped. J.D. jumped. Vin had lain so still for so long that he had long ago decided the sharpshooter was asleep. He slammed the notebook shut and turned sheepishly to look at his teammate.

Buck turned to look at him then. He rolled his eyes at J.D. and turned back to watching the parking lot through a corner of the drapes.

Vin had lifted himself to a sitting position and came noiselessly down to the foot of the bed to face J.D.

J.D. blushed, but did not move as Vin reached out and pulled the note he had been working on out from between the pages of J.D.’s notebook. He looked at it curiously. Then his eyes turned back to J.D.

“I thought someone should answer them,” he said slowly. “To say thanks. That we appreciate it.”
A funny expression swam through Vin’s blue eyes.

J.D. paused before continuing, almost embarrassed. “It makes me feel better, too,” he said awkwardly.

J.D. pulled one of the condolence cards he had retrieved from Chris’s office out of his backpack and offered it and a pen to Vin. “Do you… I mean, you could… If you wanted to…”

Vin balked, pulling back away from the card like it had bit him. He went back to lying on his back and staring up at the ceiling.

J.D. looked over to Josiah, concerned, confused. It was written all over the youth’s face that he hadn’t intended to offend.

“A real nice gesture,” Josiah rumbled and gave J.D. a nod.

Then the big profiler frowned in exasperation as Buck muttered not quietly enough, “People should mind their own damn business.”

J.D.’s gaze snapped over to his best friend. All their nerves were frayed, but he couldn’t let the comment slide. “Have you even read any of them?”

Buck turned his head slowly to look at his young friend. He didn’t say anything, but his glare was hot.

J.D. was not intimidated. “Maybe it is their business,” he said holding up the card he was answering. “Maybe they miss him, too.”

Buck’s gaze hardened.

J.D. felt anger rise up in him, anger he had been keeping down for days on end, while he tip-toed around everyone else’s feelings. Yeah, okay, Buck and Chris had been close. Hell, more than close. They had weathered storms together that neither of them cared to share. They had earned the right to keep their shared history to themselves. But that didn’t give Buck the right to piss on other people’s grief. Or the right to decide who deserved to be allowed to honor a fallen friend and co-worker.

J.D. felt his face grow hot. The heat rose up into his eyes. With an angry glare, he held the card out to Buck—or anyone else who wanted to see it. “This one’s from Laura who does our expense reports,” he snapped. “Did you know that when her husband died, Chris helped her go through the insurance paperwork? Did you know he helped her find an attorney?” His anger carried him to his feet as he continued, “She goes out of her way to say how much it meant to her. Then she tells all of us how sorry she is that he’s gone.”

Both Vin and Buck jerked at the words. Josiah and Nathan had put down their cards. They exchanged a glance. Someone finally said it, Nathan thought, knowing Josiah had caught it, too. Spoke the words out loud. Admitted it. He hoped it was a first step to healing. He hoped it didn’t cause broken heads first. He and Josiah watched their teammates closely—not sure when it was time to intervene.

J.D. didn’t notice the silence that fell onto the room, hear it over the blood starting to pound in his ears. Any indication that he should stop was rolled over by the rush of the anger suddenly let loose. His hand still trembling, he grabbed another card from the short pile beside him and rose to his feet, thrusting the pastel painted card in front of him. “How about Jean-Ann in the secretarial pool?” he asked, his voice rising, not waiting for a response. “She said that when she had to work late, he walked her down to her car, or called up security to do it. She says she’ll miss him.”
The trembling began to spread through him. His voice was strident, threatening to crack, growing steadily louder.

“How about this photo from Team 8? How about the Travises? Are they allowed to have any memories? Or do you get to decide who’s worthy?” He stopped suddenly, breathing hard, the tendons on his neck standing out as he defied Buck to answer.

Buck felt his eyebrows draw down. His jaw clenched. His hands balled into fists. A thousand conflicting feelings rose up into his throat and threatened to block his breathing. But uppermost was the urge to strangle someone. Yeah, he knew that some of those cards were from people who cared, but he’d been here before, and he knew—absolutely, certainly—that most of those cards, cards with trite expressions of sympathy, those pre-made flower arrangements, and their generic sentences of insincere condolences, came from people who hadn’t given a damn about Chris when he was alive, when his grief over Sarah and Adam had threatened to destroy him, who thought he was a pain in their brass-bound backsides, who considered him a bad element, a dangerous blot on the law enforcement profession. Cards and flowers were just an easy way to assuage their guilt. To say “no hard feelings.” Well, Buck didn’t give a damn about their guilty consciences and he could hold onto his hard feelings as long as he damn well pleased.

There was utter silence in the hotel room as the two friends glared at each other. But it was Buck who broke the deadlock. He went out the door and slammed it shut behind him. The door stayed closed only for the instant it took Vin to get to it. He opened it. Slid out wordlessly like a shadow and moved off in the opposite direction.

J.D. was left standing in the center of the room. Then the silence was broken. He swore. And swore again. He picked up his notebook and hurled it against the wall.

“Easy, J.D.,” Josiah said softly.

“Shut up,” J.D. snapped back.

Josiah watched the anger flood out from the young agent with those last two syllables. He dropped back down onto the edge of the bed like an unstrung marionette. For a second, his young face hardened and closed down—the same way he had seen the others do. Then shame and grief filled in the space and he couldn’t hold the expression.

J.D. hid his head and the face that showed every emotion he was feeling—whether he wanted them read or not. But a single gasp of air and a slight movement of his shoulder betrayed him. He ground his teeth together, as frustration and embarrassment spun into the whirlwind that churned up from his stomach. He thought the effort to be silent might choke him.

Nathan and Josiah looked at each other, reading the grim lines in each other’s faces.

“It’s best to get it out, son,” Josiah said at last. “We’re here if you need us.”

They turned back to their cards, and picked up where the game had left off. The gesture was not lost on J.D., but he could not voice his gratitude through the ache in his throat. He went into the small bathroom, closed the door, and sank down onto the cold tile floor between the toilet and the tub—relieved to have been given the privacy and the time to pull himself back together.

Nathan and Josiah each drew and discarded in silence.

“You alright?” Nathan asked finally, his eyes traveling across the scraped knuckles that held Josiah’s cards and up to the familiar face that seemed to have grown a few more lines recently.
Josiah’s lips twisted into an almost smile, an inverted reflection of the sadness in his eyes. He gave no other answer.

Nathan nodded at the profiler’s raw, scabbed knuckles. “Hope that’s the heavy bag you’ve been punching,” he said, an attempt at humor.

He was grateful to Josiah for replying in kind. “My living room’s been through enough, don’t you think?” the profiler asked with a wry smile.

Nathan let loose a soft chuckle and was surprised at how good it felt. He had nearly forgotten.

He had last seen Josiah’s living room on Tuesday. Sanchez’s ancient Suburban had failed him again and Nathan had given him a ride. The medic had not been surprised to see that the living room was still a shambles. Josiah had not righted the upended furniture. The splintered wooden legs of the coffee table still stuck sideways out toward the overturned TV like jagged outstretched fingers. Between the legs lay the shards of half a ceramic lamp. The rest of the lamp lay like an emptied eggshell on the other side, between the tabletop and the couch. The cushions on the sofa lay strewn about the room, where Josiah had flung them right before lifting the heavy sofa bed over onto its back, like a modern day Samson destroying the temple instead of saving it. Every scrap, every shard, every splinter, and every stick of furniture still lay right where it had fallen that first day back or in the days since. As he waited for Josiah, Nathan had counted two large holes in the plaster wall between the living room and the kitchen. Neither had been there on Saturday. He had said nothing, but Josiah knew he had noticed.

“You?” The voice, the question stole into his consciousness. He realized that Josiah was waiting for his reply. He shrugged. What to say? He had said it all and more to Raine. Talked about what happened. Talked about his feelings. Talked and talked and talked, only to find out that just when he thought he had gotten a handle on it, could handle it, there it was again. Looming over him. Stealing up on him each morning as he awakened, like it was the first time all over again, reminding him that he couldn’t forget. Talk, talk, talk, he thought angrily. Words don’t change one damn thing. They didn’t tell him how to help his teammates. And they didn’t make the hole inside his chest one bit smaller.

He thought of a hundred truths he could reply to Josiah’s question, but instead said simply, “I’m coping.”

The profiler gazed at him steadily, as if weighing the truth of his friend’s words.

“Better than some, anyway,” Nathan retorted testily at the unspoken question.

Josiah nodded. “Sometimes that’s the best we can do.”

Each man returned his gaze to his cards, but their thoughts had moved elsewhere. A pair of heavy sighs floated into the still air of the rented room, lingering a moment, before leaving the room again in silence.

It was only a few more minutes before a key jiggled in the door lock. Both agents at the table tensed, but recognized the silhouette before the figure entered the room.

His hair was cut neatly but not quite stylishly. He wore a plain black overcoat, simple black pants, and shiny but otherwise undistinguished black shoes. In fact there was nothing particularly noteworthy about the man apart from the deep dimples in his cheeks, as a benign smile rested itself upon his features. But the two agents knew him, and when he stopped in the doorway and looked over at the two agents at the table, they stared in disbelief at the deep brown eyes behind the slightly
out-of-style spectacles that perched on the bridge of his nose.

Ezra Standish looked back at them innocently, pretending he didn’t know what they were staring at. The change in his appearance was rather astonishing, if he did say so himself. Particularly the rather pedestrian haircut, and the colored contacts. He looked almost, well, humble. When he first looked in the mirror, he had smiled as he thought how much his mother would hate it. But the smile faded as he remembered why he was there.

“Let’s see the rest of it,” Josiah said softly in wonder. Nathan nodded, speechless.

Ezra obliged. He placed a garment bag on the bed and draped his overcoat beside it, revealing his pressed black shirt and the white collar that marked him a priest.

Josiah got up and walked slowly around him, inspecting every inch of Ezra’s appearance. And Ezra endured the scrutiny. Finally, Josiah stood before him and nodded his head. “Perfect,” he said.

Ezra snorted petulantly. “It had better be. According to your acquaintance, he is the only competent professional in the business in at least five states, and all religious denominations combined. Until now, I was unaware that purveyors of religious vestments could be so terribly competitive.”

Josiah smiled. He had sent Ezra to the best. The man could try the patience of Job and all the saints when it came to listening to him criticize and condemn all others in the business, but he certainly knew his business. Ezra looked every inch a priest.

He had Ezra open and try on each of the robes and vestments he had purchased.

At last he nodded his approval. “We’ve got the outside right. Now let’s have some lessons.”

Ezra eyed the big profiler and didn’t care for the gleam that appeared in his eye. “I am a professional,” he said tartly. “I will do my job to my utmost. But don’t think for a moment that you have the proverbial snowball’s chance in hell of converting me to Catholicism.”

Nathan’s bark of laughter startled Ezra. “Ezra,” he said. “I’m just hopin’ that church don’t burst into flame when you set foot in it.”

Ezra threw him a sour look.

He looked around the room. “Before we begin our condensed divinity school, I feel that I should ask what our Mr. Tanner is doing up on the roof.”

“Getting air,” answered Josiah.

“Oh,” Ezra replied. “And where is our overprotective Mr. Wilmington? I should have thought he’d be wearing a groove in the floor awaiting my reappearance.”

“He was,” Nathan said and halted. The medic and profiler looked at each other.

“Then he needed some air,” Josiah said simply.

“And Mr. Dunne?” Ezra said impatiently. “Also getting some air?”

At hearing his name and Ezra’s voice, J.D. emerged from the bathroom. His face carefully betrayed no expression, but Ezra could read the evidence. He threw Josiah and Nathan a questioning look. They both shook their heads.

Ezra sat down abruptly on the end of the bed. “Well that’s wonderful,” he snapped. “I spend four
excruciatingly irritating hours meticulously preparing for my part of this hair-brained, psychotic mission, and my backup can’t even manage to remain in the same room together.” He stuck out his hand. “J.D., your cell phone, please?” he said, holding out his hand.

Surprised, J.D. handed it over. The former undercover agent sent out two terse text messages. “Gentlemen, put on your game faces. We have work to do. EPS”

They did not have to wait long. Buck and Vin came in the door almost at the same time. “’Bout damn time,” Buck growled, as he shoved his way across the threshold. J.D. retreated a few steps, hoping no one would notice the redness of his eyes.

Vin and Buck both stopped short when they saw Standish. He stood so they could properly appreciate the view provided by four straight hours of prodding, pinning, and enduring the endless bragging of the store’s proprietor, chief sales consultant and only tailor. Only time would tell if it was worth it.

Buck gave a low whistle. “Hell, Ez, the devil wouldn’t even recognize ya,” Buck grinned slyly.

Vin seemed to find something remarkably humorous in what he saw before him. The gleam in his eyes nearly reached his lips.

The stalked around him like schoolyard bullies, eyeing him from head to toe. Satisfied, apparently, they exchanged a glance of approval then moved away from each other.

Ezra barely managed to keep his exasperation from leaking onto his face. He’d feel a hell of a lot more comfortable about pulling off this job, if the six of them could remember what it was like to act as a team for more than just a few minutes at a time.

Back at the beginning, when he had first met the men he had been told would be his teammates, he had marveled at Agent Larabee’s obvious hubris. He was certain that any attempt to form these disparate personalities into a viable team was destined to fail and fail miserably. Yet eventually, seemingly without effort, almost without their even noticing, they had begun to rely on each other, to anticipate each other’s moves and reactions, until somehow seven became almost as one.

Ezra had actually fought against it, this melding, this loss of his solo status, of his right to remain aloof and apart. He was not a joiner. But insidiously it had surrounded him, sucked him in, until he had begun to care for his friends more than he had cared for his own safety. And he still didn’t know how it had happened.

Recently Ezra had begun to consider, for the first time, just how much skill—and cunning—Agent Larabee must have employed to select and then transform this bunch of temperamental, headstrong, obstinate, uncooperative loners into anything remotely resembling a team—let alone a team that worked as well as theirs had. A wry smile twisted up the corner of Ezra’s mouth. Agent Larabee could be a pig-headed, unyielding, vindictive bastard when he wanted to be. Any one of his agents would willingly attest to that. But maybe some of that was just strategy. The troops united against the overbearing tyrant, Ezra thought. Touché, Mr. Larabee. Now, at last do I begin to understand.

The smile twisted into something else, as the thought came unbidden. And now when we need your leadership most, you are not here.

“You okay, Ezra?” J.D.’s voice said suddenly, softly, reaching out to touch his shoulder.

Ezra flinched away, pulling down his practiced mask of indifference. “Of course I’m okay,” he snapped. “Why wouldn’t I be?”
J.D. pulled his hand back with gratifying speed. And Ezra almost regretted the hurt look that crossed the young agent’s face. Almost. But he couldn’t afford regret right now.

He didn’t see the look that Josiah and Nathan traded as they turned away.

Buck shook his head at the exchange and let Standish’s comment slide. He regarded all of them and his own part in the fiasco he feared was coming.

They needed to be a team now, or this whole plan would go to hell—or worse. Not for the first time he wondered how the hell Chris did it, day after day after goddamn day. But he had. And he hadn’t had time to pass on the gift. Hell, Buck wasn’t even sure it was the kind of thing that could be taught. But it was too late to waste time on speculation. Ezra’s message had been right. They had work to do. And they’d best start focusing on that and remembering how to do what they did best. Without further delay, he began reviewing assignments and issuing orders. The others obeyed, glad to have new focus and outlet for their energies.

Josiah and Ezra took a pair of Bibles, a notepad and some pens to the other room they were renting to begin Josiah Sanchez’s Short Course on Everything You Need to Know to Become a Convincing Catholic Priest in 48 Hours or Less, with special emphasis on Confession and Absolution Without Raising Suspicion.

J.D. checked, tweaked, rechecked, and perfected an end run around an exact duplicate of the security system, "borrowed" from the company that created it. Buck ran a check on the communications equipment. They would have to keep in close but discreet contact with each other to make this work. Vin inspected the small arsenal they had brought with them, apportioning ammunition and weaponry according to the assigned positions.

Nathan rechecked his medical supplies, considering his potential needs as he ran several different conflicting scenarios in his head, from best to worst. Although he knew no kit would ever be as complete as he wanted it to be, there were a few items he wished he had. Of course they were totally unofficial and totally unauthorized. Then again, so was this entire mission. He considered what connections he could or should pull to get those supplies. Would the risk be worth it? What about the risk of not having them?

Buck ordered them all to make it an early night. They would get started well before dawn. Ezra complained about spending any extra time in the questionable cleanliness of the sheets of this low-rent establishment, but his tone lacked any real fire. Not long afterward, he followed Nathan and Josiah back to the room the three shared. Vin didn’t bother to change clothes. He lay back down on top of the bed, exactly as he had earlier that afternoon. J.D. disappeared into the bathroom to brush his teeth and wash his face.

Buck sat for a long moment at the end of the other bed, staring off into space and trying not to wonder whether he was doing the right thing.

In the silence, he heard Chris’s voice, so close it was nearly real. Back at the beginning. “You’re my second in command,” he said. “It’s not your job anymore to watch my back. It’s your job to take care of the team when I can’t.”

“When you can’t? You goin’ somewhere?”

“Be serious, Buck.”

“What makes you think I’m not serious?”
Chris had laughed. The first time Buck had heard it in a long time. It lasted only a moment.

“I know I can count on you to follow my orders,” Chris said, his eyes serious. “To keep the team together. To lead them. I know you’ll do what’s best for the team, no matter what…”

J.D.’s return from the bathroom broke his thoughts.

He realized the young agent was speaking to him. “What?”

“I said the bathroom’s all yours,” J.D. said, looking at him oddly.

Buck nodded and got up, carrying his shaving kit.

He stared into the mirror under the too-bright lights. He closed his eyes and tried to bring back the voice. But it was gone.

He leaned his head against the mirror and reluctantly returned to his previous train of thought.

Chris was no fool and neither was he. They had seen action, both in the military and in the DPD. They had each lost friends, and they each knew how important it was to establish a backup chain of command. I can count on you, Chris had said.

Yeah, Buck thought bitterly. Count on me to follow your orders even if it means turning my back on you. Walking away. Leaving you behind to…

He choked. Couldn’t finish the thought. Silence suddenly pressed in on him from all sides. He needed air.

He emerged from the bathroom. “I’m going out for some air,” he managed. J.D. turned in surprise.

He glanced at Vin’s empty bed. Buck was not surprised to learn the sharpshooter had left, was out prowling the night, probably back on the roof, finding somewhere not to think.

“Okay,” J.D. finally stammered out, but Buck was already gone. He stood alone in the center of the room. And swore. Said every swear word he could think of. Then softly, finally, he let it out. Because there was no one there to witness his shame.

It was a long time later that J.D. realized he had dozed off. He didn’t have to look to know he was still alone. He could hear it in the silence. He opened his eyes in the dark and squinted a little as he checked the time on the softly glowing digital clock. Just after midnight.

With a sigh, he swung his legs out of bed and padded toward the door. He shielded his eyes from the strange orange glow of a nearby neon sign and nearly tripped over two figures sitting on the walkway just outside the door.

They looked up at him.

He looked down at them and a scowl slowly brought down his brows. “Do you have any idea what time it is?” he asked at last.

Buck and Vin looked up at the young agent who was glaring down at both of them, his hands on his hips, chastising them and looking for all the world like someone’s father. Or worse yet—someone’s mother. For the first time in days, the two men looked at each other and laughed. Really laughed. Until they were helpless, hiccupping, and lying on their backs on the cold concrete walk.

J.D. stared at them perplexed. A door opened above them and two familiar faces peered down at
them from over the rail.

A voice floated out onto the night air. “Really gentlemen, if I must be in bed at this ridiculous hour, I must insist that you keep down the racket.”

The two faces at the railing shared a sour look and a smile.

That was the end of J.D.’s patience. “Get in here before you wake everybody up,” he snapped at the two men, reaching down and grabbing Buck’s elbow. He hustled them in the door and waved impatiently at Josiah and Nathan to go back in their room.

“Damn it!” J.D. swore, shutting the door behind them, still glaring. “This is NOT keeping a low profile.”

Buck and Vin looked at each other again. Their smiles were softer now, the hysterical giggles gone. They wiped their eyes and sighed.

“Sorry, kid,” Vin said.

“What the hell were you doing out there?” J.D. demanded.

Vin shrugged.

J.D. turned to glower at Buck, hands still on his hips. Buck was careful not to look at the young agent for fear of lapsing into another laughing fit. The fact that the picture in his mind was overlaid with his own mother’s fuzzy bathrobe and matching slippers was not helping.

“Just talking, J.D.” Buck said, climbing into his side of one of the beds.

“And waiting for you to let us in,” Vin added from the other bed.

The two shared one short, sharp chuckle.

“Forgot our keys,” Buck said.

J.D. stared at both of them in helpless disbelief. He stomped into the bathroom, thoroughly confused and thoroughly irritated, and shut the door behind him.

“Hey Buck?” Vin’s voice, nearly a whisper, broke the silence. “It wasn’t your fault.”

“It wasn’t yours either, Vin,” Buck answered back softly. “We all did what we had to do. Chris too.”

There was a long silence from the other bed before Vin finally answered. Choking out, “Just wish he…” The words broke off.

“I know,” Buck said, staring up at the dark ceiling. “I didn’t want to leave him either.”

But you trusted me, he thought at the plaster above him, fighting the pricking sensation at the corner of his eyes. God damn you. Why did you have to make it be me?

He rolled over suddenly and closed his eyes.

When J.D. returned from the bathroom a mere minute or two later, both men were sound asleep. Or at least pretending to be.

When the earliest tinges of gray began to lighten the pre-dawn sky, they were all awake and nearly
ready to begin.

* * *

Of all the nasty tasks in a job that could really dig deep down into the crap, this one had to come in pretty near the bottom of the slime pit, Ryan Kelly thought sourly as he eyed the directory on the wall in front of him. The antiseptic smell of the place violated his nostrils. He felt tired all the way to his toenails. But “Go,” Travis had ordered. And so he went. Overnight, nonstop. And now here he was, as if this wasn’t the sorriest of all the shit details he had done lately.

He turned his feet slowly in the direction he needed to go, pondering the best way to diplomatically introduce himself and insert himself into this mess. That the others would be hostile, he had no doubt. He would just have to deal with that when he came to it.

A small smile quirked one corner of his mouth as he reflected on what Chris Larabee might have done in his place. It wouldn’t have been pretty, but no doubt it would have been effective.

He sighed.

Larabee. He should have been the one to come down here. Except he went and got himself blown all to hell.

Damn you, Kelly thought. You have no idea what a mess you’ve left behind.

He thought of the AWOL Team Seven and wondered if they knew about the upcoming interrogation. Did they plan to be here? If they did, it would be his job to keep them away. What the hell would he say that would make any sense? Could he really blame them for wanting answers?

He swore again, and forced himself to concentrate on finding where he was supposed to be. First things first.

It took a long time to get where he was going. Clearly, they had hidden the man away in the farthest possible corner from anywhere. Doubtless, the impending assassination from his fellow militia members was the reason for that. God knew the ATF, FBI, and local law enforcement didn’t need any more civilian casualties in this fiasco.

He had learned yesterday afternoon that only nine prisoners had been taken from among the militia members. Somewhere just over 80 bad guys dead, mostly young men, from what forensics could identify. The leaders apparently escaped, although no one knew how or to where. If they were ever on the site, that is.

Add to that, 15 members of the law enforcement community dead or seriously injured, another 15 to 20 with more minor injuries, plus six civilians from the building next door dead and seven more injured. It would have been worse had it been a regular weekday. It would have been better if the loading bay door had not been propped open and the explosion from the rocket could have been confined to the warehouse where the weapons were stockpiled.

Of the nine prisoners, three died of their injuries and two more who had been injured were murdered at the hospital, with no useful witnesses, just a nurse who had been knocked senseless and locked in a bathroom. He hadn’t seen or heard anything. Immediately after that, the survivor, still unconscious and heavily sedated, was spirited out of the original hospital and through several other hospitals since then. He’d arrived, finally, at this mostly empty basement service corridor of a minor VA hospital that most people never heard of.

Of the others, one escaped, vanished into thin air. The only one who was conscious refused to talk,
refused to say anything at all, and apparently regarded himself as having prisoner of war status under the Geneva Convention. And the last one killed himself yesterday afternoon. Ate a cyanide pill that no one knew how he got.

The ATF wanted answers now. They wanted answers, blood, and convictions, not necessarily in that order. Thus the orders came down. They wanted this prisoner conscious, regardless of his comfort or condition. And they were currently in chambers with a judge trying to get her to empower the ATF to make medical decisions on the man’s behalf. Several very good lawyers charging several hundred dollars for each hour of work were arguing the ATF’s point. No one was arguing the other side. It would only be a matter of hours before a properly legal interrogation could begin.

That’s where Kelly came in. What little information the ATF had been able to glean so far pointed to connections to a few seemingly unrelated arms-dealing cases that the ATF offices in Denver had been working on. They didn’t look so unrelated now. And the directors wanted someone present at the interrogation, someone with knowledge of the cases. Agencies in both regions promised full cooperation—full sharing of information. Although no one would say, you could tell from the gleam in their eyes that they were aiming to tie the dealers together and bring down the militia network at the same time.

So here Kelly had come, straight through the night, token representative from another jurisdiction, to be present at the interrogation of yet another piece of slime who may or may not have the information they wanted. Would he even be willing to give them information? After all the militia had proven its willingness to destroy her own children to keep her secrets. Would they offer him a deal? Entry into a protection program perhaps?

That would go over really well. He grimaced.

What would happen if they woke the bastard up only to find out he was some low-ranking, know-nothing buck private from some cornfield out in Oklahoma? All this protective custody for nothing. And no information to lead them to the top of the militia chain of command.

He made his way up the corridor toward the voices he heard slowly getting louder. He stopped at the end of the corridor to take stock of the situation.

A young doctor with jet black hair and skin the color of toasted cinnamon stood in front of a closed door and looked to be calmly, patiently, and firmly repeating himself. He was small of stature and slender. The four men who stood around him were each at least six inches taller than he was, and much wider at the shoulders. They loomed over him, their body postures clearly bespeaking their intent to intimidate. But the doctor shoved his fists into the pockets of his white coat and stood his ground. Kelly was impressed and strained to hear what was being said.

“You’ll let us in there and you’ll let us in immediately,” the blockiest of the tall men was saying, trying the straight orders approach.

“I told you before,” said the doctor, slowly and calmly but without hesitation, no intimidation evident in his lightly lilting accent. “No one will see the patient until he is stabilized. I will let you know when he can be ‘interviewed’.” There was slight evidence of sarcasm on the word “interviewed.” Kelly’s eyes flicked from the determined doctor to the increasingly frustrated men surrounding him.

“Listen, you little shit,” said one of the men, his lips making an ugly curl under his oft-broken nose.

“That’s Doctor Little Shit to you,” countered the doctor meeting the man’s gaze. “And until you produce someone with power of attorney for the ‘prisoner,’ the medical staff of this hospital will determine what is best for this patient.”
Despite his feelings about what the prisoner represented, Kelly couldn’t help but grin at the little doctor’s sheer brass.

The four men traded glances. The one who had been interrupted started to close the one remaining step between himself and the doctor, but the blond, although neither the tallest nor the largest of the group, suddenly asserted authority and held him back with a firm hand on his shoulder.

“We’ll have that power of attorney, soon, Doc,” said the man. “Then we’ll talk.”

The doctor nodded once. “When you have it, we’ll talk,” said the doctor calmly, still planted in front of the door.

The man nodded his head toward the other end of the corridor, and the other three men backed up. He lowered his voice and spoke to the doctor again and Kelly listened hard. “I apologize for the—er—zealous behavior of my men,” he said.

“Apology accepted, Agent Richter,” said the doctor. Kelly’s ears perked up at the name, but he remained still at the end of the hall.

“We’ll post a new guard,” said the agent.

“They’ll have to be posted outside the door,” the doctor said calmly.

The agent looked at the doctor closely. “You know this man is in protective custody,” he said. “It’s for his own safety.”

The doctor didn’t blink. “So far, your ‘protective custody’ hasn’t been conducive to the patient’s good health,” he said. “At the moment, he seems to need protection from his guards.”

“You have my word it won’t happen again,” said the agent, a threatening edge cracking his cool tone.

The doctor nodded in acknowledgement of the pledge, and then repeated calmly that they would talk once power of attorney had been assigned.

The agent seemed about to say something else, but thought better of it. He turned on his heel and gestured to the other three who were talking quietly together a few feet away. All four walked off together, their dissatisfaction evident in their body language. No guard was left at the door.

Kelly watched the doctor walk to the nearest wall phone, dial up security, and ask for a temporary guard to be posted at the patient’s door. He made up his mind. He would speak to the doctor first. Then he would approach his law enforcement colleagues.

***

On the other side of town, Father Eli Rafferty was in the sacristy of St. Bernadette’s, reverently, purposefully donning his vestments. He was carefully straightening the purple stole over his white chasuble, when he heard a soft knock at the door. His gaze jerked to the clock on the wall. It was very early. Far too early to begin the regular offices of the day. And he wasn’t expecting anyone. He considered that it might be the sexton. But then again, since St. Bernadette’s was one of the few remaining churches that refused to lock the doors, one never knew who or what one might encounter in the church first thing in the morning. No matter. In his many years of faithful service, Father Eli made it a point never to turn away one of God’s creatures, be they four-footed or two-footed. Who was he to refuse anyone whom God had sent?
“Come in,” he called out, turning to face the door.

A mountain of a man with salt and pepper hair and an unshaven face slouched almost apologetically in the door. He looked around the sacristy and smiled slightly at the priest.

“How can I help you?” the priest asked.

“I’d like some of your time, Father,” the tall man said simply, closing the sacristy door softly behind him.

Father Eli stared at the man for a moment, trying to comprehend the alarm bell that had begun ringing in the back of his mind.

As if sensing his unease, the stranger put out his hands palm up. “Easy, Father,” he said. “This won’t take up too much of your valuable time.”

With that gesture, the priest caught a glimpse of the gun holstered under the man’s shoulder under his worn jacket.

Father Eli was not a large man, but years of faithfully going where God and the Pope called him and doing the work that was required—whatever the circumstances—made him a hard man to discourage. Or intimidate. He narrowed his eyes. “All are welcome in the house of the Lord, my son,” he said. “But you should know that we don’t keep our poor box money or offerings here at the church.”

A rumbling laugh spilled forth from the man before him. He seemed genuinely amused by that. “Thank you, Father,” he said. Eli wondered what the man was thanking him for. “I really do just want a little of your time.”

Father Eli took a breath. “I would be happy to oblige you, my son, but at this moment, I have a standing appointment to hear confession. Perhaps afterward…”

The man shook his head. “I am afraid you won’t be able to make that appointment.” He sounded genuinely regretful.

Father Eli straightened his spine and looked the big man straight in the eye. “Do you plan on holding me here against my will?”

“I hope not,” the man replied.

Father Eli thought about the gun he had glimpsed under the man’s jacket. He knew he should be frightened. But something in the man’s tone was tickling his curiosity.

“What are your plans, then?” he asked.

The big man’s face cracked into a small smile. “I had hoped to start this on a better foot,” he said. “Name’s Josiah Sanchez. I’m an agent with the Denver ATF.”

Father Eli relaxed a bit. No doubt the man before him was dangerous, armed or not. One look in his eyes revealed that clearly. But the priest was reasonably certain that he was dealing with someone who didn’t mean him harm. He waited patiently to hear more.

“My team and I are currently pursuing a case in this area. Unfortunately, our mission makes it necessary that you forego your duties outside of the building this morning.”
Father Eli sighed. “My son,” he said, a slight strain in his voice. “Although I am more than supportive of law enforcement, especially at this time,” he noticed a wince pass across the big man’s face. He continued undeterred. “Nevertheless, I must be allowed to pursue my sacred obligations toward my parishioners, particularly where the necessary sacraments and the salvation of my brethren are concerned.”

He hoped the clerical terms would confuse the man. The man nodded. He lowered his head for a moment, and the priest anticipated an opening. But when he raised his graying head, the agent looked regretful but no less determined.

“Father,” he began thoughtfully. “Do you really think that one confession more or less will make the difference in the salvation of this man’s soul, when he does not truly repent of his sins?”

A cold chill went up Father Eli’s spine. Anonymity in the confessional was a sacred trust. And the parishioner he saw once a month for confession did not want anyone to know about his arrangement with the priest. The priest was picked up at the church and taken to a small room in a very large house. He administered the sacred sacrament of confession without asking the man’s name or seeing his face. Then he was returned to the church. Several days later, like clockwork, a rather large donation marked for the good works of the church would be added to the offering plates on Sunday. He never knew who put it in the plate, nor did he try to find out. Occasionally, he wondered whether, knowing what he did about what was being confessed, he should continue to accept these donations. Then again, these donations had contributed largely to the new furnace and the new roof for the church as well as supplies to continue their mission of feeding the hungry, ministering to the imprisoned, and clothing the poor. In this way, he hoped the man’s sin could be turned to good works.

“Agent Sanchez,” Father Eli said firmly, the use of his name meant to get the agent’s attention, “I have a standing appointment. I am expected. Your errand here is futile. If I do not arrive as expected, then someone will come looking for me. And soon.”

Sanchez shook his head. “Regrettably, your driver is right now being informed that you have taken ill and will not be able to hear confession today. A suitable substitute is being offered.”

“Who?” demanded the priest. Most of the churches around had more than one priest, but not St. Bernadette’s. At least not at the present time.

“Oh he’s new,” Sanchez returned. “Entered the profession recently. He has no doubt already explained that you asked him to stand in for you, if that is acceptable to your parishioner. No doubt, the car is on its way away.”

Father Eli stared at the man. “What you are doing is reprehensible.”

Sanchez looked impassively back at him. “From one point of view,” he said. “From a more protestant point of view, one’s sins are between oneself and God. Therefore confession made to anyone but God is a pointless exercise in futility as only God has the power to absolve you of your sins, regardless of what is said by any member of the clergy.”

Father Eli continued to stare at the agent, but a small smile turned up the corners of his mouth. “A theological scholar?” he asked. A gentle jibe.

“A mere student of philosophies and human nature,” the man replied.

Years of experience at reading people told Eli that the man was being modest. He couldn’t help the smile that sneaked onto his face. “So you intend to pass this waiting time debating religious points of
Agent Sanchez smiled. “Well, I had thought that would be interesting. And I do have some questions that I would be interested in having your point of view on.”

Father Eli shook his head in disbelief. He almost laughed at the ridiculousness of the situation. An agent of the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms had taken him captive in his sacristy, prevented him from carrying out his priestly duties, and was now asking for his opinion on questions of faith. His eyes roved upward toward the ceiling. You do have a mysterious sense of humor, he said but only in his head, knowing the One to whom he was speaking would surely hear his thoughts.

He looked at the agent again. “As long as I suddenly have an open spot in my schedule,” he said dryly. “What would you like to ask?”

The agent’s smile sagged, drooping almost imperceptibly at the corners. “How about an old one, Father?” he said. “Like why God lets bad things happen to good people.”

Father Eli’s smile mirrored the sadness in the man’s own. He sighed. “That is a hard one, my son,” he said. He looked around the sacristy. It was orderly but crammed full of chests for altar linens, stacked with offering plates, and other items used during the service. There was only one chair, and a set of vestments was currently draped over it. He looked back up at the agent. “Perhaps we could sit more comfortably in the church office and discuss this.”

“Certainly, Father,” the agent said and moved away from the door.

Father Eli smiled as he led the way to the church office. Who am I to refuse whom God has sent me? he thought.

* * *

At the gates of a house he could barely glimpse from the driveway, the newly-ordained priest was handing his identification up to the driver of the car, so it could be scrutinized by the gatehouse guard. The guard eyed the young priest in the back seat of the car and flicked his gaze back to the card.

“Just a moment,” the guard said, sliding his window closed and picking up a phone. The driver and passenger both waited. The window slid open again. “What did you say happened to Father Rafferty?”

The driver jiggled his foot impatiently and looked exasperatedly at the young priest before replying. “I told you. Father DeCristofaro said he was ill.”

“Father Angelo, please,” said the priest, laying his hand on the driver’s arm. He leaned over so he could look up through his glasses at the gatehouse guard. “If this is a problem, we can simply go back,” he said congenially. “I know how difficult it can be when one is used to a particular confessor.”

The driver shrugged up at the guard. “I didn’t think it would be such a problem. I mean a priest’s a priest, right?”

The guard rolled his eyes at the driver then slid the window shut again to continue his conversation. After a few more moments, he hung up the phone and the window slid open again. “Begging your pardon, Father Angelo,” he said. “Thank you for waiting. The driver will take you up to the house now.”
“Thank you. And it’s no trouble at all,” said the young priest with a warm smile. The driver rolled up his window, gave the gate guard a long-suffering look, and proceeded up the long drive toward the house.

Two blocks away in a telephone company van, which Ezra had somehow procured, J.D. Dunne breathed out a sigh of relief. “Ezra’s in,” he whispered into his headset.

“Good,” came back Buck’s whispered reply. “Begin stage two.”

J.D. cracked his knuckles and bent over the keyboard and computer equipment he had borrowed from some acquaintances in the security business. He had not told them what he wanted it for. They had not asked. They believed it would be some top secret ATF police work. He did not bother to explain. It was a lot easier to get things done when you dispensed with probable cause, warrants, reasonable search and seizure, and all sorts of other ethical procedures. The thought made him shiver. He thought instead about the arms dealer who sold a rocket launcher to a militia outfit that used it to slaughter six innocent people, 80 of their own militiamen, and 15 law enforcement officers—including Chris Larabee.

Lying along a tree limb a quarter mile from the house itself and just beyond the boundary wall, Vin Tanner allowed himself one tiny smile for his friend who had just breached the compound’s walls. Ezra had chosen a new alias for this mission. Not one of the names he often used when he went undercover for the team. Vin didn’t know why, but Ezra had gone out of his way to tell Vin what his chosen first name meant, although judging from Josiah’s smile, Tanner suspected the profiler already knew the meaning of the name. He thought about it now as he waited for J.D.’s signal. Ezra had styled himself Father Angelo DeCristofaro. Angelo, from the word angel, meaning messenger, Ezra had said. A tribute. Ezra had called himself the Messenger from Christopher.

With a pair of tiny but powerful binoculars, Vin watched Ezra go inside with a pair of hulking men that could only be bodyguards.

“Ezra’s inside the house,” he whispered into his own headset.

“Copy,” came back the whispered reply. “How many guards you get?”

“So far four: gatehouse, driver, two inside with Ez,” he replied.

“You set?” Buck asked.

“Just waitin’ for the word,” he responded. His left hand clutched a long canvas bag against the limb beside him. It was camouflaged just like the clothes he wore. Two joggers had passed directly beneath him less than an hour before. They did not notice him. He was completely invisible from below. He willed himself to lie still.

“Okay, here we go,” came J.D.’s voice over the head set. “Vin, I can’t take the motion sensors down all at once or the alarm company will know something has been tripped, but I can create a distraction if you need one.”

“Copy,” said Vin, preparing himself.

“Buck,” the young agent continued, his voice admirably steady, “I’ve got the security cameras on my command now. I’ll feed them an overlapping loop in the sequence I gave you before. Stay in sequence. Otherwise, it will be hard for me to knock out the right cameras without attracting their attention.”

“You’re the genius,” Buck said flippantly. A smile crept onto J.D.’s face. For a second it was like
old times and he forgot that what they were doing was totally unauthorized and totally illegal. *No turning back now,* he told himself, putting the thought right out of his mind.

“Dogwalker, heads up,” came Nathan’s whisper from a park a half mile away. From the top of the monument where he was crouching, he could peer through a high-powered telescope right into the backdoor of the house. A damn poor set up if you asked him, but unless the man had personally climbed the county Veteran’s Memorial himself to look through a high-powered telescope aimed at his own backdoor, he probably wasn’t aware of the breach in his security.

He nearly held his breath as the back door slid open and a young man came out with two leashes wrapped around his arm. At the end of the leashes were the two most enormous, fattest basset hounds Nathan had ever seen.

“Outside motion detectors deactivated,” said J.D. His bet and their informant had been right. The dogwalker was too lazy to deactivate a particular set of quadrants in the yard, so he just shut the system down for the ten or so minutes he might be outside. They were basset hounds. They hated exercise. And what could happen in ten minutes, anyway?

The answer to that question had let himself swiftly down out of a nearby tree, and had scaled the outside wall easily. The voice in his ear told him he had approximately eight minutes to get into position. *Piece of cake,* Vin thought, crouching low and moving across the manicured lawn, taking a zig-zag course in the cover of occasional landscaping until he shinned up a statuesque willow tree, which offered him a window view on at least three rooms. Trouble was, they had no way of knowing which room their target would be in. Getting him in the right window would be Buck’s problem.

From the opposite side of the house, another camouflaged figure had come up over the back wall, skirted the open space of the terrace and was now crouched below the rear windows of the garage, hidden by the garbage cans and recycling bins.

Both men radioed that they were in position.

Nathan heard it through his headphones. He stashed the telescope in a corner of the statuary and was down from the monument in mere seconds. He sprinted through the park, in sweats and a t-shirt, looking like an ordinary runner out on a beautiful morning. At the east end, he veered suddenly from the path and headed for a drainage culvert, a shortcut to the house in fair, dry weather like this. He just hoped no one started shooting before he picked up his medical kit from the van.

J.D. held his breath. This would be the tricky part. The windows and doors were all alarmed. He had to disarm two entry points, one for Buck and one on the same circuit for a decoy in case anyone noticed. Best to do it without attracting the attention of the company monitoring the alarms at all.

*$100 million dollars worth of arms stashed away in warehouses in the western states couldn’t keep Bautiste from worrying about being attacked in his home. How right he is,* J.D. thought grimly, his fingers carefully sending through a command sequence his acquaintances had given him.

He had tested the commands on a mockup program he had downloaded from the security company under guise of wanting a demo to consider for his home. It had worked then, but a demo was one thing. The real deal, the security system on the home and headquarters of a major paranoid arms dealer, was something else entirely. One couldn’t account for customizing. He held his breath, and watched his screen for the tell tale blip.

“Buck, side garage entry,” he ordered.
“Copy,” Buck said. There was a tense silence before his whisper came back on. “I’m in. All clear.”

J.D. exhaled and nearly jumped out of his skin as the van door opened.

“It’s just me,” Nathan said, coming inside and closing the door behind him. He skinned out of his running clothes and into a utility company uniform.

“That was quick,” J.D. said.

Nathan did not reply. His mouth formed a tight line as he rechecked his medical kit disguised in a canvas tool bag and then checked his weapons. He went out again and jogged down to a power company van waiting another two blocks away. Then he put on his hard hat and heavy insulated rubber gloves and climbed the pole beside the van. He waited with the wire cutters for the signal from J.D. Either everything would go as planned and he would cut the power and arrive at the house to check out the situation, thus providing extra backup for Buck and Vin—or, more than likely, everything would go to hell, and he would cut the power to shut off the alarms, throw everyone in confusion, and give Buck and Vin and Ezra time to escape. He breathed out, wishing Josiah were here instead of on the other side of town keeping the real priest occupied. But someone had to keep the only other person who now knew something was up from blowing the whistle on all of them.

*Keeping a priest from blowing the whistle on us,* he repeated to himself and rubbed his forehead, remembering when they used to be the good guys. Sometime in the last two weeks, they had crossed a line. All of them. Together. He wondered what Chris would have said if he were here. Would he be proud of them? Or would he be kicking their collective asses all the way back to Denver? He was not sure. And he didn’t want to think about it all that hard right now.

Inside the house, Ezra played his part with serene priestly perfection.

“Begging your pardon, father,” said one of the two hulking men who met him at the door. “Would you mind raising your hands? We need to check for weapons.”

“What?” the priest asked, confused, swallowing the outrage that flickered onto his face.

“It’s a precaution. Mr. Bautiste don’t know you,” said the man with an uncomfortable twitch of his head.

Father Angelo looked at the man, aghast, then raised his hands slowly and awkwardly. The second bodyguard gave an exasperated snort and began patting him down, while the first one, the polite one, waited patiently a few steps away. “Pretend it’s an airport security check, Father. Nothing personal.”

The second bodyguard’s face remained cold and hard, betraying nothing, as he ran his hands down the inside of Ezra’s pant legs. A red flush made of equal parts embarrassment and indignation crept up the priest’s neck.

The second bodyguard was very efficient and thorough. Ezra was thankful that his team had finally seen the reasons why he could not wear a weapon or a wire. Unfortunately, that meant he also could not know if and when they were in their positions or help them out. All he could do was hope that they would appear at the magic time in the magic place. As they always did. He pushed all questions aside and threw himself into the performance of his career… a career he had just abandoned.

He was shown to a small, dark room, and ushered into a comfortable chair. He looked around. Besides the overstuffed chair, there were only writing desk and a tall narrow bookcase filled with books. He waited.

“Can I get you anything to drink while you wait, Father?” asked the polite one. The man’s deference
would have made him laugh if he weren’t playing a role.

“No, thank you,” he said with just a twinge of gratitude in his voice.

“You new at this?” said the other, the one who had patted him down, without preamble or courtesy. Ezra made a note to watch out for him. He looked like a musclehead, but was clearly a lot shrewder than he looked.

“I came to the priesthood later in life,” Father Angelo replied.

“You don’t look too Eye-talian,” the man baited him with a sneer.

Ezra laughed companionably and pushed his glasses up with a finger. “I hear that a lot,” he said. “My mother was Irish. Looks like her genes won out,” he said.

“Was Irish?” The first bodyguard said curiously.

“She passed on a few years ago,” Father Angelo said, his face clouding over. “It was losing her that brought me to consider the priesthood.”

The first guard nodded seriously. “Losing someone does sometimes give you a whole new perspective.”

The second guard snorted and rolled his eyes. “Cut the sentimental crap,” he said. He turned back to the priest and pointed toward the door. “After we leave, he’ll come and knock on the door three times. Don’t open it. He’ll just sit on the other side and do his confession thing through the wood. Got it?”

“Got it,” Father Angelo said with a smile. He shifted in his chair, held his missal and Bible in his hands and bowed his head in prayer, totally ignoring both men as they left. By the time the knock came on the wooden door, Ezra had activated the tiny recording device in the hollowed out spot in his Bible. One never knew what one might hear in a confession—especially from a cold, ruthless man like Samuel Bautiste. It would be completely inadmissible as evidence, of course, but nobody was fooling themselves into thinking this had anything at all to do with courtroom procedures and proper convictions. This was insurance, in case they needed something to keep Bautiste from coming after them after it was all over. All he had to do now was hear the confession, offer absolution and then look completely terrified and innocent when armed men suddenly appeared and tried to force information out of Bautiste. He turned his thoughts from his teammates and answered the rap at the door.

* * *

“Excuse me, Doctor Kahar?” The doctor turned from the nurse’s station desk, impatient, beginning to be annoyed. The fact that he saw yet another federal agent standing before him did nothing to relax him.

“Yes, Agent…” he waited.

“Kelly. Ryan Kelly, with the Denver ATF,” the man answered. The doctor looked him over once from head to toe. Kelly cleared his throat. “Um if you’re busy, I can wait a few more minutes.”

“Busy, no,” said the doctor, his eyes narrowing. “Why would I be busy? This is a hospital.” Denver ATF. They were just crawling out of the woodwork now. He supposed this one wanted directions to the interview that was about to be conducted down in the basement. Directions and popcorn, maybe,
to go with his front row seat.

The agent looked gratifyingly taken aback. He was obviously looking for the words to say what he had to say. “Actually I was hoping to speak to you for a few moments about one of your patients.”

The doctor sighed. “I can’t release information to you if you are not family.” The words were robotic. Unless the court has signed over power of attorney, that is. He thought for a moment. Technically, the power of attorney had been given to the ATF, not a particular person, a fact that made him madder than hell, since those barbarians who had headed downstairs only minutes before were each now technically empowered to make medical decisions if the patient were unable. Unfortunately, he would not be allowed to be present. A military doctor with a security clearance had taken his place. Of course, he had not bothered to tell the rest of the agents that it was in the patient’s defense that he had had the chest tubes removed last night and had the man brought to consciousness this morning, in the wee hours. Hopefully he would be awake enough to be lucid. At least then, the patient would have a chance to make his own decisions.

Of course, that also meant he had removed the wrist restraints. He wished he had done it before this morning’s impromptu visit from Agent Richter and company. Nevertheless the thought worried him a bit. But he reminded himself that the patient would be far too weak and groggy to unhook himself from all the tubes and wires, let alone get the bed rail down and make it all five steps to the door of the tiny room.

“Agent Kelly,” Doctor Kahar said slowly and calmly. “Your colleagues have already taken the elevator down to ‘interview’ the patient. If you like I can give you directions.”

“That won’t be necessary,” the agent before him replied. “I wanted some information on the patient’s condition before I head down.”

Doctor Kahar inclined his head at the agent and regarded him with narrowed eyes. “Why?” he asked.

“I have to report back to my superiors, and I want to know whether I can expect anything he says to be said with full mental capacity,” the agent replied. Then he smiled ruefully. “Besides, I heard you rip into some of the local agents earlier this morning and you got my attention.”

The doctor smiled. “A well-deserved ripping,” he said. He completed his orders to the nurse at the desk then indicated with a nod that Agent Kelly should follow him.

“The patient,” he said, “has been putting up a good fight.” He wasn’t sure how much medical terminology an ATF agent might know, so, as he always tried to do, he made his explanations as simple as possible, but that didn’t mean he had to spare the agent’s feelings.

“He arrived with two bullets wounds,” Kahar said. “One bullet passed through the abdomen on the left side, causing relatively minor tissue damage but sizable blood loss. The other bullet chipped the upper arm bone and remained lodged in his left arm. He also sustained a punctured lung and contusions to the diaphragm, neither of which were inflicted by the bullets.”

He was gratified to see the agent look at him in shock. “What are you saying?”

“I am saying that I have been a doctor a long time, and I recognize the imprints of a boot heel in human flesh when I see them. Someone beat the patient up good before sending him to the hospital.”

The taller agent’s face took on a grim cast. “Go on,” he said to the doctor.

“He’s been intubated since they brought him in and heavily sedated in order to give the lung and
diaphragm injuries time to heal. The length of time between when he was shot and when he received medical care allowed infection to set in. Moving him around from hospital to hospital has interfered with his care. Several of the entry sites for needles and tubes have also become infected, which has become a cause for concern, and according to his chart, at least one medication that was given him somewhere along the way caused a bad reaction. Nevertheless, he was awake for a short time this morning after we removed the chest tubes. He was confused but lucid. He asked what happened to his men. When we could give no reply, he refused to answer more questions or give his name.”

*His men,* Kelly mused to himself. *Must be on some level of the chain of command. Not necessarily the jackpot but still better than a buck private from the cornfields.*

“What did you throw those other agents out for?” Kelly asked the doctor.

The doctor’s face darkened angrily. “They were attempting to awaken the patient,” he paused. “And throwing peanuts.”

Kelly pursed his lips and tried not to laugh. He was appalled, he really was, but the last part sounded like something Buck Wilmington would do. But only to his friends—and only when they were conscious enough to be irritated by it.

The doctor was glaring at him now. “Agent Kelly,” he said, his voice taking on a low edge.

“I’m sorry, Doc,” Kelly said, holding up his palms. “I can see your point. You did right. It’s just that the last part sounded like someone I know.”

The doctor regarded him strangely. “You know someone who would attempt to prod a man’s injuries in order to rouse him to consciousness?”

“No,” Kelly said slowly. “I know someone who would throw food at a patient. But only someone he actually liked,” he added hurriedly.

“You have strange acquaintances,” said the doctor.

“You don’t know the half of it,” Kelly replied.

They stopped at the elevator bank.

Kelly shook his hand. “You’ve been most helpful.”

The doctor nodded and watched the elevator numbers fall as the car came down toward them.

“You should probably hurry. They have probably begun by now,” the doctor said, shifting his weight from foot to foot as if trying to make a decision.

When the elevator doors opened, he made up his mind and got inside with Kelly. He looked up at the agent. “I don’t seem to have a high enough clearance to be permitted at the interrogation,” he said, his disdain evident in his voice. “But perhaps I’ll attempt to look in on my patient anyway.”

Kelly grinned. There was no way the brass was going to let the doctor in, but he liked this guy. He was scrappy. And smart.

Rounding the corner together, they could see two agents standing shoulder to shoulder, filling the doorway. And they could hear two voices. One was the voice of the military doctor, who was protesting from outside the door. The other was a cold, furious voice inside the room.
Kelly and Kahar broke into a run.

“Your men are dead, you son of a bitch,” said the voice. “Just like you’re gonna be if you don’t tell me what I want to know.”

They could not hear the reply, but apparently it was unsatisfactory.

Agent Kelly and Doctor Kahar reached the door craning or ducking their heads in time to see the agent doing the interrogating press his palm down hard on the livid bruise where the patient’s ribs had been stove in through a lung a few weeks ago. The patient doubled up in pain. Everyone froze, Kahar’s face registering his surprise that the patient could move even that well. An instant later, the man swung one hospital-stockinged foot up off the bed and drove his heel into his attacker’s face. The blow was weak, but it surprised the agent by the bed enough that he stumbled back several steps toward the door. The two agents in the doorway backpedaled out into the corridor. The patient, furious and groggy, attempted to heave himself out of the bed, but was impeded by the side rail and the tubes, poles, and wires surrounding him. He crashed to the floor in a heap, pulling the heavy IV pole and the bed down on top of himself. He remained motionless on the floor, yanked wires splayed around him.

Doctor Kahar and the military doctor threw themselves between and through the large agents blocking their way. Kelly grabbed a hold of the agent who was clutching his nose, fury in his eyes as he recovered his balance and moved toward the patient again.

He kept a hand on the man’s arm until he recovered his composure. He was not hurt by the blow, but it had been hard enough to make his eyes water. The agent turned angry eyes on Kelly. “Those bastards killed my best friend,” he grated out.

Kelly nodded sympathetically. “Those bastards killed a lot of good men,” he said, slowly releasing the man’s arm.

While Kahar collected the patient back into bed and called for nurses, the other doctor advanced furiously toward the door. Kelly glanced around looking for the doctor’s intended target, guessing it would be the senior agent in charge. The one who should have put a stop to this. He found him: Richter, leaning in the doorway, his eyes fixed on his agent who was wiping the water from his eyes. The glance he threw the agent told Kelly everything he wanted to know. The man had been given one chance to inflict his revenge. It was over now.

Kelly shivered inside. Richter’s men were loose cannons. On the edge. And Richter liked them that way, liked being the one who held their leashes. In a way, he reminded Kelly of Chris Larabee, albeit a darker Chris Larabee, one with far less regard for right and wrong than the man Kelly had known.

He shivered again, thinking how easy it would have been for Team Seven to go the same path. He was certain that they wouldn’t, and yet they had been AWOL now for nearly 48 hours. They had taken no weapons from their equipment locker, but that didn’t mean they weren’t dangerous. Or armed to the teeth for that matter.

Kelly noted the arrival of two nurses, slipping around and between the agents crowding the cold basement corridor. He stood aside. They must have been waiting nearby to have arrived so quickly.

The military doctor was in Richter’s face, and Kelly couldn’t hear what he was saying. But he could hear Richter’s reply. “This man is complicit in the deaths of more than a hundred people. It’s my job to keep his bosses from killing a hundred more. I don’t give a damn about his comfort or his pain.”
Kelly sighed. *The lowest job in the bottom of the slime pit. Damn you, Chris. If you could have been ten minutes faster, I wouldn’t have to be here with these idiots now. Or worrying about what YOUR team is out there doing.*

The remaining ATF agents had ringed their boss and were waiting while the doctor reamed him out, apparently to little effect. Doctor Kahar was examining the patient, assisted by the nurses. Kelly decided the military doctor could hold his own, and moved closer to the bed. He felt the blood drain from his face at what he saw.

It took him nearly a full minute to force himself to think what to do. He stared from the patient to Richter and his agents and back to the patient. He took an involuntary step toward the bed. Then he forced his feet to turn toward the door and walk the few steps into the hall.

Richter and the doctor still stood nearly nose to nose, still arguing, veins standing out on both of their necks.

Kelly cleared his throat. “Agent Richter,” he said. His voice seemed to have a strange, tinny quality to it.

Richter’s head snapped up in mid-threat. He glared at the man coming toward him. “Who the hell are you?” he snapped.

“Ryan Kelly, Senior Agent, Team Eight, Denver ATF.”

A sour look passed across Richter’s face. “Denver,” he said, icily. “They told us you were coming.”

Clearly, Kelly had been right about his warm reception. “Good,” he snapped back, clenching his jaw reflexively.

Richter continued to glare at him. “Something you wanted to say?” he sneered, ignoring the doctor before him, who turned to look at Kelly, too.

“You know how the patient sustained the broken ribs?” Kelly asked, forcing his jaw open, striving to sound calm and collected.

“It’s in the report,” Richter snapped, eyes narrowing. *Denver,* he thought angrily, *sends us Mr. High and Mighty.*

“I haven’t had time to read the report,” Kelly said calmly. “Perhaps you could just tell me.”

Richter shouldered the doctor out of his way and bent slightly to glare into Kelly’s face. “I could, Agent Kelly,” he said sarcastically. “But if the pretty boys in Denver didn’t have time to clue you in, then I don’t see why I should.”

“The pretty boys?” Kelly asked.

“Lose one damn agent, you go hysterical. We lost a whole team. And then some.” His eyes narrowed dangerously. “Nobody here asked for your help.”

“Correction, Agent Richter,” Kelly said, returning the acid tone in kind. “Your brass asked for our help. Whether you like it or not. Now how did the patient in there get those broken ribs?”

“Read the report,” he said at last, his voice dripping contempt. “I’m sure one of your secretaries can find it and send it to you.” Denver could find things out the same way everyone else did: Work for it.
Hospital security had arrived. They were moving the ATF agents away from the door, and away from the patient. Any official interview was over—at least for the moment.

Kelly moved obligingly out into the corridor and pulled out his cell phone. Security immediately intercepted him, showing him a spot up the corridor a ways where he could safely use the device without it interfering with any equipment in the room.

“AD Travis, please... it’s Ryan Kelly.” He waited for Travis’s office to pick up and exhaled a long breath. Then he clenched his jaw to keep a sudden hysterical laugh from escaping between his teeth.
Chapter 3

A steady stream of sins had been coming at Ezra through the wooden door. Some of them were minor and some shocking enough to give even a jaded old priest pause. He had some trouble not yawning during the confessions about not sticking to a strict diet and exercise regimen and about arguing with a brother who lived in Palm Beach. And he managed to sound neither impressed nor shocked nor, heaven forbid, satisfied as he got some of the better ones on tape. Oh yes, there was insurance material here. Ezra smiled grimly at his tape recorder, even as he said solemnly to the door, “Go on, my son.”

Bautiste continued in a quiet steady voice. Then it stopped suddenly, mid-sentence. Ezra snapped his Bible shut. “Are you all right?” he called through the door.

“Who’s in there?” a gruff, cold voice demanded.

If Ezra hadn’t recognized the tone, he might really have been afraid.

“No one,” Bautiste answered hurriedly. His voice was strained.

“No one, huh?” the voice said, softly, coldly. “We’ll just see about that.”

“No!” Bautiste nearly shouted, then lowered his voice. Ezra could hear the quaver in it right through the door. “It’s a priest,” he said hurriedly. “Just a priest.”

There was silence for a second. “Well, well, well,” said the soft voice in icy bemusement. Then louder it called, “Come one out then, priest. Slowly, and with your hands in the air.”

“For God’s sake…” Bautiste’s voice grated. There was a thump and the rest of what he said vanished in a garble.

“For God’s sake,” repeated the voice with cold amusement. “That was a good one.” The voice raised a notch in volume as it repeated its orders. “I said come out with your hands up, or I’ll send you to your maker right through the door.”

*Good Lord, Buck. We said tough, not thug-like,* Ezra thought icily. But, hey, Buck had his part to play, too.

Hands in the air, face white and glistening with sweat, the priest emerged slowly from behind the door. His eyes were wide with terror as he beheld the black-clad man with the black mask over his head and flicked his eyes to the large automatic weapon he held in his hand. He stood over Bautiste, who lay prone on the floor, hands already bound behind his back, his fat neck resting uncomfortably under the arch of his attacker’s boot.

“On the floor,” the man ordered, pointing toward the floor with his gun.

“You’ll never get out of here alive,” Bautiste muttered, one fat cheek pressed hard against the beautiful pine floorboards.

“Wanna bet?” the gunman asked. “On the floor!” he roared at the priest.

The priest got down to his knees, actually shaking with fear, and slid forward onto his belly, arms covering his head.

*Damn, Ez,* Buck thought admiringly as he watched the performance and remembered why Chris had
always said that Ezra was the best undercover man in the business.

“Keep your head down, Priest,” Buck said gleefully, “and you’ll get to keep it on your shoulders.”

It wasn’t easy, but Ezra managed to nod his head against the floor without looking up from under the shelter of his arms.

“As for you,” Buck said to Bautiste, his voice dripping self-satisfaction. “Your bodyguards aren’t coming up. And no one else has any idea that anything is wrong. If you want to get out of this alive, you’ll keep it quiet, and you’ll answer my questions.”

Bautiste made to protest, but his assailant cut him off. “You make it tough on me then I’ll shoot both of you. Now get up.”

“I’m sorry, Father,” Bautiste whispered.

“Get up,” the gunman snapped again, reaching down and yanking Bautiste’s wrists painfully up behind him, pulling him up onto his knees. He half-dragged the older man to kneel sideways in front of a window.

From under his folded arms, Ezra sneaked his first in-person look at the notorious arms dealer. He was less impressive than he had been in his prime: fatter, doughier, slower, tired. They were counting on that.

The lights in the room suddenly went out.

Bautiste flinched forward.

“That should occupy the rest of your staff,” the gunman whispered in Bautiste’s ear. He turned Bautiste’s head to the left, to force him to look out the window.

“See that sparkle of light in the willow tree?” he asked.

Bautiste looked at the willow a mere eighty feet from the window and nodded.

“Know what that is?”

Bautiste nodded again. He knew a rifle scope when he saw one. How could he not know? He had dealt in hundreds of high-powered weapons and scopes. In the old days he had done it personally. It had been several years since he had done more than set up new markets. He let his lieutenants take care of the dirty and dangerous parts.

The gunman was satisfied with his answer. “Good,” he purred icily. “So you know that my buddy out there will put a bullet right through your brain if you make too much noise, don’t answer my questions correctly, or otherwise piss me off.”

He spoke into a tiny hands-free microphone that protruded through the mouth of his mask. “Wave to Mr. Bautiste, Johnny,” he said.

A camouflaged arm raised itself from behind the sun-caught sparkle of the scope. It gave a short wave and then vanished back into the foliage.

Bautiste scowled.

“You been reading the newspaper, Mr. Bautiste?” the gunman asked. He moved around to stand in front of Bautiste, careful never to block the window Bautiste noticed.
Bautiste glared at the gunman but did not answer.

“Of course you have,” the gunman said with a good cheer that sent a chill up Bautiste’s spine. “I want to know where the militia got their hands on a rocket launcher.”

Bautiste looked at him, his face pale. “How should I know?” he snapped.

The rifle butt caught him swiftly in the chin.

“I know you don’t get your hands dirty anymore,” replied the gunman contemptuously. “But I ain’t stupid. I know that not much goes on in the business that you don’t know about.”

Bautiste regarded the man coldly, licking his lip where he had bit it at the blow to his chin. It was true. There was much more money to be made brokering information.

“What’s in it for me?” Bautiste snapped.

The gunman chortled, and evil sound. “Life, Mr. Bautiste.”

Bautiste glared at him stonily. “Go to hell.”

“That’s the way you want it,” agreed the gunman. “I’ll just send the priest on ahead. To warn the devil we’re coming.”

He pointed his weapon at the priest.

Bautiste had crossed a lot of legal and ethical lines in building his career and reputation. But the sanctity of the church was one rule he never violated, one lesson from his mother that he had never forgotten. And he wasn’t about to abandon it now.

“The priest has no part of this,” he said.

“Too bad for him that he picked a bad day,” the gunman replied.

“If I tell you what you want to know, will you let the father go?”

Hidden in the shelter of his own arms, Ezra rolled his eyes and thought over the confessions he had just listened to. Sure. Now the man grows a conscience.

Buck appeared to be thinking about Bautiste’s offer. After a moment of mulling it over, he agreed.

Then the door to the room opened and another tall, black-clad, mask-wearing gunman entered.

“Bout damn time,” snarled the first gunman.

“Called in the blackout to the alarm company,” said the new arrival. “We’re clear.”

Bautiste swore inwardly. Now not even the alarm company would be alerted to a breach in security. He swore again. What the hell do I pay the staff and bodyguards for? Useless. Utterly useless.

“Who’s that?” the new man asked, indicating the priest lying on his face on the floor.

“Damn unlucky priest,” the first gunman said with an evil laugh. He turned his full attention back to Bautiste. “You got something to say about that rocket launcher?” the first gunman asked, as the new arrival trained his gun on the priest.
Bautiste thought about whether he should give them the satisfaction. Then again, he DID know who had sold the rocket launcher. Several rocket launchers, in fact. He considered the situation.

First, he didn’t know who these men were. That didn’t disturb him. They could be a new group of buyers who wanted rocket launchers. They could be assassins or mercenaries. They could be representatives from some hostile government hoping to get their hands on serious arms. He didn’t really care. New players entered the game all the time. What impressed him was that these guys were smart enough to realize that a few well-prepared men could often accomplish what a whole army of thugs could not.

Second, he considered the “colleague” who dealt in the rocket launchers. He was an arrogant bastard who deserved to be brought down a peg or two. Bautiste had no intention of sacrificing himself to save that idiot. In fact, he would actually enjoy seeing the man’s business get mucked up by a rival gang—that is, if his suspicions weren’t completely off.

Third, if worst came to worst, and he sold out his “associate,” and had to flee to South America, he could, quite easily live on his money—in opulent comfort—for the next fifty or sixty years.

Live, he mused. For the better part of two years he had been trying to wipe the slate clean, so that when his failing liver finally dragged him into the sweet hereafter, he could go confidently. And so his mother wouldn’t smack him around too much when he did meet her again in the Promised Land. He was pretty sure he needed several more months of penance before God Almighty might consider the scales balanced. To that end, he realized that, after today, he’d have to invest in much better security systems and bodyguards.

All things considered, it wasn’t that hard a decision to make—once one got over the indignity of being captured in one’s own home and forced to give up information. Really, it was just the principle of the thing that stuck in his craw. But Bautiste was a practical man. His ego wasn’t worth dying over.

“Dowd,” he said simply. “He acquired a shipment four months ago. Four launchers and several crates of rockets disappeared off an Israeli ship. Bragged he had a contract waiting.”

He did not see the glance the two gunmen exchanged.

Dowd, Buck thought. They had been trying for more than two years to flush him out. But the best they had managed yet was to nab a lieutenant. That had been good, but not good enough for Chris or the rest of Team Seven. Nailing Dowd, Buck thought. Chris would like that. Make it seem like maybe there was sense in this. He abandoned that thought immediately. There was no sense in it, he reflected, but nailing Dowd would at least be a fitting tribute.

Along with the thought, something came nagging into the back of his brain. He pushed it aside. He had what he came for. Now he had to get all of them out of here.

He flicked a glance at Nathan. Nathan backed out the door, gun still trained on the prone priest.

“Allright, Bautiste,” he growled. “You and the priest both get to keep breathing. As long as you follow instructions.”

Bautiste looked up at him and waited patiently. There was no fear in his face. Indignation and anger still rested there, but there was no fear.

Buck opened the window with its view of the willow.

“For the next ten minutes you will stay here. Don’t move. Don’t speak. At that time the power will
come back on, and you can do whatever you want.”

He jerked his head toward the tree outside. “You move or call out or even pray before that time is up, my boy Johnny’s gonna shoot you through the ear. Got it?”


“Good,” the gunman said. He prodded the priest with his toe. “How ‘bout you Father. You hear me?”

“I hear you,” came the muffled reply from beneath the arms.

The gunman made a satisfied grunt. Then spoke into his microphone. “All yours Johnny. Keep ‘em still for me.”

The line crackled back a nearly inaudible affirmative.

The gunman turned Bautiste to face the window and slipped out the door behind him.

* * *

Ten minutes passed slowly. During that time, Bautiste watched the sight reflecting in the willow tree. He watched for the sniper to come down from the tree. He plotted how to catch this one remaining member of the gang. To regain a little pride and dignity.

But there was no sign of movement from the tree, and it dawned on him that he had been tricked. The sniper had somehow gotten away.

After an eternity, the lights flickered back into life. Bautiste moved gingerly and rose slowly to his feet.

The priest cautiously peeked out from beneath his arms.

“They’re gone, Father,” said Bautiste, his face showing genuine distress, especially as he saw how shaken the new priest was.

The priest tried to stammer out something appropriately reassuring.

Bautiste looked at him closely. “I’ll have the driver take you back now,” he said kindly. “Thank you for coming out here on short notice.”

The priest said nothing but seemed to sag with relief.

Bautiste rang the driver. The man came bounding into the room in mere minutes, prattling about the transformer problem that had caused the blackout. Bautiste felt like smacking him, but he didn’t. He had other things to do. Like go find his bodyguards. He hoped they were merely tied up somewhere and not actually dead because he planned to fire both of them immediately.

Later he sent the errand boy out to climb the willow. He came back with a small mirror, the kind that rest in the top of a woman’s compact. It had been fastened to a branch halfway up the tree. Bautiste scowled, but one part of his brain couldn’t help but admire the savvy with which he had been tricked. Not that such admiration would prevent his putting his revenge in motion. As soon as he figured out the identities of his unknown assailants.

* * *
Josiah’s cell phone rang. With apologies to Father Eli, he checked the caller id. Travis. He sighed. There was a reason they had turned their phones off. But now he was waiting for Buck’s call. He let it ring until the voice mail picked up.

He apologized again.

“I’m sorry, Father,” he said.

Father Eli smiled slightly. He had heard precious little of the man’s story. So far, it was clear that the agent before him was well read and well traveled, and had studied many of the world’s major religions, several obscure cultures, and a wide variety of philosophies. On a scholarly level, it was one of the most challenging and enjoyable conversations Father Eli had had in a long time.

On an emotional level, he found the tall ATF agent a tough nut to crack. It was easy enough to see that the man was wrestling with a great deal of anger. Bitterness sparked in his eyes. The man would give no details and all that Father Eli could gather was that whatever had happened had occurred fairly recently.

“No apologies necessary,” replied the priest. “You were about to say?”

“You believe that it all goes back to free will?” Josiah said.

The priest smiled sadly. “I do. God gave us free will, and He has never seen fit to rescind that decision. In a small way, you can probably see it in your own life,” the priest said. “Sometimes a man makes a decision that wreaks havoc all around him. But he hangs tough because he knows that he has made the right decision for the right reasons and that in the long term his decision will turn out to be for the best.”

Josiah thought suddenly of Chris and the urgency of his voice, when he ordered the team to retreat. To leave him behind. He thought of Buck, who was still not sleeping. Still hardly eating. Josiah could hardly breathe around the sudden tightness in his throat, so he just nodded.

Father Eli read the sorrow that flashed through the man’s eyes and dragged down the corners of his mouth. He softened his voice. “Do you think you could look long term for a moment? Can you see good that might come from whatever it is that has brought you here?”

The agent lifted his eyes to Father Eli’s. He gave a bitter snort. “I don’t think I can see that far yet, Father.”

Unbidden, a vision of Chris’s face rose before him. He was wearing that grin, the one that drove Travis crazy, the one that dared the bad guys to take a crack at him, the one born of pure adrenaline and pure audacity. He wondered if Chris was wearing that grin when they brought him to face St. Peter at the gates.

He felt his eyes cloud over. No one would be more surprised than Chris when those gates opened for him. The man had never been one to dwell on his own good points. He hardly seemed aware that he had any.

People who didn’t know Chris Larabee said he was arrogant. Chris was stubborn. That was sure. Driven, definitely. No one could argue that he had nerve. But arrogance required a sizable ego, Josiah reflected. Chris didn’t think enough of himself to be arrogant.

From his breast pocket, Josiah suddenly reached for a pen and the paper, where he had begun to prepare some notes for the inevitable memorial service. He scribbled a thought down on the paper. Then he folded it carefully and returned it to his pocket.
“One day you will be able to see it,” Father Eli said, after the agent had finished writing. “In the meantime, I like to take comfort in St. Paul’s assurance that God will not test us beyond our endurance.”

A flicker of a smile crossed the agent’s face. “He seems to have a mighty high opinion of us,” the agent said dryly.

Father Eli laughed. He was curious who the “us” might be, but he did not ask.

Sanchez’s phone rang again. He looked at the small screen and rose abruptly to his feet. “Thank you Father for your time. It has been most enlightening.” He offered his big hand, which Father Eli shook warmly.

“I know you are only in the area temporarily,” he said, “but if you want to talk about this some more, you know where to find me.”

The big agent smiled. “I appreciate that, Father,” he replied. He looked back through the office door, which was partially ajar.

“I’ll see myself out. I already know the way,” he said with a slight grin as he remembered how this encounter had begun.

Father Eli Rafferty returned the grin. He uttered a small prayer as he watched the man go. He still did not know exactly what was bothering the agent, but he prayed that he had been able to help in some small way.

Then he grinned up at the ceiling. The Lord had certainly chosen a most unusual way to start off his day. The Lord’s work is never dull, he thought as he set about the day’s business.

* * *

J.D.’s cell phone rang. He glanced at the screen. “Travis again,” he said, sorely tempted to answer it, but he let it go to voice mail.

“Shut that thing off,” Buck said, irritated at the interruption.

No sooner had the words left his mouth than Vin’s phone rang. He fixed the sharpshooter with an icy look. Vin turned off the phone without a word. They all knew who it was anyway—their phones had been ringing in succession for about twenty minutes now.

“He’s trying awful hard to reach us,” J.D. said.

“Yeah, well, whatever he wants can wait,” Buck snapped. He glared at each of his teammates in turn. No ringing phones interrupted the silence that had fallen, and he was satisfied that everyone had turned off their phones.

A knock sounded at the hotel room door. The five men inside tensed until it opened with a key.

“Room service,” said a southern drawl, entering the room with six coffees and a bag of bagels.

“Where the hell have you been?” Buck snapped.

Buck’s fierce glare almost made Ezra grin, until he remembered why it seemed so out of place. “Sorry, I’m late,” he said insincerely, passing out the coffee and placing the bag on the table.
He had divested himself of his robes and removed his contacts and glasses. His hair was slightly rumpled, but he looked more himself in neatly tailored pants and a button down shirt.

Buck did not ask him when or where he had found time to change.

Ezra scanned his teammates who were scattered throughout the room. “Does anyone know why AD Travis has been so persistently ringing my cell phone?” he asked.

J.D. shrugged. “We’ll find out eventually,” he said.

Ezra shrugged back indifferently. It did not surprise him to learn that Travis had been calling the others as well. It just gave him a sinking feeling.

Buck cleared his throat. The men’s eyes all turned back to him.

“As I was saying,” he continued briskly. “We have a decision to make about our next move.” He looked at each of the men in turn. “We know that Dowd sold the rocket launchers and the rockets to the militia. We can keep after Dowd. Or we can try to ferret out the militia.”

He paused. There was a third option. One that gnawed at him persistently, but he just wasn’t sure how to bring it up after all the Team had already done.

He sighed. “Or,” he said, carefully. “We could just go back home and get back to work.”

The others shifted. They inhaled to speak. Buck held up his hand to stop them. “Hear me out,” he said. “I know why we said we were doing this.” He looked past them all out the window. “But we crossed a lot of lines today.”

He paused again, gathering his thoughts. Not sure how to finish saying what he wanted to say.

It was Vin’s quiet voice that saved him the trouble. “I spent my mornin’ up a tree pointin’ a gun at an unarmed old man, watchin’ Bucklin and Nate extort information outta him,” the sharpshooter said. He looked at the floor. “Chris woulda kicked our asses good if he was there.” He paused, his voice gravelly as he said softly, “Kinda glad he wasn’t.”

Buck waited, tense, for the protest. But the sound that rippled through the room was an exhalation, a breath that had been held. He felt the tension break, saw the relief in their faces. They had felt it, too.

He scratched the back of his neck and stared at the floor. “First week as Team Leader,” he said ruefully. “Not one of my prouder moments.”

Josiah wouldn’t let him take it. He had watched Chris blame himself too many times. “We went right with you, brother,” he said. “We wanted it, too.”


J.D. gave a nervous chuckle. It spread to the others.

Vin swore ruefully. He and Buck caught each other’s eye.

“Travis is gonna kill us,” Nathan groaned, laying back on one of the beds and covering his eyes with his palms.

Buck shook his head. “I’m the team leader,” he said. “I’ll take the blame.”
“Not this time,” Josiah replied firmly. “This time we all stand together.”

A myriad of emotions crossed Buck’s face in quick succession. But he simply said, “Thanks.”

“She should we find out what he wants?” J.D. asked picking up his phone.

Buck smiled. “He can wait,” he said. “Until we’ve had breakfast anyway. Then we’ll tell him we’re coming back.”

“Hopefully, we’ll still have jobs,” Nathan said wryly.

“Sure we’ll still have jobs,” J.D. said with his usual youthful optimism. “We’re the best in the business.”

Nathan shook his head. “After what I saw us all pull off today, I’m glad we’re the good guys. I know I’d hate to have to face Team Seven gone bad.”

Josiah smirked. “For that reason alone, they’d almost have to keep us.”

An expressionless mask fell into place over Ezra’s face. He held up the grease spotted brown bag he had brought in with him. “Bagels?” he offered.

“Shoot, Ezra,” Buck said. “Immoral, illegal, unethical, as it was, don’t you think our performance today deserves a better breakfast than a rock hard Texas bagel?”

J.D. grinned at his best friend. “You buyin’, Buck?” he asked.

“Hell no!” Buck retorted. Then he looked around at the men of his team and grinned. “Alright,” he said. “Just this once. But don’t expect it to become a regular thing.”

They all laughed. And for a moment everything in J.D.’s world seemed normal again.

* * *

Mike Walsh stared at Jimmy P. in disbelief. “Yer lyin’,” he said finally. It was the best he could stutter under the circumstances.

Jimmy looked at the young police officer. “I’m not,” he said, simply. He waited for the explosion.

Mike swore—a long string of expletives. “Tell me you’re kidding,” he said. Mike had known Jimmy his whole life, since they were kids. Long before he had followed his big brother Bobby’s example and become a cop. Long before Jimmy had to go them one better and join the ATF. Now he was hoping against all hope that Jimmy would tell him this news was just part of some horrible tasteless joke.

Jimmy shook his head. His face was serious. He wasn’t kidding. He wouldn’t joke about this. What happened to Bobby was no joke.

Mike turned and smashed his fist into the wall. He cocked his arm back to let it fly again, but Jimmy caught his arm.

“Mikey,” Jimmy said softly, turning him back to face him. “It was a mistake.”

Mike gazed at him, sorrow and anger warring with the fear that was dawning in his large hazel eyes. “What mistake?” he exploded suddenly, the fear winning out. “I wanted to kill that bastard. Would’ve, too, if Detective Mitchell hadn’t come by.”
“I was there, Mikey,” Jimmy said.

He had stood right by while Mike Walsh kicked the living shit out of the militiaman. Not ten minutes earlier, Bobby Walsh’s partner had called from the hospital. Bobby was dead. Mikey hadn’t even said goodbye. Before they loaded him in the ambulance, Bobby had told Mikey to stay at the warehouse, to keep working. Said he was all right. And like always, Mikey had believed him. Believed his big brother.

Stupid schmuck, Jimmy thought angrily, about both the brothers he had grown up with. Bobby knew he was dying. He just didn’t want Mikey to have to see it. His eyes had pleaded with Jimmy not to say anything. And like always, Jimmy went along with what Bobby wanted. Seven hours later, Bobby was dead.

Mike had hung up the phone in a daze. He had just changed out of his uniform in Jimmy’s team’s communications van and was about to head to the hospital when the call had come. Mike managed to breathe out the words, the news that Bobby was gone. Then he turned and wandered aimlessly back toward the warehouse. Jimmy fell in beside him as they slowly made a circuit of the blackened concrete and the rubble still to be cleared under the glaring floodlights set up so rescue crews and workers could keep on through the night.

Then suddenly, this militia guy staggered crookedly out from behind the smoke and flame-blackened walls of the concrete enclosure that housed the dumpsters and the refrigeration units for the warehouse’s cold storage area. A machine gun dangled loosely from the fingers of his right hand. Both law enforcement officers stared at him. He was dazed. He was pale under the grime, and blood flecks shone blackly on his face under the garish lights. He pulled up short as he caught sight of the two lawmen, and he looked at them warily.

For a split second, no one and nothing moved, except Jimmy’s trained eyes that instinctively took in everything they could see. The camouflage jacket hung crookedly from the man’s shoulders, and beneath Jimmy could see a dark stain had soaked the man’s black t-shirt and the waist band of his black pants. Bullet hole. A trail of dried blood led down from the cuff at his wrist and wove trails down the back of his left hand between his fingers. A black stain had stiffened the sleeve of his jacket.

Before Jimmy could tell the man to put down his gun and surrender, Mike had sprung forward and grabbed a hold of the bloodstained left shoulder of the man’s camouflage jacket, spinning him around and propelling him face first against the concrete walls he had just come out of. The man tried unsuccessfully to gain his feet. He said something, but Mike was screaming at him, so Jimmy couldn’t hear. Mikey slammed the man back against the wall two more times, until he seemed about to lose consciousness.

But he didn’t. He suddenly remembered the gun in his right hand and swung the butt hard, catching Mikey in the temple. Mikey’s head snapped sideways. His hand flew upward and came back down smeared with the blood that welled up into the cut.

At that, Jimmy pulled his gun. He leveled it at the militia man, but before he could speak the man gave a feral growl and with surprising strength, pushed Mikey back two steps to stumble into Jimmy. He pushed away from the wall unsteadily, his eyes smoldering.

Something in Mikey broke. With a strangled cry, he lunged forward, hurled the man down onto the pavement and drove the heel of his boot into the man’s rib cage. Jimmy heard the crack. The man instantly clutched his abdomen and tried unsuccessfully to curl into a ball, but Mike prevented him, continuing to stomp and kick him mercilessly, all the while shouting almost unintelligibly about Bobby.
The guy had apparently survived the fireball from the rocket launchers by taking shelter in the concrete enclosure, as good a bunker as one was likely to find. It made Jimmy mad that the cops and the ATF hadn’t thought of it. He may have survived the fireball and the explosion. He may have survived the firefight before the rocket launcher attack. But he had just stumbled into the path of Mikey Walsh and Jimmy Pirelli, stoked up, brawny, and looking for a way to vent their rage that Bobby Walsh, the best of the Michigan Avenue Musketeers, and a damn good cop, had gone to meet his maker because of these asshole separatist, white-supremacist, militant punks.

Jimmy stood stock still, watching, eyes wide. Mikey was going to kill the guy. Then he did what any loyal friend would do. He looked around to make sure there would be no witnesses.

But he was too late.

“What the hell is going on here?” a plainclothes detective demanded. He had come across the parking lot in a full sprint. He was already on the radio calling for an ambulance.

Jimmy pulled out his ATF badge and showed it to the sergeant. “This man tried to attack us. He was armed and aggressive,” Jimmy said quickly, the practiced clipped tones of the federal agent he was. The rifle lying not two feet away added credence to his story, as did the bloody gash on Mikey’s head where the rifle had caught him during the struggle.

The detective’s gaze traveled down to the rifle. “Get that weapon secured,” he snapped at Walsh. He bent over the militiaman, his face white. “I need that ambulance right now,” he barked into the radio.

Jimmy leaned in to follow the detective’s gaze. The man’s breathing was labored. Harsh. Ragged. Exhaling a fine spray of blood onto the pavement beside him.

To Jimmy’s surprise, the eyes snapped open, catching his face, scanning it carefully, as if he were memorizing it before they slid shut again. He shivered involuntarily.

“Where the hell is your uniform, Walsh?” the detective snapped.

* * *

Subsequently, it took a lot of effort and quite a bit of leaning from Richter to make the official report go away. It helped that this was one of the few surviving militia members and the brass didn’t want any hassles mucking up their opportunity to interrogate him. Pirelli’s little lie helped, too. He told Richter his name was on that police report. Richter didn’t want any hassles mucking up his plans either.

It wasn’t until much later that Jimmy remembered two things. The man’s militia uniform had been incomplete. And there were no matching bullet holes in the jacket. He put both thoughts right out of his mind. They weren’t important enough to open a can of worms over.

Apparently he was wrong on all counts, he reflected. Richter was probably going to hand him his ass when this was all over.

Mikey’s voice brought him back to the present moment. “He’s a fed,” Mike said in despair. “What the hell am I going to do now?”

“I’ll think of something, Mikey,” Jimmy assured him quietly. “I always do.”

* * *

“Sure, I’ll call ‘em,” Ryan Kelly muttered staring at his phone. “They won’t pick up for Travis. But
he thinks they’ll call me back.” He loaded the phone numbers he had been given into his phone. That way he could dial them one after the other, the way Travis had been doing for almost an hour. He could tell by the exceptionally toneless calm of his boss’s voice that Team Seven had pissed off the AD again, in that way that only they could.

He shook his head again. Of all the times for Team Seven to not to pick up the damn phone.

Travis hadn’t left details in his messages. He didn’t think it was the kind of news you just left in a message. Ryan Kelly thought differently. If there was one message that might get them to call back, this was probably it.

He had just hung up on Buck Wilmington’s voice mail when he realized that the “prisoner” had not come back from getting new x-rays after the incident this morning with Richter’s protective custody. Richter and his team were also nowhere to be seen. Chalking his misgivings up to paranoia, Kelly snapped his phone shut and went to look for the doctor.

One look at the doctor’s stormy expression told him that something was wrong.

“Hey, doc,” he said, approaching cautiously.

The doctor glared at him, then surprise dawned on his face.

“The patient okay?” Kelly asked.

“No thanks to you all in the ATF,” the doctor snapped, something more than anger clouding his voice.

Kelly grimaced. “Can I see him?” he asked.

The doctor looked at him, surprise evident on his face. “Didn’t they tell you?”

“Tell me what?” Kelly asked warily.

“They’ve moved him to another hospital,” the doctor retorted, his voice strident. “Barely even stable again, and they’ve hauled him away. How do they expect him to recover if they don’t let doctors do their jobs?”

Kelly felt like someone had dropped a lead weight through his stomach. Why wouldn’t Richter tell him they were moving him? There weren’t very many reasons he could think of, and he didn’t like the conclusions he was coming to.

He felt his stomach tighten. Damn, Richter. What are you boys up to?

In a flash he was back on the phone with Travis.

When he had called Travis two hours ago, after the stunned silence and the calm question whether Kelly was absolutely certain, Kelly was almost certain he heard the stern AD let out a whoop of joy. He didn’t blame the man. He had almost done the same once his own shock wore off. It was all he could do to keep his calm long enough to call Travis.

He shook his head at the memory. To look on that bed and see the last person he ever expected... Chris Larabee. Alive. And apparently still kicking. He laughed at his own joke. Three weeks the ATF had had Chris in their tender care. Alive. Hurtin’ bad. But alive. Absolutely, inconceivably, incredibly, stubbornly alive.
Now this.

This time, when the swearing was over, Travis told him he’d get a hold of the Texas brass and straighten it out. In the meantime, the AD said with a sigh, Kelly had better call Team Seven again.

After he hung up, Kelly let out a heavy sigh of his own as he contemplated his phone. Just what the hell was he supposed to say now? Team Seven didn’t even know Larabee was alive yet, and now they’d gone and lost him. There wasn’t a single way to word this that wouldn’t bring Buck Wilmington and the rest of Team Seven flying down on his head like the horsemen of the Apocalypse.

When this was all over, he was filing an official report. Then he was going to personally and unprofessionally kick Senior Agent Matthew Richter’s ass. But first, he had to find Chris.

* * *

It was well after noon when Buck finally, accompanied by the hoots and jeers of his teammates, decided to check his voice mail. He pushed the empty plate away from him across the worn laminate of the tabletop and grinned at them mockingly. He knew they were all too chicken to check their voice mail before they knew what was on his.

He motioned them to silence as he listened to Travis ask him repeatedly to call back. He could hear the frustration mounting in the AD’s voice. Then another voice came on. He frowned. What on earth could Ryan Kelly need bad enough to call right now?

The Team lowered their voices enough for Buck to hear his messages, but they did not stop ribbing him with sarcastic comments about how many of his voice mail messages were from women and how long it would take him to get through those before he got to Travis’s message.

They all saw him frown. Then he went dead white.

He stared at them for a moment and seemed unsure what to say. “You boys had better meet me in the parking lot,” he said, his voice strangely quiet. He slid out of the booth. They didn’t miss the tremble in his fingers as he dialed the phone and disappeared out the door, the cowbell on the diner door tolling behind him.

They exchanged a silent look, then slid out of the booth in single file and hurried out to the diner parking lot. Buck stood between their two rental cars, one finger against his ear as he listened intently to the person on the other end of the line.

“Are you sure?” They heard him ask, his voice rising. “You’re absolutely sure?”

J.D. watched his friend’s eyes get wide and a grin spread across his face.

He glanced at his teammates. They watched the grin freeze, then evaporate.

“What do you mean?” Buck asked, glancing up at his team. He turned his back on them and spoke more quietly into the phone, even as the urgency in his voice ratcheted up.

“You think? You think?” he demanded icily. “Why the hell don’t you know? How the hell could this happen?”

There was quiet, while he listened. Ezra could see the muscles of Buck’s shoulders bunching up.

He swore into the phone. “We’re on our way. And God help you, Kelly, you’d better have some
He hung up. Then with a cry of rage, he hurled the phone down onto the blacktop at his feet. Component pieces scattered and bounced apart from each other.

Then he turned. His eyes were sparkling, and J.D. was startled to realize it was tears. Tears. *Shit,* he thought. Now what had happened? Buck looked at them, bewildered, like he didn’t know what to say.

Josiah and Nathan exchanged a glance. “Just say it, brother,” Josiah said soothingly. “The Lord knows we’re getting used to hearing bad news.” To their surprise a wan smile appeared on Buck’s lips. “Not all bad news,” he said quietly, looking at each of them as if he were offering an apology. “That was Ryan Kelly,” he said finally. “He’s here in Texas. Came to see a militia prisoner.” He grinned suddenly, incongruously. “He said the prisoner kicked an ATF interrogator in the face. That’s when Kelly got a good look at him.” The grin widened and he paused, grinning at them inanely.

Ezra felt suddenly that Buck would never finish whatever it was he was intended to say because Ezra would have to strangle him first.

“What?” J.D. finally demanded, exasperated.

Buck stared at each of them before he dropped the bomb. “It was Chris.” Dead silence fell on the six men before him. Their faces went blank. They did not know what to think. They stared at each other.

It was Vin who asked in a strangled voice, “He’s alive?” Buck nodded, but his expression darkened and the grin vanished. “He’s alive, but he’s hurt pretty bad. And the ATF has dragged him off somewhere.”


“Cause no one knows who he is, kid,” Buck snapped. “They think he’s part of the militia. He’s still a prisoner in protective custody.”

“Protective custody for what?” Nathan asked slowly, as if he wasn’t sure he wanted to know. Buck’s brows drew downward. “The militia killed the other prisoners to keep ‘em quiet.”

J.D. drew in a sharp breath.

Nathan, Josiah, and Vin exchanged a glance.

“Where did they take him?” Ezra said slowly, his plain words and painstaking enunciation telling all of them that he wanted to know and wanted to know now.

“Kelly and Travis are trying to find out,” Buck said hurriedly, fishing out his keys. “I’ve got the address of the hospital where Kelly is waiting. We better roll.”
J.D. was the first to unfreeze his feet and move toward the car. “You heard the man. Let’s roll,” he said, scooping up the pieces of Buck’s phone as he went.

His teammates remained behind him, frozen in confusion.

He’s alive! Josiah thought, unable to move. He’s alive! It was more than he had dared to pray for in the past few weeks. And it was more than he dared hope for now. He had been here too many times in his life. Just as he was about to be delivered what he most desperately wanted, he stood on the brink of having it snatched away again. Would this time be any different?

Ezra stood stock still, poker faced and struggling to remain that way. He felt like he had suddenly contracted a bad fever, only instead of hot flashes and cold chills chasing each other up and down his spine, it was joy and grief, hope and terror that crashed through him simultaneously, ricocheting off each other until he felt he had no room in his body to contain them.

Chris was alive! It couldn’t be, could it? He was alive. Alive but not all right. With militia assassins on their way to kill him, and only the Texas ATF to offer protection. Whatever Texas ATF considered protective custody, Ezra knew it was not the same kind of protection Team Seven could provide. Chris needed them now. Only no one knew where the ATF, in its infinite wisdom, had taken him. It was too much to think about.

“Let’s go!” Buck called stridently, leaning on the horn and breaking the spell.

They moved suddenly forward as one and hustled into the two cars. Ezra slid into the front seat next to Buck. They began rolling even before he had closed his door.

Vin slid into the back seat of Nathan and Josiah’s car without another word. When understanding had first dawned, the former Army ranger had grown a sudden grin that exactly matched the one that lit up each of their faces, but it had since vanished. As they pulled out of the diner parking lot and into the highway traffic at a speed much faster than was legal or comfortable, Josiah sneaked a glance in the rearview mirror. Vin was slumped forward in the back seat, bent over and resting his forehead against the back of Nathan’s seat. His eyes were squeezed closed, and he looked like he might be sick.

A lump formed in the back of Josiah’s throat, and he began to pray—the same prayer he had prayed three weeks ago. He believed then that God would hear him, and he believed it now. But in the meantime, he also believed in helping himself. His foot hammered down on the accelerator and the car burst suddenly forward like a horse given its head.

Nathan’s knuckles turned white on the dashboard, but he did not protest. One look at the furrowed concentration on the medic’s brow told Josiah that Nathan was already far away.

He was way ahead of them in fact, his brain racing much faster than their two cars. He couldn’t help it. He was evaluating the possibilities. And the questions…

Damn it, Chris. You are the stubbornest hard-ass I know. And you hate hospitals. It takes the six of us to convince you to sit for an x-ray. What the hell happened to you that you couldn’t tell them who you are? That you let them take you away? Jesus…

He broke off his train of thought abruptly.

Jesus, the word had entered his mind as an expletive, but Southern Baptist roots he thought he had left behind him reached up to catch him falling. Don’t you give him back to us only to lose him. Nathan prayed. I don’t think we can survive it.
He glanced back at Vin, still bent double in the back seat, eyes still squeezed shut. The sharpshooter’s lips were moving but no words escaped. Perhaps he was praying, too. No matter. Whatever the words, they were not meant for anyone else’s ears.

“Can’t we go any faster, Josiah?” Nathan ground out between his teeth.

Obligingly, Josiah pulled his sedan up right behind Buck, Ezra and J.D., nearly nudging them in the process. Buck took the hint and poured on more speed. They could explain it to the cops when the cops flagged them down—if the cops could catch them.

* * *

Normally, the women’s health clinic was busy. All day. But not today. Today it was buzzing with activity, but technically empty. There was only one doctor on staff and one nurse. And that was only because they had one patient. The other doctors and nurses milling about and the patients in the waiting room were police and federal agents, every one.

The stage was set. Richter had set the ball in motion as soon as he got the green light this morning. He wasted no time in leaking the information back through sources that the sole surviving militia prisoner was being held at a free clinic on the south side. No one would think to look for him there. Security was impossible to keep up. Feds must be desperate and running out of hiding places. At least that’s what Richter hoped the militia would think once they got the word.

He drummed his fingers on nurse’s desk in the waiting room and adjusted his white coat and stethoscope. He scanned the waiting room with narrowed eyes. Everything needed to look perfectly normal. When the militia arrived, it needed to look nice and easy to them. Let them waltz right in. Let them get close. Hell, if they could hold off until whoever they sent actually tried to do the prisoner in, they would have additional leverage to use in the interrogation.

Pirelli came back with the doctor—the real one. Richter scowled. Hell of a mess Jimmy had gotten himself into. Should’ve known only Jimmy would be unlucky enough to assault another Fed. A visiting guest from Denver, no less. Like Kelly.

He scowled even harder when he thought of Kelly. It had been a pleasure leaving him behind at the hospital. He’d seemed way too happy to announce to Richter and his team that their prisoner was really their dead team leader from Denver. And while Richter was watching his career-making opportunity to bring down the militia evaporate, Kelly was demanding to know who had broken his buddy’s precious ribs. There were several replies Richter wanted to give him, none of them diplomatic. Instead he stalled.

Fortunately it hadn’t taken Richter very long to figure out a way to salvage the situation, to regain his chances to crack open the militia and buy some time to figure out how to solve Jimmy’s little problem. He simply called his superiors. Told them about the royal fuckup, but offered them this plan:

The man was no good for information. He didn’t know any more than Texas ATF did. But he was still good bait—so long as the militia thought he was one of their own. Of course, he told the directors that the Denver guy—what was his name? Laramie?—had agreed to act as bait for the trap.

That had been a bit sticky, but the famous Richter luck had held. They didn’t know—and no one had told them—that the guy was still out cold.

In the meantime, Richter called up contacts, pulled strings, greased palms, and worked another patented Matt Richter miracle. In less than three hours, he had this clinic ready to go and a staff of
eager law enforcement volunteers chomping at the bit to man it. Spiriting his prisoner out of radiology and into a waiting ambulance turned out to be even easier. He showed his badge. He demanded the prisoner. And left without the MRIs or the x-rays. He wondered what that squirrelly little doctor thought when he found out. He would have paid to see Kelly’s face when he heard that his buddy had disappeared.

The doctor—the real one—approached Richter looking grim. “His fever’s up. We’re increasing the antibiotic. He’s still asleep, which is the best thing for him.” The doctor’s lips formed a grim line. He hesitated a moment before saying, “He ought to be in a real hospital. This facility doesn’t have the capability of handling his injuries if he takes a turn for the worse.”

“He’s not going to be here that long,” Richter said, waving the doctor away impatiently.

He threw Pirelli a dark look. Pirelli had told him that the agent didn’t have a badge, a gun, a vest, or anything else to mark him as a federal agent when he’d crawled out of his hiding place. If the fool had identified himself, he wouldn’t be in this mess, Richter thought, so it’s his own damn fault—partly anyway.

The rest of it was Pirelli’s fault.

He gave Jimmy a particularly filthy glare to let him know it as he moved down the hallway to check the other positions. Richter would clean up his team’s little messes, but he wouldn’t forget what Pirelli owed him. And he wasn’t about to let Pirelli’s bad luck keep him from making a bust that would get him an Assistant Director spot for certain. Unfortunately, the only solution he had come up with for Jimmy’s problem was to actually let the militia kill the “prisoner” before arresting the assassin. Somehow, Richter didn’t think that would sit well in Denver.

Jimmy watched his boss walk away, happy to be out from under that glare. When he told Richter he had assaulted the prisoner, Richter had been only too quick to make Detective Mitchell’s report disappear. This new turn of events didn’t change his story. He knew he could trust Richter to turn this mess to their advantage because Richter wouldn’t tolerate anything that might stall his master plan for advancement. Jimmy knew he would be paying through the eyeballs later, but at least he had gotten Mikey out of the line of fire. It was what Bobby would have wanted him to do.

With a shake of his head, Jimmy went back up the hall to guard the prisoner. If Richter was right—and he was never wrong—militia assassins would be here this very evening. And Pirelli still didn’t know what they were going to do about Larabee.

* * *

It was two hours before anyone claimed to have a high enough clearance—or perhaps just the guts—to return AD Travis’s phone calls. The tension in his office notched steadily higher as the minutes passed. He paced the floor, refusing to move any further from the phone. Every time the phone rang, he pounced, and his assistant had to wave him off while she found out who it was.

His assistant set about freeing his phone lines and keeping them that way. She turned away all callers and all visitors and canceled all his appointments. As the news began to spread through the ATF offices, agents, directors, and other staff saved her the trouble of telling them he was not available. They simply began to avoid the office altogether.

She had lunch brought in for him. He did not touch it.

She thought the tendons would burst right through his neck when she brought him a fax from General Larabee’s aide, requesting a “status report” on “the release of the remains of Agent
Christopher Larabee, ATF RMET Number 7, based in Denver.” It was written as if AD Travis wouldn’t have recognized the name. As if General Larabee’s aide didn’t know the name. Had his secretary not outmaneuvered him, reminding him to keep his line free, he would have got on the phone and jumped down the aide’s throat himself.

Then again, what would he have said? Good news, sir. Your son is alive. Bad news. We have no idea where the hell he is.

Travis made yet another turn at the far end of his office. He kicked the wooden leg of his desk as he passed.

When the light on his intercom finally lit up and his assistant’s infuriatingly calm and professional voice said, “Texas ATF,” he was on the line in an instant.

He did not bother with preamble. “Where the hell is my agent?” he snarled into the phone as a week’s worth of frustration held at bay uncoiled and threatened to explode out of the top of his head.

The lackey on the other end stuttered, tried to keep his composure, and, in the end, bailed, promising to connect Travis to his Assistant Director.

His teeth grinding together, Travis waited.

At last, a voice on the other end identified herself as AD Rivers. Travis knew Rivers. Hard as nails. Scary as all hell. He didn’t care.

“Where’s my agent?” he demanded, hotly. He had long since overcome the urge to be polite.

“AD Travis,” she said with a sigh and a patronizing note in her voice that made a vein begin to throb in his temple. “There is no need to get upset.”

“Like hell there’s not,” Travis snapped, cutting her off.

She attempted to say something placating, calming, but he steamrolled right over her. “Two hours ago I reported to your office that your militia prisoner is my team leader. Now my liaison in Texas tells me that my agent is missing. The man sure as hell didn’t get up and walk, so you tell me where he is.”

At the other end of the line Rivers took a breath and attempted to put on a pleasant voice. She was not good at pleasant. Icy would do. “According to my information, your agent is with Team Four, attempting to snare the militia in a trap.”

There was a long pause. When Travis spoke again, it was not with the contrite tone she had been hoping for. “Repeat that?” he said, his tone as icy as hers.

Rivers felt the warning hairs rise on the back of her neck. She repeated her words slowly and calmly.

Damn Richter! She thought. If his grandstanding’s made another mess for me to clean up, I’m going to shove that arrogant bastard’s head so far down his throat, he’ll have to close his eyes to sit down…

There was another silence before Travis grated out, “And just what role is my agent supposed to play in your little sting?”

She grimaced, but wouldn’t give Travis the satisfaction of hearing it in her voice. “He has agreed to continue to act as a militia prisoner for the purpose of luring in the real militia.”
“As bait for an assassin you mean,” Travis’s voice said way too calmly.

Her hackles were up now. “That’s not exactly how we’d term it,” she said.

“And my agent agreed to participate in this sting?” Travis asked.

“Yes,” Rivers said. Travis was not a stupid man, and she could tell by the tone of his voice that he knew something more than she did. She began to envision Richter’s painful death as she wondered what exactly he had not told her.

“He said this to you?” Travis said, enunciating each word.

“No,” she said, making a lot less effort to be civil now. “To my Senior Agent on the case.”

“Your agent’s delusional then,” Travis snapped. “According to his last doctor, my agent hasn’t been conscious for more than a few minutes at any time in the past three weeks.”

Rivers’s jaw snapped shut with an audible click. She was going to have Richter’s head on a platter for this.

Her eyes glinted evilly. She had a better idea. As his boss, she might have covered Richter’s ass—had he told her the truth. But no. He had left her hung out to dry, along with those idiots they called her directors. All bets were off now. Let’s see how you like it, she thought savagely.

Recovering quickly, she asked very slowly, “Are you saying that you think my agent is mistaken?”

There was a short, sharp snort. “No, AD Rivers. I’m saying your agent is a liar.”

“That’s a serious charge,” she said gravely.

“Yes. It is.”

She tapped her pen on her desk and laid out her trap lines carefully. “If that were the case,” she said. “Then surely your liaison agent would have intervened. Agent Kelly, wasn’t it?”

“I’m sure he would have,” Travis said icily, ”if your Team Four had bothered to inform him of their intentions or their destination when they kidnapped my team leader.”

Rivers almost laughed at that. It served Denver right to be left standing flat-footed in the wake of Hurricane Richter’s relentless drive for promotion. But, realizing that she needed to get herself out of the path of destruction first, she contained her mirth quickly.

“Kidnapping now,” she said in a voice that oozed grim seriousness—and a veiled threat. “Those are two very serious charges. Are you prepared to pursue them?”

Travis grimaced. He read her loud and clear. Was he prepared to take on Rivers and the four pet thugs she called the best team in Texas? He felt his blood boil.

“Listen carefully,” he said through his clenched teeth. “The state in which my agent is returned to me will dictate what charges I am willing to pursue. Now tell me where he is, or I will give the remaining members of Team Seven your office address, and they’ll come ask you themselves.”

She started. Team Seven was in Texas? She hadn’t been informed of that. No one else had mentioned it either. Were they here officially, or were they off duty? Or worse yet, were they on a mission of their own making? She wouldn’t put it past any team with a reputation like Team Seven’s. That gave her a thought. Perhaps Travis could give her some leverage after all.
“I’ll have to give you to one of the directors,” she said pleasantly. “I can’t give out that information.”

Without a sign-off, she put him on hold.

Who the hell does Richter think he’s playing with? she thought, savagely. He wasn’t an AD yet, and hell if he was going to put a black mark on her record for the sake of his own promotion. If Richter wanted to play games, she could play games, too.

The first one would be letting the directorship know that he had deliberately deceived all of them. Then she would tell them she had no knowledge of the “prisoner’s” current medical condition. Oh the brass was going to have a fit over this! Let Richter cover his own ass, she smiled to herself.

She put on her apologetic voice as she spoke to Director LeBron. “Sam,” she said. “I’ve got AD Travis on the line from Denver. He’s quite upset and charging that Team 4 didn’t have the Denver agent’s approval to go undercover.”

She paused and listened to LeBron’s pained response. LeBron was a born bureaucrat. A genius at paperwork and theories of law enforcement. Not so good at making real-world decisions in real time, which was precisely why she chose him.

“Well,” she said, putting just enough wince in her voice to let the Director know that she, too, had been taken in by her renegade team. “According to AD Travis, his agent’s condition is somewhat worse than Senior Agent Richter let on. Seems he may not have been in a condition to consent to his participation… Yes, I know…,” she said. “I agree,” she said. “That is a serious charge. No, I haven’t seen the medical report. We have been relying on Senior Agent Richter for status reports on the prisoner.”

She took an artful breath and stumbled convincingly over her words. “I’d hate to lose this opportunity to catch someone in the militia. But I suppose we should pull that Denver agent out of there. It’s just that the sting is already underway. I’m afraid the commotion will alert the militia to our trap.”

LeBron paused. Hesitated. Asked her to have Travis leave a message, while he called a conference with the other directors. That’s right, she thought. Let’s take this through the proper channels. With any luck, by the time you knuckleheads make a decision, we’ll be celebrating the successful capture and interrogation of a militia assassin by the spectacular Team Four.

After that, if everything went according to her plans, the brass would remember how Richter embarrassed them and call him on the carpet for his duplicity. Privately, of course, not to tarnish the victory. In the end, Rivers would get the credit for her team’s action, and Richter would get a black eye that the brass was bound to hold against him when the next AD slot came open.

She thought she heard Travis hit something when she told him apologetically that the directors would call him back. She grinned at that, as she hung up.

She drummed her fingers thoughtfully on her desk. She had some digging to do if she were going to be prepared for any fallout from Hurricane Richter’s current idiotic power play.

* * *

Travis was about to send the entire phone set hurtling against the far wall of his office, when his arm stopped in mid-arc. A memory popped into his head. Larabee, the man who had single-handedly increased Travis’s departmental office equipment budget until the AD finally told Chris in no uncertain terms that he would pay for the next phone he destroyed out of his own pocket. The very
next morning, Larabee had shown up at his office wearing that smart-ass grin. He slapped a crisp new one hundred dollar bill down on Travis’s desk. An advance payment, he said with a smirk. Then he turned on his heel and left, unrepentant, without another word. Sure enough, he destroyed another phone later that week.

But it wasn’t the fate of the phone in his hand that stopped Travis dead in mid-throw. It was something else about the memory. Something about Chris. And the way he sometimes, without warning, simply sidestepped the expected. Found an unanticipated exit. Disregarded rules and intended outcomes. Violated both social custom and professional guidelines with utter indifference, seeing what others held inviolate as merely optional. It had come back to bite Larabee more than once in his many careers. Several official reprimands already graced his ATF file. Yet reprimands failed to teach Larabee to toe the line. And Travis was not too proud to learn from a subordinate’s example—especially a subordinate who tended to get results.

Travis put the phone back down on his desk, and clarity of thought returned in a rush. If Texas thought he was going to sit around and wait for their directors to call him, they thought wrong. If Rivers’ team was using Chris to bait an assassin, they had to let the assassin know where Chris was. And if they had put out the word where Chris was, Travis was certain they could find it out just as fast as the militia could.

He dialed up Team Eight and spoke to the second in command. They promised that their undercover agent and their communications man would be on it immediately. If there was a rumor, they would catch it, now that they knew what to look for.

Travis hung up the phone and dialed Kelly, determination replacing the strain across his face. He told Kelly Team Four’s plan and that Team Eight was searching the rumor mill already. He listened to Kelly’s tight response that he had gotten hold of Buck Wilmington at last and that Team Seven was on its way to the hospital and would be there within the hour. Travis assured Kelly he would get whatever information they could dig up just as soon as some came to light. Then he hung up to keep his line free.

He drummed his fingers on the table. Now they were getting somewhere. Still, the questions raced through his mind: How far ahead of them were the assassins? How fast could Kelly and Team Seven get to the place once they found it? How much could they rely on Texas Team Four to protect Chris? And was Chris in any shape to help himself if the assassins got there before Team Seven? He fought down the hard fist that was squeezing his insides. One thing he knew: Team Seven would never get over arriving too late.

He rose from his chair and headed for the door, telling his assistant on his way out that he would be in Team Eight’s bullpen and to send his calls over there.

* * *

It was Team Eight that called Ryan Kelly next. He snapped the phone open immediately, but it wasn’t the information he was hoping for.

“Whaddya want first?” Team Eight’s Doug Stone quipped. “The bad news or the bad news?”

Kelly closed his eyes and pushed his knuckles against his forehead. Now was not a good time for Doug’s off-kilter sense of humor.

“Just spill it,” Kelly grated through his teeth.

“Right. It’s taking us a while to get through to any possible informants or snitches on the street who
might connect up with this militia group. Kirk and I have got some lines out through some friends in low places. And we have a couple of back up lines through some acquaintances of Team Twelve—don’t ask, don’t tell, know what I mean?” Doug said.

Kelly sighed. Frankly, at the moment, he didn’t care who knew who on what team knew someone else who might just be a little on the shady side of the law. He just wanted the information.

He shut his eyes. “You said there was bad news?” he asked, knowing he’d regret it.

He could almost hear Doug’s sardonic grin across the telephone wire. “I may not have too many contacts in the world of crime, but I can get some information out of the bureaucracy we lovingly call Mama ATF.”

Kelly opened one eye slightly. That was true. If anyone alive could nose his way through a nest of red tape and come out with the answers dangling off his fishing line, it was Doug.

“You know where they’ve got Larabee?” Ryan asked hopefully. Too hopefully, he knew.

“I said bad news, Boss,” Doug said.

Kelly shut the eye again and exhaled slowly as he waited.

“My sources dug up a police report that got squelched. And there’s a rumor attached.” He sounded pleased with himself, like a boy about to tell on his big brother.

“Just spit it out, dammit,” Kelly snapped. Stone was a damn good agent, but he sure knew how to get on his boss’s nerves.

This time, he was sure he really could hear Doug grin. But his tone was serious when he replied. “Seems our mysterious militia man, A.K.A. Chris Larabee, stumbled out of some sort of shelter he found when the whole place went up in a fireball only to be beaten nearly to death by a police officer named Walsh with the possible assistance of ATF Agent James Pirelli.”

Kelly’s eyes popped open as his head snapped back. “Did you say Pirelli?”

“Pirelli,” Doug confirmed. “Texas ATF Team Four.”

A long string of expletives poured from Kelly’s lips. He had underestimated Richter—again. Thought he was just being a pompous idiot. Too high and mighty to fill in the details. He kicked himself. He should have known that Richter was covering something or someone.

Since none of the tirade was directed at him personally, Douglas Stone simply waited patiently for Kelly to stop swearing.

“Can you prove that?” Kelly asked, dropping his voice suddenly and moving off into a corner with his phone. His outburst had drawn disapproving stares from staff and visitors alike.

“No,” Stone said. “I told you the report got squelched, and from the sounds of it, the detective who wrote the report has been ‘requested’ to keep his mouth shut. As for Texas ATF, I was told by my ‘sources’ that it is just a rumor.”

Kelly snorted. He knew as well as Doug did that the ‘source’ was just protecting himself from backlash.

There was a pause. Then Doug asked hesitantly, “Is Pirelli one of the guys who’s supposed to keep
the assassins away from Larabee?"

"Yeah," Kelly answered tightly.

"How bad did they get him?" Stone asked.

"What’d your informant say?" Kelly returned.

Doug snorted, "I told you. Said they beat him near to death."

"That’s about right," Kelly said.

There was another silence. "My guy said that if the detective hadn’t interrupted them…" he trailed off. Doug had worked with Larabee and his team before, a fact that never failed to remind him to be grateful that he worked for Ryan Kelly instead. Still, he had to admire Larabee. He was a hardhead in the worst possible way, but he got results—and his team seemed to like him okay. They had sealed up his office so no one could use it. Had gone AWOL for him. Not that anyone was officially admitting that, but Stone was no dummy. He knew when the rumor mill was lying and when it was telling the truth. Team Seven was out there getting revenge. This news would not sit well when they heard.

Kelly felt cold inside. With the clarity of years of law enforcement experience, he began to analyze the situation. Richter’s man had nearly killed Chris once. Richter must have known that when he had let Pirelli “interrogate” him. Then again, Kelly reasoned, at that time they thought Chris was one of the militia. Not that that was an excuse for cruelty but now they knew the truth. This hopeful thought was drowned immediately by the realization that as soon as Kelly told Richter the identity of his prisoner, Richter had spirited Larabee out of the hospital and now had him hidden away somewhere waiting for an assassin to come finish the job.

That led to the question of Pirelli. Would Chris recognize the agent as one of the men who tried to kill him earlier? Would Pirelli run the risk of letting Chris tell what he knew? The part of his brain that Kelly reserved for thinking like the enemy, anticipating their moves—the very habit that made him so good at his job—told him that Richter and Pirelli’s best option for keeping the truth securely hidden was to let the militia assassin do his job. A heavy lump rolled around in Kelly’s stomach and he willed himself to believe that a fellow ATF agent would not go that far to protect himself—or his men.

The echoes of that thought and that hope were still rolling around in his brain when he saw them at the end of the hall and coming fast. All six of them bearing purposefully down on him, fanned out as wide as the hallway would allow into an inverted “V,” an arrow directed straight at him, Buck Wilmington at a long-legged lead, the others at his back. They filled the hallway with motion, oblivious to the nurses and orderlies that scattered into doorways before them, moving out of their way.

Kelly could feel the tension rolling up the hallway ahead of them, like an invisible vanguard steamrolling over everyone in their path, pushing them to the sides, out of their path as they stalked up the corridor. Kelly gave a sigh. He was not surprised. He had once seen Chris Larabee and his bad attitude alone clear a path through a crowded room in much the same way. And that had been on a good day. The six men approaching him were not having a good day. And he alone knew how much worse it might get.

He stepped forward to meet them, and before he had time to figure out what to say, he was surrounded. They stood in an almost perfect circle with Kelly at dead center, each pair of eyes burning with intensity. They looked frayed at the edges. Making an effort to hold themselves back.
For a moment, Kelly imagined spilling the beans on Richter and letting them have him but he held his tongue. He couldn’t sentence a man to death on a gut feeling and an unofficially squelched report.

“Kelly,” Buck said, his voice low and gravelly. He held out his hand. Kelly shook it, but the shake was too tense to be friendly. There was no banter. Buck simply asked, “What have you found out?”

Kelly shook his head. “Nothing useful,” he said. It wasn’t a lie. Until they found Chris, what little information he had wasn’t going to do anything but make Team Seven mad. And from the looks of them, it wouldn’t take much to topple them over the edge.

The remaining members of Team Seven continued to stare at him, totally silent. Even Standish, a thought that was very nearly unnerving.

“You have no leads?” Sanchez, the big profiler asked, narrowing his eyes. Not exactly in suspicion, but certainly in frustration.

Kelly held his palms out in his own gesture of frustration. He had already kicked himself for not keeping a closer eye on his compatriot. But kicking himself didn’t change the past. “My team and Travis are chasing the rumors and snitches,” he said simply.

Tanner and Dunne exchanged a glance.

“That can take a long time,” the young computer expert said. He was clearly making an effort to keep his voice steady. Still, a plaintive note crept in at the end of his sentence.

Tanner leaned around Dunne to eye Standish. Dunne turned his head and followed Tanner's gaze.

Dunne spoke to the undercover agent, as if he were Tanner’s ventriloquist puppet. “Don’t you have any contacts we could ask?”

Standish looked surprised, perturbed, and thoughtful all in swift succession. Kelly held his breath. But anger and frustration followed right after. Then Standish closed down his face again. “I am afraid I don’t,” he said quietly.

Afraid, Kelly thought with a start. He stared round him a moment at the men who surrounded him, fearsome, tough as nails, tight and snarling as a pack of sled dogs, tensed and straining at their traces. They’re afraid, he realized suddenly. Team Seven. Scared. Wilmington needs to take them in hand or this whole mess could turn into a disaster—even if we find Chris in time.

The last of the thought sounded in his head and his own fear gripped him. Chris was a friend—if not a close one, still they had some history together. He was a colleague. And whether Kelly ever admitted it or not—especially to himself—there were things about the man he admired. This was not how Chris Larabee should go down. He should not be remembered as Kelly last saw him. Kelly should not have to live with the memory of how badly he had failed him when Chris needed him most.

He turned back to Team Seven determinedly. “We’ll take the town apart if we have to. But we’ll find him.” He meant it. He just didn’t know how to keep his promise.

Buck nodded once. His teammates’ eyes locked onto his. “Tell us what you know,” he said.

And Kelly began his story at the beginning.

***
Pirelli was sent on several “punishment” errands. He knew the drill. He was in Richter’s doghouse, so he had to do Richter’s dirty work. Marc Goldman was sitting in the “prisoner’s” room, with his feet up on the end of the bed, probably whistling to himself because now he was no longer in the doghouse. There was room for only one dog, and Pirelli was it. And probably would be for a long time, he thought grimly as he double-checked the perimeter they had set up and fetched drinks and took meal orders for the agents and cops hanging around waiting for something to happen.

They had been waiting all afternoon. The evening was dropping around them like a gray tattered curtain as a sprinkle of cold rain put a sheen on the streets. He hustled up and across the street to a row of fast food places and a deli. He hustled because he didn’t want to get wet. He also hustled because with the way his luck was going this week, it was more than likely that the militiamen would arrive and Team Four would make a spectacular capture while he was still waiting in line for a plain turkey, no mayonnaise on a tortilla wrap with a Diet Coke for officer what’s her name from the 84th. His team would never let him live it down if he missed the bust.

Richter checked his watch for the eighteenth time in forty-five minutes. He had received reasonable confirmation that the militia had gotten the message. They knew where the prisoner was. He wished they had an inside contact, so that they could get an idea of the militia’s timetable. At least then he could check his watch and know when to expect them. Now they just had to wait. And waiting made him irritable.

But not as irritable as the loud crash that came ringing up the empty hallway. He swore. What the hell was Goldman doing down there? All he had to do was baby sit an unconscious man. He swore again. What the hell was the matter with his team? They were normally so competent and efficient. This was not a convenient week for them to turn into idiots.

Down at the end of the hall near the fire exit they expected the assassin to come through, Marc Goldman was using the door to the room as a shield. Another crash sounded and the door jerked as something hard struck it from the other side. The doctor and the nurse came running from a side corridor. They both gave Richter a dirty look as they hustled down toward the room. All three came to a halt outside the door.

“I take it our ‘guest’ is no longer unconscious,” Richter said icily, glaring at the doctor and at Goldman each in turn.

“I thought you said he was sedated,” Goldman griped, fixing the doctor with a dirty look.

The doctor gave both agents a dirty look in return. “He was sedated before he left the last facility,” the doctor said icily. “I told you he was sleeping.”

Goldman swore. Richter laughed. He shoved Goldman aside and grabbed hold of the door handle.

“Jesus, Goldman,” he said with a sneer. “The man’s half dead. You couldn’t take him?”

The doctor opened his mouth to protest. Richter gave him a smirk. “You want to go in first, Doc?” he taunted. “Sounds like he’s in a fine mood.”

The doctor backed up a step.

Goldman smirked at him. Richter was an asshole, but he could size up a situation faster than anyone Goldman had ever met, and he was never at a loss for a backup plan. Truth was, sometimes Goldman loved it when one of Richter’s plans went down the toilet. It wasn’t just a desire to see his boss get his comeuppance. It was more that there was something almost magical about the way plan after plan simply occurred to him. Ways to turn a bad situation to his advantage seemed to descend
on him from heaven. The speed with which his mind worked to assess the odds boggled Goldman’s mind.

And he knew he was about to watch it happen again. It was the smirk that gave it away.

Richter knocked on the door, solidly, business like. When no crash sounded, he poked his head tentatively into the nauseatingly pink examination room and planted a sympathetic smile on his face. It was well that he had practiced the smile a few times because he had a hard time suppressing his surprise at seeing the man he had just called half dead, sitting up on the side of his bed. Not very straight, but nevertheless in a posture that was nearly vertical. He was breathing hard. Beneath the strands of blond hair that hung over his eyes and a thick reddish stubble that covered his chin, his face was drained of all color, except for the fading greenish yellow bruises that decorated the side of his face where it had slammed against the brick wall repeatedly two and a half weeks earlier.

He never once looked up at Richter but went on pulling the needles from his arms and removing electrodes and sensors from beneath his gown, as if he were unaware that anyone was watching. Nevertheless Richter knew the man had noted his entrance.

Richter stopped and examined the objects scattered across the floor just inside the door to the room. A metal tray, a plastic pitcher, and some medical instruments. He sized up the "prisoner" again. He could barely sit up, but had found the strength to pitch those objects across the room hard enough to drive Marc out into the hall.

He paused to consider. The man had driven Marc out of the room, but had made no move to attack Richter. Richter wondered if it was simply because the man had run out of decent projectiles to throw at him. Somehow he doubted it. Then he caught a flash of light. Just a flash. Against the white sheets and hidden behind the “prisoner’s” thigh.

He swore. Looked like the man had found a weapon. And he was in an all-fired hurry to untether himself so he could use it.

Inside the room an alarm went off as a monitor stopped registering a heartbeat. The doctor leaped instinctively forward and Richter pulled his head back into the corridor.

“Relax, Doc,” Richter said with another irritating smirk. “The only thing dead in there is some of your equipment and those wires that used to connect him to the monitors.”

The doctor looked relieved and tried to brush past Richter. He was not successful.

“Hold up there,” Richter said tauntingly. “Before you go charging in there you ought to consider something. Looks to me like the prisoner’s found a weapon. What did you leave in there that he might be able to use to defend himself?”

The doctor stared at Richter blankly.

“Anything with a blade?” he asked. “A syringe? What?” His tone was not so pleasant now.

The doctor shook his head.

Goldman had peeked into the room behind Richter’s back. “There was a vase,” Goldman said. “On the nightstand next to the bed.”

Richter looked at Goldman.

“I heard it smash,” Goldman said. “Thought he threw it at the door.”
Richter thought back. There was no broken glass before the door. The man had smashed the vase like a bottle to make a blade. “Apparently you thought wrong,” Richter said from between his teeth. He rolled his eyes once at Goldman and the doctor. Then he poked his head back around the door.

“Agent Laramie?” he asked, quietly, fervently hoping that was actually the man’s name. He could not remember. He shrugged inwardly. He had never been much good at other people’s names.

The man’s head jerked upward. The feverish eyes held a hot green glare.

Richter moved slowly into the room, keeping his hands where the man could see them.

“And you are?” the man asked. A twitch curled up the corner of his lip, where the stitches had been removed two days ago. His voice was cracked and gravelly from disuse. But the malevolence behind it was loud and clear.

Richter smiled inwardly. If the odds had been more even, he thought he might have enjoyed going head to head with this guy.

“Senior Agent Matt Richter, Team Leader, Texas ATF Team Four,” Richter said with clipped syllables. Then he softened his tone. “It’s good to see you’re awake.”

The blonde continued to glare at Richter, but he made no move toward the makeshift weapon at his hip. “Where am I?”

“Well,” Richter said, scratching his head disarmingly. “You’re hidden away in a women’s clinic.”

He almost didn’t catch the low reply.

“I gathered that much,” the agent on the bed returned dryly.

Richter looked around the examination room, walls the same vivid pink as Pepto Bismol, a watercolor painting, some specific equipment and several detailed diagrams dealing with women’s medical issues. He started. Observant. Just how long had this guy been biding his time, pretending to be unconscious? What did he know already?

Richter took a breath. Now was as good a time as any to test the waters. Waters that were growing murkier almost by the minute.

“Do you remember what happened to you?” Richter asked in what he hoped was a kind voice.

The man’s expression darkened further. “Yeah,” he said. His voice was dropping in volume. The conversation and the effort to sit up were clearly taking their toll. To tell the truth, Richter was relieved. He needed the man off balance. He was becoming worried at the agent’s self-possession.

Richter waited, but no further information was offered. This guy wasn’t going to make it easy. That was okay. Richter enjoyed a challenge.

He took another step into the room. He could see the broken neck of the vase clearly now. He nodded his head at it. “Planning to use that to bust out of here?” He said it as a joke. He wasn’t joking.

“If I have to,” the other agent replied, the corner of his mouth twisting up into a cold smile. He wasn’t joking either.

Richter chuckled, warmly he hoped. “Agent Laramie. We’re all ATF here. You’re safe now.”
Green eyes flicked up to his with a gaze so penetrating that Richter almost took a step back. Almost. But he didn’t. He held his ground.

The man didn’t reply, but he snorted. Softly. His strength was fading fast and all he’d managed to do was sit up and unhook himself from the equipment around him.

Richter took another step into the room. The man was clearly suspicious. But Richter needed to know why.

“Can you tell me what happened to you?” he asked, pulling a pad of paper from the pocket of his white doctor’s coat.

The green eyes narrowed. “Why?”

Richter was taken aback, but he refused to show it. “Gotta fill in the records. Since we brought you in the militia’s been trying to get at you.”

“What for?” he asked. He was beginning to list slightly to his right. He put his right palm down to support himself and his fingers clenched around the broken vase.

Richter smiled sheepishly.

“Well,” Richter said slowly. “When we first found you we thought you were one of the militia. Seems like they do, too. Only we want to keep you alive. And they want to make sure no witnesses are left on the loose. Unfortunately, it took us a while to figure out your identity.” He chuckled a bit, trying for apologetic. Trying for compassionate. He did neither one very well.

From the doorway Goldman rolled his eyes at Richter’s performance. Was this Richter’s brilliant new plan? Tell the man the truth? What kind of plan was that?

The expression on the battered face did not change. Richter was beginning to think that maybe the man hadn’t heard or was still too shaken up to carry on an entire lucid conversation, as a far off expression came into the green eyes. Then the man took as deep a breath as he could manage with his cracked ribs and bruised lung and faced Richter frankly.

“Where’s my team?” he asked.

Richter looked down at the floor and swallowed. A lot depended on his answer. And his answer depended on what the Denver agent knew already. Was his team out there somewhere and expected to return? Had they fled the scene without him? Or had they been lost in that fire? Richter didn’t know. But if the Denver agent didn’t know either, Richter would get to choose the one that served his purpose best. And it was clear which option that would be.

He said the safest, most non-specific phrase he could think of. He dangled it in front of the man to see which way he’d bite.

“They’re gone,” he said softly.

The man recoiled. The shoulders jerked. But not in surprise. Richter noted the lack of surprise. He hit a nerve. He took a chance.

“You kept asking for them, while you were sick,” he said, managing a compassionate note in his voice. “We tried to tell you, but weren’t sure you had heard.” Would the agent remember? Would he also remember Pirelli’s art of interrogation? The man had been in and out of consciousness since early that morning. And Richter was counting on the recent past still being very confused in the
man’s mind.

The eyes flicked up but not at Richter. He directed a burning glare at the wall opposite him. But he did not speak.

Richter pressed on. “Team Seven wasn’t it?” he asked. This time he managed a compassionate note in his voice. “Heard about them. Heard they were good. Hard when something like this happens…“ He paused and looked chagrined. “I’m sorry,” he said. “I shouldn’t have said that.”

Even from the side, Richter could see the eyes harden another few degrees. Richter analyzed the way he was taking the bait. The man was angry, that was sure. Angry and something else. Was it grief? Or was he pissed off that they had left him behind? He had heard that Team Seven was tight. Didn’t remember much else about them. Hadn’t really cared at the time they were brought in to help.

The man looked abruptly at the floor. Richter took a few more slow steps toward the bed.

There was a long silence.

“What happened?” the man asked finally. Slowly. Without looking up.

At the pain in the voice the doctor started forward. Richter reached back, behind the door, placing a hand on the doctor’s chest and shoving him backward. He had taken the bait. Now was not the time for medical interference.

Richter sighed artfully. “Look. You get some rest. We can talk about this when you’ve got a bit more of your strength back.”

The man’s head snapped around surprisingly quickly. So quickly, he nearly lost his balance on the bed. He didn’t seem to notice. There was an ugly expression in the green eyes.

“How did they die?” he growled.

It was all Richter could do to keep the triumph off his face. But he managed. Not only that, he managed to stutter. “I don’t… You shouldn’t…” he stopped, exhaled. “Will knowing make it any easier on you?” he asked, cocking his head over to the side.

_Damn he’s good_, thought Goldman admiringly from the corridor. _Too bad he can’t remember the man’s damn name._

Goldman watched the green eyes get hard and flat. Turn an intense cold that reached across the room and made Goldman flinch. Fingers clenched on the broken vase.

“How did they die?” the blonde asked with more force than Goldman would have thought possible. It cost him. The sentence ended in a hiss of pain. He nearly bent over with it. But held himself erect by force of will.

_Set the hook_, Richter crowed in his head.

Richter winced. Dropped his voice. “They went back for you,” he said. “Fire must have caught them.”

The agent recoiled as if Richter had punched him. Went even whiter if that were possible. “No,” he said, softly, to himself. So softly, Richter had to read it from the cracked lips. He tore his eyes from Richter’s face and stared at the wall.
Richter licked his lips. “If it’s any consolation,” he said, slowly, beginning to reel him in, “they must have gone quickly. Couldn’t have felt much.”

Suddenly, the blond propelled himself forward off the edge of the bed. He tried to pull himself shakily to his feet.

The doctor started forward and Goldman grabbed him. Held him back. “If Richter wants you, he’ll let you know,” he hissed in his ear. The doctor glared at Goldman, but Goldman was impervious.

Goldman shook his head in wonder as his Team Leader pulled his snare tight around the unsuspecting agent from Denver. *Good thing, too, Goldman mused. If this guy’s not on board, this bust is going to go down hard.*

By this time, Richter had moved close enough to catch him by the uninjured elbow. The Denver agent swore vehemently. Stiff armed Richter away from him. But he managed to stagger forward only a few steps before his knees buckled. A wave of nausea took him and he heaved violently, crumpling over his aching ribs onto all fours. There was nothing inside him to throw up. Richter put a hand under his shoulder and hauled him half up to his knees, pushing a wastebasket toward him with a foot.

“Easy,” Richter said soothingly, pressing a hand against the injured agent’s back. “You’ve been through the mill yourself. Can’t go charging off like that.” He laughed a bit at his joke.

The spell passed, but the man stayed on his knees. Bent double. Gasping. A sheen of sweat across his face mingled with tears that had been forced through his clenched eyelids.

Richter lifted him under the shoulders and propelled him backward to the bed. *Hell,* Richter thought. *This guy’s either the toughest or the stubbornest fool I ever met.* Didn’t matter, though, because Richter was smart. And brains would beat all the rest any day. It seemed almost unfair. But by the time the Denver agent pieced together enough facts from his disjointed days to figure out what was going on, the bust would be over. All they had to do was keep him off balance. Keep him from asking questions. That shouldn’t be too hard.

He looked down at the Denver team leader. The man was breathing hard. His eyes were still squeezed tightly shut as he lay back again against the pillow that seemed to hold more color than his face. Richter pulled up the blanket.

“Let me call the doctor,” he said quietly. He pressed the call button behind the bed.

A moment later, Richter grumbled impatiently and buzzed again. The doctor, his arm still held firmly in Goldman’s grip, and the nurse, who had remained motionless behind him, a fearful expression on her face both flushed an angry red.

Richter bent low over the Denver agent, conspiratorially. “Look,” he said. “You may not want to hear this, but we can make something good come out of it.”

There was no response, just the sound of the harsh breathing coming slowly back under the injured agent’s control.

“*We could use your help,*” Richter said.

For a moment Richter thought the man had fallen unconscious again. Then the eyelids opened slowly. The eyes refocused, devoid of expression. He spoke slowly. His voice raw, but strangely toneless, as flat and expressionless as his face. “*What do you want?*”
“Help me get them,” Richter said earnestly. “Help me get the bastards who killed a hundred people in my town and your team. Help me put them away.”

The green eyes turned slowly toward him, focusing in, icy, flaming all at the same time. And far off in their depths, Richter saw it again. That ugly expression looming larger, growing nearer.

“How?”

*Hook, line, sinker. Hand me the net, I’m gonna land him,* thought Richter.

Senior Agent Matt Richter pulled a chair up next to the bed. “Let me call the doctor. You’re going to need to stay awake for this.”

He left the room, and flashed an arrogant smirk at Goldman, drinking in his agent’s admiring expression.

He turned to the doctor. “Give him something to keep him awake.”

“I can’t just…,” the doctor protested. Richter wrapped his large hand in the doctor’s shirt collar.

“Give him something to keep him awake,” he repeated quietly, deadly.

The doctor paled. He stuttered. “I’m sure we can find something that won’t interfere with his medication,” he offered at last.

He shook his arm free of Goldman and his collar free of Richter. With his last shred of dignity, he walked swiftly away down the hallway. The nurse followed. She said not a word, but he could feel her angry glare.

He wanted to tell her that she had no right to blame him. She had done nothing to help either. But he bit his tongue and cursed himself for the coward he knew he was.

After the doctor left, Richter turned to Goldman, self-satisfaction writ large across his features. “Well, that’s one problem taken care of,” Richter said. “We now have Laramie’s full cooperation.” *Whatever happens to him won’t be our fault.* He thought it but did not speak it aloud. Not to Goldman.

Goldman didn’t correct the error. It was nice to have one up on his boss—even if it was just a little one.

“Keep Pirelli out of the room,” Richter went on. “Now that we’ve got Miracle Boy on our side, I don’t want any inconvenient memories interfering.” He paused. “Should probably keep Martinez out, too. He spent too much time on guard duty last week.”

He jerked his head back toward the door. “That makes you Laramie’s primary bodyguard. You need to make sure he looks like good bait when the militia gets here.” He fixed Goldman with a warning look. “Don’t screw up.”

Goldman nodded. At least I know his damn name.

* * *

The first question out of Buck Wilmington’s mouth after Kelly ran down the details was “Where’s the doctor who treated him?”

Kelly sighed. He knew that Buck wanted to find out what to expect when they found Chris. But one look at the team’s strained faces and he wasn’t sure Doctor Kahar deserved the wrath that was likely
to descend on his head.

The doctor’s own voice saved Kelly from having to make a decision.

“I am Doctor Kahar,” said the lightly accented voice. He spoke quietly but confidently. “I treated Agent Larabee last. I would be glad to tell you whatever you need to know.”

As one, the six agents of Team Seven turned to look at the slight figure in the white jacket. He stood with his hands in his pocket. His face was grim, full of concern, but not nervous or afraid. He simply waited for their answer.

A young man with long hair and a worn leather jacket detached from the circle around Agent Kelly. He stepped around his comrades, laying a hand lightly on the back of the tall mustached one as he passed almost like it was a signal. He came to stand before the doctor, who was only a little shorter than himself. Hard blue eyes looked the doctor over once, and Kahar knew he had been carefully measured in that glance.

“Vin Tanner,” the man said, his manner brusque. His voice was low with a raspy Texas drawl. “I’m Agent Larabee’s next of kin. I have his power of attorney.” He put out his hand and the doctor shook it. The grip was not friendly.

The agent waved a hand back to indicate his friends. “Anything you can tell me about Chris’s condition, you can tell them, too.”

The doctor studied the agent whose hand he had shaken, the next of kin. He certainly didn’t look related to the man he had treated, but who was Kahar to argue? They were ATF. And for now, the wise court had given the power of attorney to the whole ATF. Even the men who had taken the Agent out of Radiology without his charts and without the images.

Kahar sighed to himself. He would need to tell the young man, so he could get his rightful power of attorney back. He looked the agent directly in the eye, but bit his words off before they could escape. Something in the hard eyes and tense jaw stopped him. Something the man seemed to be trying very hard to keep buried, out of his expression. Something that did not bode well for someone somewhere. Kahar knew then that court orders and proper procedures were not going to be the man’s first priority today.

All the agents were moving toward him then, including Kelly. It struck Kahar how large most of these ATF agents were. He wondered if that was on purpose. To intimidate. He nodded once at the men in front of him then suggested they come with him to a place where they could all sit and talk.

Ryan Kelly waved them on ahead, saying the doctor had already filled him in and he would be in the waiting room working the phone with Travis and Team Eight. He watched the doctor walk away, Team Seven dogging his heels. The little doctor rose up yet another notch in Kelly’s estimation.
Chapter 4

The red glow of the cigarette was the only sign that Nico Martinez was there in the shadows, watching. Had Richter seen even that much of the agent he had placed on the roof to keep watch, he would have reacted much differently. Pirelli was glad to see the cigarette. It told him which direction to stumble in across the tarred, gravelly roof, uneven, sticky with the falling rain, and somehow littered with garbage and debris. He reached the corner, where Nico leaned up against a concrete chimneystack, venting the furnace room below. In the gloom, Pirelli could see that Martinez’s coat collar was drawn up around his neck. As he drew closer, Pirelli could tell by the gathering scowl that Martinez was not happy to be stuck on the roof in the rain. He came to a halt where Martinez could see him, although he knew that Martinez had known exactly who was coming toward him the moment he came out of the roof access door.

Martinez looked up from under close-drawn eyebrows. But when he saw the Styrofoam cup of coffee in Pirelli’s outstretched hand his expression relaxed. He stumped out his cigarette on the wet tar and took the coffee with muttered thanks.

Pirelli grimaced. “You can thank me even more,” he said. “I get to take your place.”

Martinez looked up at Pirelli then and grinned. “Bet you’re sorry you ever laid eyes on that guy,” he smirked.


Martinez chuckled low in his throat. “Right,” he said. He pushed away from the wall. “Nothing’s happening. No one out of place. Nothing to look at.”

Pirelli slid into Martinez’s place in the meager shelter of the chimneystack at his back.

“Keep a good watch,” Martinez grinned, glad to be going inside at last. It was going to be miserable out here in the cold rain.

“Thanks,” Pirelli said, making a face at Martinez.

Martinez grinned wider and headed for the roof access door.

At 6:00, Richter had a new problem. Following a regular schedule, the clinic would close in a half hour. The patients would all go home, followed an hour later by the doctors and nurses. They would empty out of the building, find their cars and disappear from this neighborhood and let the building belong to the night. Keeping to the façade meant that Richter and Team Four had to send most of their backup home. On the plus side, he had no doubt that Team Four could handle an assassin alone. In addition, they would not have to share credit for the bust with any other team or any other agency. On the minus side, he had no way of knowing how many people or what sort of arms the militia would send. If they simply blew up the clinic, there was not going to be much that Team Four could do.

He saw Nico Martinez coming toward him. Pirelli had taken watch on the roof. That was fine. Pirelli was as sharp as they came when it came to keeping watch. He could hardly miss another rocket launcher coming down the street. He would notice anything else that seemed out of place.

“How’s the prisoner?” Martinez asked. Not that he cared. He just wanted Richter to know that he knew that he’d been banished. And for no good reason.
Richter grinned at him. “Made a deal,” he said.

Martinez looked at his boss curiously. “A deal?”

“Yeah,” Richter said. “He was more than willing to make himself into militia bait once I told him how his team died.”

Martinez looked at Richter even more curiously. Team Seven wasn’t dead. They had boarded a plane back to Denver carrying a medium-sized manila envelope—the only personal effects they had to remember their leader by. He remembered hearing that. Remembered thinking how strange that must have been for them.

Martinez caught the glint in Richter’s eye. Truth was not something Matt Richter let get in his way. If it suited his purpose to have Team Seven dead, then he would just declare Team Seven dead. It was all Martinez could do to keep from shaking his head in wonder. Richter was truly amazing sometimes. As his team leader, he would follow Richter anywhere, and be on board with any plan he put in front of him, but when it came down to it, Martinez didn’t trust Richter any more than he would trust a rattlesnake. Less, in fact, a rattler generally warned a man off before it bit. With Richter you couldn’t count on any such warning.

“What was the deal?” Martinez asked.

Richter grinned even wider. “Denver asked for some clothes.”

It took Martinez a minute to realize that by “Denver”, Richter meant Larabee. Richter was never any good at names. Denver would do in its place. Anyway it was an improvement. Whether Richter knew it or not, it was sort of embarrassing to listen to Richter keep calling the man by the wrong name.

Richter broke Martinez’s thoughts as he shoved the bottoms of a set of scrubs into Martinez’s chest. “Give these to Goldman,” he said. “Tell Goldman to tell him it’s the best we can do.”

Martinez took the scrubs in the hand that didn’t hold his coffee. “You’re not worried he’ll try to get away?”

Richter shrugged. “How far is he gonna get without you spotting him? Even if he did get around you, how far could he go in the shape he’s in without shoes or a shirt?”

Martinez nodded in agreement. “It’s getting cold out there,” he said, sipping his coffee.

“Yup,” Richter said, still grinning that satisfied grin. “He’ll be best off staying in here where it’s nice and warm—and dry. Have Goldman let him know that when he gives him the pants.”

Martinez nodded and turned to leave, but Richter caught his arm. “Doctor’s down there now.”

He turned back to listen.

“Goldman’s finding out what meds the doc is giving the patient in case we need to dose him ourselves. Send the doc up here, when he’s done. I’m sending him home.”

Martinez looked at him curiously.

Martinez nodded again and moved up the hallway to do as he was told. Once he got out of earshot he began to chuckle softly. He knew as well as anyone, it wasn’t the so-called mess that Richter hated. It was the paperwork he’d have to fill out if a civilian got hurt.

Richter watched Martinez’s back retreating up the corridor. Then with a sigh, he went out into the waiting room to announce to the agents and police officers who had waited through the day that their assistance was no longer required. Appreciated, he reminded himself to say. But no longer necessary.

He thanked them for their time and effort. Reminded them half-jokingly that they had had dinner on the ATF directorship. He restrained himself admirably from herding them out the door although in truth, he couldn’t wait for them to go. In many ways, the less people there were around to interfere, the better this plan would work. As it was, it had been hell all day trying to keep curious cops and federal agents from sneaking down the hallway for a peek at the prisoner.

In addition to guarding the hall, Richter had threatened the doctor with investigation and censure if he breathed a word about the prisoner’s condition. He knew he could rely on his own men not to let it slip that the prisoner was really an ATF agent. He had convinced the directorship to keep that on a need-to-know basis. And Rivers had convinced them that Team Four was all that needed to know. Now and then, he realized, Rivers did prove herself handy, but he could surely do just as well without her when he became an AD.

After he sent all the law enforcement home, Richter’s next problem would be the doctor. He anticipated no real difficulties, so long as the man didn’t try to grow a backbone now. He just wanted a nice succinct report on Denver’s condition and an idea of what medicines to administer and when.

After this was all over, they could return Denver to the last hospital and let that little doctor take care of him. All Richter needed was for the man to stay alive long enough to attract an assassin. To do that, he didn’t have to move, didn’t have to think, didn’t have to do anything but lie there and look sick. In truth, the man was doing a damn fine job of that so far.

Sounding curious, ignorant, and more than a little admiring, Goldman had carefully gleaned from the doctor exactly what medications he was giving the patient, and how much, and when, and what each was for. And when the doctor’s back was turned, he wrote it carefully down.

Richter just wanted the guy alive, breathing, heart beating. That was good enough. Goldman thought a little differently. He didn’t care about conscious, but he didn’t want it on his conscience if the man kicked because Team Four gave him the wrong meds in the wrong dose or the wrong order. The trick was getting the information without the doctor considering the reason why Goldman wanted to know. But Goldman was good at disarming, charming, and ignorant. It got him lots of information. Got him access to places that an ATF agent should have trouble getting access to. Got him out again, too. Saved his butt more than once.

He watched the patient blanch when the doctor suggested food again. The doctor reminded the patient that he hadn’t eaten anything remotely solid in quite some time. All he had had was some water and a little juice. The patient grunted out his refusal again, glaring at the doctor, and Goldman could tell from the way the corners of the man’s eyes pinched that the mere thought of clear liquids made him want to heave the water and juice back up all over everything again, just as he had done the first time the doctor had given him something not quite an hour ago. By then, the nurse had been sent home, so Goldman had had to clean it up, silently chewing out Richter the whole time.

The doctor sighed in resignation and hooked up another IV. He turned to Goldman. “He’s going to have to eat something if he’s going to start getting well.”

Goldman nodded. But in the back of his mind he was thinking about the way the man had kicked
Pirelli in the face during his first few hours of consciousness early this morning and how this afternoon he himself had been chased from the room with a storm of flying objects, just so the guy could make enough of a distraction to smash the glass vase into a shiv. Goldman didn’t think now was a convenient time for the patient to start to heal. Live, yes. Start getting better? Not yet, thank you very much.

Martinez materialized in the doorway. Like a shadow. Man had an unnatural habit of suddenly appearing where he was not supposed to be without a warning, without a sound—without his feet touching the earth Goldman would have sworn. He materialized there with a crumpled pair of scrubs in one hand and a cup of coffee in the other. Ah, so Pirelli’s coffee run had included the roof, too. And here I thought I was special, Goldman thought sardonically. He took the scrubs.

“Just pants?” he asked.

Nico grinned crookedly, wide enough to show his broken tooth. “Thought that might convince him to stay put. Mighty cold and wet outside.”

Goldman looked Nico over. There were rain spots on his jacket, but they were drying already. He snickered. “How’s Jimmy like the roof?”

Martinez snickered back. Scrubs delivered, he yanked a cigarette from the inside pocket of his jacket where he kept them dry. He stuck it in his mouth.

At that moment the doctor stepped in front of them, waving his arms. “You can’t smoke that in here!” he snapped.

Martinez grinned at the doctor in a way that made his blood run cold. “Okay, doc,” he said. He looked him over slowly and moved toward the fire exit, tossing back over his shoulder. “Richter asked to see ya.”

He saw the doctor’s eyes get wide.

“Best run,” Nico said, putting just a little growl in his voice. “Richter ain’t a patient man.”

The doctor scowled but both agents noticed the hurry in his step as he headed up the hallway to the reception area.

Goldman chuckled. Martinez winked at his teammate. Then each man went through his separate door. Goldman to make sure the prisoner didn’t leave his bed—with or without his pants. Nico out to the fire stairs for another smoke.

* * *

Kelly waited on the phone. Waited for Kirk Gustin to come back. He was running down a lead. Didn’t promise anything, mind you. It was just one more of a half dozen or so and he didn’t hold out much hope. Still, it was a lead and as evening was ticking on in Texas time, he could see the Assistant Director’s face in his mind, getting grayer and grayer.

Doug Stone was on the line. He kept his voice low. Travis was pacing back and forth in front of his desk. Had been for the better part of an hour. Was likely to drive him crazy.

There was no hope of distraction or rescue, as the rest of Team Eight was scurrying around the office, shouting at each other, pulling files, scanning e-mails, and making phone calls as if someone had pressed an invisible fast forward button and turned them loose. Papers that would have to be carefully refiled later littered the desks in their bullpen. Maps lay open across the filing cabinets and
covered bare spots on the floor.

They had dropped everything, every case, every pending bust, every bit of research to look for Larabee. Turning up the speed and the intensity another notch as the hours got later. Tempers were fraying. Doug watched two of his teammates jabbing their fingers down against a map. Arguing, heatedly, reddening faces inches apart. He found himself wondering which would happen first: would someone break a finger pounding it down on the desk like that or would the two come to blows?

Kirk came skidding suddenly back, his face animated. He was waving a tattered piece of paper in his hand. He grabbed the phone from Doug without so much as an excuse me, pressed it up against his ear and without preamble blurted an address out to Kelly.

Kelly swore. Scrambled for a pencil and paper at the nurse’s station.

“You got it?” Kirk panted.

“Repeat it,” Kelly ordered, noticing with annoyance that his fingers were clenched so tight on the pencil that it was actually shaking in his hand. He willed his hand to relax and his brain to think. “Got it,” he said after a minute. “You’re sure this is it.”

There was a pause. “Can’t really be sure, boss,” Gustin’s voice said, losing some of its animation.

There was a pause on Kelly’s end, too.

He heard the background noise switch and realized Doug had put him on speaker phone. If he closed his eyes, he could picture his team’s faces, knew from experience where each man was probably standing and what each one was probably doing. Knew them like he knew himself. Couldn’t picture his team without any one of them. Like he couldn’t picture Team Seven without Chris. They had dropped everything to find him. This was the best lead Kirk had given them yet.

“Tell me one more time,” Kelly said, closing his eyes and concentrating.

Kirk read from the notes in his hand, more slowly this time. “A pregnant woman went to the Melendez clinic this afternoon for a scheduled appointment. She was turned away at the door. Said a large man told her the clinic was closed. She said she had an appointment. The man was firm. He said the clinic was closed this afternoon and she needed to reschedule. She pointed out the people in the waiting room and the doctor standing at the reception desk. The man reached for her arm to escort her back outside and she caught a glimpse of his gun. She got scared, hailed a cab and then called the police when she got home.”

There was complete silence in the Team Eight bullpen.

“The local precinct started to assign a pair of officers to check it out, but the sergeant was told to cancel the dispatch call. He was told it was a ‘non-issue.’ And to drop it.”

“Just like that?” Kelly asked. “To drop it.”

“Yup,” Kirk replied. He looked around at his team. Still, as if frozen, staring. AD Travis, too. He waited for Kelly to reply.

“Just curious,” Kelly’s voice came back, sounding tinny over the speaker. “Did anyone check it out anyway?”

“No,” Kirk said. “But I got hold of a late morning briefing note asking patrols to stay out of the
vicinity for an unspecified time.”

Kelly swore. It slipped out before he remembered that Travis was standing there in the bullpen on the other side of the speaker. “Sorry, sir” he said quickly.

“No offense taken,” Travis responded. Truth to tell, he was thinking some choice words himself.

“You’re sure your info is accurate?” Kelly asked. He needed to be sure. If he dragged Team Seven down to the south side and they were in the wrong place… He cut the thought short. Now was not the time to second-guess his instincts or to run disaster scenarios. Now was the time to think and think clearly.

The members of Team Eight could almost hear the wheels turning in Kelly’s head. Could see his face in their minds. Knew he was weighing the options. Knew they were running out of time.

Kelly spoke again. “You boys got anything else that looks as promising?”

There was silence, as they all looked at each other. Their expressions were identical. This was the best lead they had.

“Nope,” Doug Stone replied. “This is our best.”

“Thanks, guys,” Kelly said quietly, honestly. He believed in being honest with them. They deserved that much. “However this turns out,” he said, “you did a hell of a job today.”

He heard the sound of their embarrassed shuffle. Heard Doug clear his throat. “You just be sure to tell Larabee which team will be drinking on his bar tab next week.”

Team Eight chuckled. He heard the sound of a high five.

Ryan grinned.

“Go get him, Boss,” Kirk said into the phone.

He was echoed by Travis’s quiet. “Bring them all back home.”

He clicked the phone off and demanded to know where Dr. Kahar would hold a meeting with a group of six grown men. A second later he remembered the blessings of technology and buzzed Wilmington on his cell phone.

He sounded surprised when he answered.

“I think Kirk found Chris. Get your team and let’s roll,” Ryan said. They were there even before he had fished out his car keys.

“I’ll fill you in on the way,” he said, waving his phone as they raced for the parking lot.

“Wait,” J.D. Dunne said breathlessly as they climbed back into the cars. They stopped, every one of them. He ordered Josiah to pop the trunk. A second later he held up the wireless head sets they had worn this morning when they invaded Bautiste’s house. He began passing them out.

“Always carry extra,” he said, handing one to Kelly with an embarrassed grin.

Kelly grinned back.

“Now let’s roll,” Buck said. Kelly saw him reach over and muss Dunne’s hair proudly, as if the
agent were a kid. Then they slid into their cars and moved out onto the highway.

Beside Kelly in the front seat, Nathan Jackson read through a folder holding medical charts. He held on with one hand, oblivious to the abrupt lane changes, as he followed the fingers of his left hand along the chart a line at a time, his lips moving as he read.

Kelly knew the upshot of what was in the chart but not the specifics. He tried to read Jackson’s face. But he found he couldn’t do that and drive at the same time. He didn’t miss the grumbling swear words that came from the normally self-possessed agent. He had heard once that Jackson had a formidable temper. He hoped he wasn’t about to see it set loose. Someone on Team Seven needed to stay calm. And much as he respected the men of this team, he wouldn’t lay odds on Wilmington, Tanner, Sanchez, or Dunne if all hell broke loose. That left Jackson and Standish. He was pretty sure Standish would stay calm, but he was not sure how much influence he would have if he had to talk the others down.

He glanced back in the rearview mirror at Wilmington, speeding behind him. *Hope you show the stuff Chris saw when he made you second in command,* Kelly thought. *Team’s gonna need you now.*

Josiah drove the rear car, same as before. This time his passenger seat was empty. Vin was still in the back, but he was not alone. Across the length of the seat, he was spreading out an array of weapons that he had pulled out from the trunk through the folding rear seat. He began preparing them one by one, loading each one carefully, and portioning out extra magazines. He said nothing. Gone quiet. He was all business now.

Josiah did not comment as he looked into the rear view mirror. Vin would make sure the team was armed properly. He just had to drive them there. He floored the accelerator again, pulling up nice and tight with Buck’s rental car. Together they pulled up tight to Kelly, weaving through the traffic like some segmented metal snake, blue lights flashing.

In the seat beside Buck, rolling with the lane changes, refusing to let them break his concentration, J.D. Dunne sat with the city map spread open across his knees and his laptop open between his sneaker-clad feet. Bent over, alternating between consulting the map and his computer, listening with one ear to Buck and the others argue and explain, until he finally crowed out that he had located the clinic on the city map.

Buck glanced over, his gaze skipping across the surface of the map without seeing anything specific before he returned his concentration to the highway and the cars before him.

“How long till we get there?” Buck asked.

J.D. consulted both the map and the laptop. “Forty-five minutes,” he said. “Maybe less.”

“Can we cut that time?” Kelly’s voice broke in.

J.D. squinted at the map. “Sure,” he said. “Break some laws. Violate one ways. Run red lights. Take us down to 35 minutes maybe.”

He looked questioningly over at Buck.

“We’ve got the blue lights on,” J.D. added.

Buck looked through the rearview mirror back at his teammates in the other cars and then again at the traffic surrounding them. It was still rush hour. The traffic was still heavy with people on their way home from work. Home to their families.
Chris would say it was too dangerous. Not worth it for less than ten minutes gain.

Buck swore silently. Chris would be right.

He shook his head. “Too dangerous,” he said tightly.

J.D. looked disappointed, but no one voiced an argument.

Josiah spoke into the headsets. “I’m not sure we want to go in there blue lights blazing,” he said, swerving his car suddenly left to stay on Buck’s tail.

He sounded as calm as if he were debating a philosophy in a theory of criminal behavior class instead of weaving dangerously in and out of traffic at a high speed on an unfamiliar highway. Kelly marveled at it.

Standish thought otherwise. “Why ever not?” came the southerner’s incredulous drawl from the seat behind Buck, where he clenched the door handle in a death grip and endeavored not to complain or contemplate the proximity of the cars they passed.

“Surprise, Brother,” Sanchez replied. “We can make it work for us. We don’t want to frighten off our quarry.”

“By quarry, I suppose you refer to the militia,” Standish said with evident contempt.

Buck entered the discussion again. “The militia is Team Four’s problem,” he said. “Chris is our problem. I don’t give a rat’s ass about the militia right now.”

Sanchez was unperturbed as he calmly demurred. “I believe Brother Chris would say differently.”

He was answered by a southern drawl dripping with barely contained sarcasm. “Well, since it is in doubt that Mr. Larabee was awake enough to give consent to his role in Team Four’s little plot, it is unknown exactly what ‘Brother Chris’ would say.”

“Ezra,” J.D.’s voice crackled back across the headphones. “Josiah’s right. If Chris were awake he’d want to catch them.”

That was too much for Buck. “Chris is a damn fool!” he burst out, twisting the wheel hard to the outer lane, passing a car on the shoulder before pulling back into the lane. He continued as if he hadn’t noticed. “He ain’t got the sense God gave a goose when it comes to his own skin.”

In the car ahead, Kelly grimaced at both the vehemence in Buck’s voice and the crackling sound of the spraying gravel against the guard rail.

He glanced back as Buck continued his tirade. “Screw the militia. Screw Team Four. And screw Chris if he agreed to this. Let’s just get him and get out.”

“Amen to that, Brother Buck,” Ezra said, his clenched teeth the only imperfection in his imitation of the large profiler. “But first we need to arrive. Safely. And in one piece.”

Buck ignored him, changing the subject but only slightly. “Hey Kelly,” he called into the headphones, “tell me what this Richter guy looks like. I want to make sure I have the right guy when I rip his head off.”

Kelly pursed his lips, not sure how best to reply.

He was saved by the southerner. “No one disagrees that said agent is well deserving of such a fate.
However, let us not forget that according to rumor, it is Agent Pirelli who is at least partly responsible for Mr. Larabee’s current medical condition."

“Then he’ll be second,” Buck snapped as the car lurched back out onto the shoulder.

Josiah’s car followed right behind him, even as he advised Buck to remain calm.

But Buck was on a roll now. He snapped the steering wheel back to the left and crossed back into the lane, nearly clipping Kelly’s bumper. “Then,” he said without hesitating either in driving or speaking. “Then,” he repeated, his voice rising in pitch and volume, “I’m going to wait for Chris to wake up, so I can give him a piece of my mind.”

“Gently, Buck…” Josiah admonished, going around the same car and its shouting driver and pulling right onto Buck’s tail.

“I’m not gonna hit him, if that’s what you’re worried about,” Buck snapped back.

“I’m worried about that piece of mind you’re going to give him,” J.D. put in. “You ain’t got such a big piece to spare.”

Hoots and jeers covered Buck’s retort.

Even Kelly couldn’t help the grin that spread across his face.

Then the raspy Texas drawl broke in. “Militia or no. Let’s just get a plan together so we can get Chris and hightail it back home.”

No joke. No insult. The jeers died instantly.

“I agree with Mr. Tanner,” Ezra replied. “Mr. Larabee’s safe retrieval should remain our primary objective.”

“No one’s saying any differently,” Josiah responded testily.

Buck silenced them all before an argument ensued. He called on the one voice that had been absent.

“Nathan?”

“I’m listening,” the medic’s voice came back heavily. “But I don’t like the look of these charts. And he never got that last set of x-rays. I think he’ll be going back to the hospital before he goes back to Denver.”

“What are you thinking will be wrong?” Josiah asked. He had heard the briefing from the doctor, but wanted Nathan’s thoughts, too.

Nathan snorted in response. “You name it. Like Doctor Kahar said: ribs, lungs, infection, possible internal damage. Plus he’s been sedated for a long time. Y’all know that stuff makes him sick. And you know that painkillers knock him out. Don’t know…” he trailed off with a sigh that didn’t release the strain from his voice. “We’ll just have to wait and see.”

“Wonderful!” exclaimed Standish, rolling his eyes. “We all excel at ‘wait and see’!”

Buck’s voice cut back in, tight, but steady. Absent the anger of a moment ago. Vented and gone.

“He’s alive, boys,” he said. “And that’s more than we had yesterday. In thirty more minutes we’ll be there to make sure nothing else happens to him. After that, whatever needs to be done, we’ll handle it. One problem at a time.”
“Amen,” Josiah seconded. The others murmured their assent.

Kelly remained silent. That settles it, he thought. Team Seven had settled their objective. The ATF’s objectives concerning the militia and hundred dead men and women had been pushed aside. Derailed. He knew he shouldn’t have been surprised. He couldn’t really blame them, but he didn’t know how to remind them of their duty: To the law, to the public. To Travis.

His musing was interrupted by Buck.

“You still there, Kelly?” Buck asked. “Ya been mighty quiet.”

His opening had come. There ahead of him, Buck had handed it to him. He was the senior agent on site. He could alter the plan. He could take charge of the team. He should take charge of the team. Set it back on track. As ATF, they had a mandate to catch the militia. A mandate that overrode personal considerations. What’s more, Chris Larabee would have agreed. This was the moment to say so.

But he let the moment slide.

“I’m here,” Kelly answered, exhaling his ego and his sense of duty out with his next breath. “I’m just waiting to hear the master plan.”

Buck laughed sardonically. “Chris is the master strategist,” he replied. “We just settle for whatever works.”

“What looks like it’s working so far?” Kelly asked with a grim smile.

Somewhere in the back of his head, Kelly wondered how he’d defend the decision he’d just made when Travis asked him why he didn’t take command. All he could think to say was It’s not my command to take. A lame excuse if ever he’d heard one.

J.D.’s voice crackled into his headset.

“I think I have an approach that will work. We go in lights off like Josiah said. And if my guess is right, there’s a rooftop next door for Vin to work down from while the rest of us come up from street level.”

They began to lay out the tactics, voices interweaving, asking questions, adding experience, making suggestions.

Kelly nodded silently into his headphones, following the exchanges. He glanced at the cars behind him and then over at Jackson, now rifling through the medical kit at his feet, even as he added his ideas into the mix: Working, the six of them, guided by a leader they trusted as smoothly as if they were back home.

It was never my command to take, Kelly thought again, realizing suddenly that for the next few hours he was not the team leader. Not the senior agent. He had been sucked into Team Seven. Called on. Called in. Enfolded. He grinned to himself. His team would never let him live this down. The hell with ’em, he thought, feeling the adrenaline begin to rush up his spine. They didn’t need to know everything about this trip.

He changed lanes again and checked the clock. If Dunne was right, and Kelly was confident that he was, they should arrive at their designated positions in less than twenty minutes. He prayed they had at least that long until the assassins showed up.
Nico leaned back in the fire stairwell, took a long, slow drag on his cigarette and breathed in the silence, savoring the feeling and the sound of being alone. Not that he disliked his team. They were competent. Hell, if he wanted to admit it, they worked well together. Together they were on their way up, with the best arrest record in Texas. Still, enough of them was enough. They had been together now for nearly three weeks straight and he could live without their yammering for just the few minutes it would take to burn through the cigarette in his hand. Then he’d turn his headphones on and be plugged back into the information pipeline and Richter’s bitching and Goldman’s griping, and Pirelli’s pain-in-the-ass commentary. For now there was the blessing of silence.

* * *

Pirelli’s voice crackled softly into Goldman’s earpiece. “They’re here.”

“They?” Goldman asked, moving closer to the exam room door.

“I count six,” Pirelli replied. “Two coming to the main entrance. Two at the rear. And two on the opposite side of the building on our east.

“Roof?” Richter asked, straightening.


“Good work,” Richter grunted. “Pull back into the roof stairwell. Don’t let them see you. Once they hit the roof, pull back to the connecting corridor. You’ll take the two at the back.”

“Right,” Pirelli said, backing carefully into the roof entrance and carefully propping the door open just enough for him to get a good sweep of the roof.

“Goldman,” Richter snapped.

“Right here,” came the response.

“Stay close to the prisoner. We’ll try to get them before they get to you. Otherwise, you take the assassins when they come in the door.”

Goldman moved away from the bed and dropped his voice. “How close do you want them to get? Do you want me to wait until…?” He felt odd about asking it out loud. Do you want me to wait until they actually threaten him? Get a shot off? What?

“Not with six,” Richter replied, oblivious to Goldman’s discomfort or his relief. He had expected one, two at most. Not six. With six, things were bound to get ugly enough without creating ways to bag more evidence.

“Got it,” Goldman answered. Pirelli and Martinez better not screw up, he thought. He did not care to end up facing six militia assassins on his own.

Goldman glanced back at Larabee, who lay back against the pillows, the head of the bed propped nearly to sitting. He was still pale and had spent most of the last two hours in just that position, head back, eyes closed and his teeth clenched tightly together. The few times the green eyes had opened to glare at Goldman, they had a glassy look to them. A fine sheen of sweat covered his face, reminding Goldman of figures he had seen in wax museums.

Goldman had tried twice to give him the painkillers the doctor had prescribed. The second time,
Larabee had gripped Goldman’s wrist with surprising strength and promised to break it if he tried it again. Goldman didn’t care to test the man’s resolve.

“Martinez…” Richter said, moving on to his next instructions. When he heard the swearing, Goldman realized that Nico hadn’t answered.

“Goldman, where’d Martinez go?” Richter demanded.

“Fire stairs,” Goldman replied.

“Go get him,” Richter snapped. “Tell him to pull back and take a position at the middle of your corridor.”

“Right,” Goldman said.

“And,” Richter added, his irritation crackling across the line. “Tell him to put his damn headphones on.”

“Right,” Goldman repeated, moving toward the door. If Richter wasn’t already preoccupied with the six armed militia members coming at the building, he would have come down to help Martinez put on his headphones. Martinez should consider himself lucky that six assassins were approaching.

Goldman had barely stepped through the door when he heard the low growl behind him.

“A gun,” the man said. When Goldman turned back he was vaguely surprised to see Larabee’s eyes open. He struggled to sit up.

Goldman nearly laughed. “You gotta be kidding!”

“Goldman,” Richter snapped in his ear. “Go get Martinez.”

“I’m on it,” Goldman snapped back.

He turned to the man in the bed. “No,” he said firmly.

To his surprise, Larabee lurched to a sitting position and swung his scrubs-clad legs over the side of the bed. He leveled a glare at Goldman that was equal parts anger and fever.

“What are you doing?” Goldman demanded, abandoning the door and returning to the bed.

“What the hell is going on down there?” Richter demanded shortly.

“What the hell is going on down there?” Richter demanded shortly.

“Larabee wants a gun,” Goldman returned.

“Then give him one and get Martinez out of the stairwell before he blows this.”

Goldman stuttered.

“He’s not gonna shoot you in the back,” Richter said snidely.

Goldman did as he was told, throwing his spare down on the bed. As he left the room, Larabee was checking the magazine, looking far too expert for Goldman’s liking. The thought crossed his mind that maybe Richter was wrong on that last point.

In the stairwell, Goldman leaned over the railing and looked down the stairs that led to the basement. Martinez was stubbing his cigarette out against the concrete steps. Goldman snapped his fingers
twice. Nico’s head snapped up. With long practice, Goldman signaled him that two were on their way down from the roof. He waved Nico up until they were in whispering distance.

“You’ve got the exam room midway down,” he said. “Pirelli’ll come down just ahead of the two from the roof. We’ll pull them in and hold them down. Pirelli’ll get the two from the back. And Richter’ll get the two at the front door. Got it?”

Martinez nodded and checked his gun.

“And put on your headphones,” Goldman snapped.

Martinez grinned remorselessly as he slipped around Goldman into the hall.

“Idiot,” Goldman hissed.

Martinez tapped his earpiece with his middle finger to show Goldman that his headphones were working just fine. Then he disappeared into an exam room on the left.

It had grown dark outside and the hallway once again descended into shadow. The exit light cast its red glow along the floor and up to the prisoner’s door, where a yellow slice of light flowed into the corridor from under the door.

Goldman stepped back inside.

His swearing impressively in three languages brought Richter’s teeth together with a click that Pirelli could hear and identify over the headphones.

“Larabee’s gone,” Goldman snapped in disbelief, staring at the empty bed.

“Maybe he’s in the john,” Pirelli offered.

They all heard the slam as Goldman nearly ripped the tiny adjoining bathroom door off its hinges.

“I already checked,” Goldman spat. “I’m not stupid…”

“Enough,” Richter said from between his teeth. “Resume your positions. Forget Larabee. He did his part. He got them here. Now I want as many alive as possible.”

“Hope Larabee knows enough to stay out of the way,” Martinez muttered.

_I doubt it_, Goldman thought pessimistically. _He doesn’t seem the type who would._

“Goldman,” Richter said after a moment. “You’ll have to take his place.”

Marc snorted at that. “Sure,” he said. “The white supremacists will never notice that I’m a Jew from Brooklyn.”

“Not if you don’t open your big mouth,” Pirelli snapped back.

“Just do it,” Richter ordered.

“Yes sir,” Goldman replied and climbed into the bed, tucking his gun hand down along his leg. He just hoped the assassins wouldn’t have Uzi’s, and that his team was on their game today. Otherwise, they’d be sending his leaky remains back to his mother, whose dying comment would be “I told him so.” It crossed his mind as he waited that since Pirelli was the one who screwed up, it oughta be Pirelli who had to act as bait. But it was too late to switch places now.
By the time he saw Pirelli’s shadow softly backpedaling across the space below his door, he realized that there was another option to sitting like an Alabama duck decoy and waiting to get splattered. He climbed off the bed, cobbled together a man-sized lump out of pillows and whatever else he could find, pulled up the covers and took a position behind the door.

“Here they come,” Pirelli warned softly into the headphones, not a moment before Goldman settled.

“Two at the door,” Richter said almost gleefully.

Richter lived for the rush.

_I hate him_, Goldman thought to himself and breathed out, willing himself to be steady.

He heard the cracking of machine guns from the front entanced, answered by the pop of Richter’s pistol. He didn’t let it distract him. A distraction would be standard procedure. A distraction would allow the real assassins to slip in unnoticed. They would wait a few minutes to be sure that the gunfire out front would draw off anyone waiting for them. Then they would step out of the stairwell. Then he and Martinez would have them. He slowed his breathing, strained to hear beyond the headphones, to separate the silence here from the gunfire in the lobby, to focus all his senses on the hall outside. And he watched the bottom of the door for the tell-tale shadow to cross the pool of yellow light.

In the reception area, Richter was busy with both hands. Irritated. The waiting room didn’t work as well as planned. Having chosen cover behind the reception desk, Richter now realized that he was trapped there. If he tried to make the hallway straight across, they had a clear shot at him. He might make the hallway behind him, but then where?

On the other hand, he was cheered by the thought that if the assassins tried a run for either hall, he had a clear shot at them.

Neither side seemed to be able to make a clear advantage. They traded bullets ineffectually in an effort to wear the other down. And in Richter’s case to keep them from reinforcing the other assassins down the hall. Since there were two of them, Richter also decided it was time to start conserving ammunition.

Richter crouched down behind the reception desk, which now sported long gashes across its pink laminated surface. He considered the back hall and whether it would provide sufficient cover and allow him to get an angle on the two gunmen hunkered down in the waiting room, one using the entrance lobby beyond what was left of the doors as his shelter. The other took advantage of the fact that if he couldn’t see Richter, Richter couldn’t see him either.

Another part of Richter’s nimble brain monitored the headphones. He had heard nothing from his agents since Pirelli’s soft notification that the militia had arrived.

A quick glance back into the reception area, through what was left of the glass cubicle surrounding the desk showed a glimpse of black. From the lobby entrance, one of the gunman had exposed an arm and was signaling to his partner. Richter took a bead. The bullet slammed into the wall opposite, taking a chunk of the doorframe with it. All traces of both gunmen disappeared. Pulled back. Richter double-checked his ammunition supplies. With one eye on the doorway, he began to take stock of his spare magazine.

The sudden voice in his ear startled him. He jerked his finger, barely keeping from firing. A split second later he realized it had not come over his headphones. He turned his head, slowly, incredulously, realizing he’d be dead now if it were the militia. It wasn’t militia, but nearly as
incredible.

Beside him, clad in the thin scrubs, barefoot, and wearing a white doctor’s coat he had found somewhere, the Denver agent crouched beside him. Richter stared at him.

Incredibly, the man smirked back, through two days' worth of scruff.

Richter took a full look at the man and barely kept himself from pulling away. Couldn’t help it. Under the soft night lighting, the man’s features looked yellow. Sweat gleamed on his face. Shadows filled the hollows of his cheeks. And his eyes held a feverish, half-crazed look. Richter imagined he could feel the fever heat, imagined he could smell it. He got himself together, his mind groping for and finding the words the man had spoken a moment before.

“Need help?”

Was that really what he had said? *Hell no, I don’t need your help,* Richter thought automatically. Instead he snapped. “How did you get here?”

A round of covering fire from the gunman in the doorway made both of them tuck their heads in. The bullets thwacked hard into the now-battered reception desk, halting there.

“Back hall connects,” said the other agent through his teeth. Richter glared at him. If just talking was painful, how the hell did he think he was going to be useful?

“I know the back hall connects,” Richter snapped back, covering his microphone. *That’s not what I meant,* he thought, but quickly shrugged it off. He didn’t want to go into what he meant because he really didn’t care to know how the man had gotten past all three of his agents and between two and four militia gunmen and a hail of bullets to arrive here just now.

He thought better of his first instinct. He wasn’t sure that Denver could see straight enough to shoot, but hell, more cover fire couldn’t hurt.

“Just try to take them alive,” Richter growled, shoving over.

A smile of pure malice twisted the man’s lips.

The gunman in the door fired another round, shattering anything that was left on the shelves behind their heads. A rain of wood splinters fell down on their heads and necks. Wood ripped from the top of the reception desk. It was the thickest fire yet.

Both agents reacted on instinct, realizing at the same instant it meant that the other would try to make the hall.

Richter launched himself out low. He rolled out into the hallway almost at the other gunman’s feet, tripping him.

From the corner of his eye, he saw Denver stand, drawing fire.

“Stupid bastard,” Richter thought savagely. But so long as the bullets weren’t directed at him, he took the advantage it gave him. He grabbed his adversary by the shoulders, trying to slam his head against the floor, to stun him. They scrabbled together across the center of the hallway all flailing arms and legs.

Behind him, the bullets stopped suddenly. Richter didn’t glance back to find out why. He had him now, flipped him onto his stomach and pinned him down. Only when he had the man cuffed and
unmasked did he wonder why he didn’t have a bullet in his back. He looked back to the door. The other gunman was on the floor, clutching his leg, rocking and cursing. Blood was already pooling on the floor. Denver stood over him crookedly, listing to one side, but pointing his gun unerringly at the militia man’s head.

Richter shoved his gun into the back of his quarry’s neck and told him not to move, not even to twitch, or he’d blow his head off. The tremble that ran through the body beneath him told him he’d get his way. He got off the man and crossed the room, never taking his eyes from his own prisoner. All the while he marveled at how steady Denver was keeping that gun, in marked contrast to the difficulty the man was having standing up straight.

As he got close, Richter could hear that Denver was breathing hard. Sweat running in rivulets down the side of his face.

“Face down,” Richter commanded the would-be assassin, drawing up beside him and still covering the cuffed prisoner on the floor.

The assassin didn’t comply. He stayed wrapped around his own bleeding leg. Without hesitation, Richter kicked out, connecting solidly with the wounded leg. The man howled in fury.

“I said, get face down. Now.”

The man let go of the leg and sprawled out onto the floor. Denver passed Richter the man’s machine gun. A quick check. Empty. Richter eyed the other agent.

_Stupid, lucky bastard_, he thought.

Richter looked around the room for something to cuff this one with. He spotted a shattered lamp and yanked out the cord. He bound the prisoner’s wrists and then tied them to his ankles. He ripped the side of the coat he wore and bound up the prisoner’s leg.

Kneeling down, he chucked his gun under the assassin’s chin to lift his face into the light as he pulled off the mask.

“Don’t bleed to death now,” he chided the man with a ferocious grin. “We’ll be wanting to ask you some questions later.”

He turned to Denver. “You hit?”

He turned a cold eye to Richter and shrugged, indifferently. Richter looked him over. Didn’t see any new blood but Denver didn’t stand still enough for Richter to get a good look.

_Stupid. Lucky. Crazy._

Still, he did have the presence of mind to get across the room before the man reloaded. _Maybe not lucky. Just crazy. And stupid._

“Alright,” Richter said, handing the agent an extra magazine. “You stay here and watch these two. Make sure they don’t try anything.”

Denver took the bullets but turned cold dead eyes on Richter. Without a word he walked the five steps to the man on the floor, looked down at him for a moment. He was young, a boy really, in his early twenties. And when he looked up at the agent standing over him, Richter saw fear dawn in his eyes. A second later, Denver raised the butt end of his pistol and bashed the youth across the temple. The kid slumped to the floor, his head bouncing once on the carpet.
Denver turned the eyes back on Richter. They were cold. Hard. Not dead. Richter saw his mistake.

“You watch them,” the agent said in a voice so low Richter almost didn’t hear it.

And as Richter watched, he stepped over the unconscious youth and headed into the back hall, one hand against the wall to steady himself.

Richter swore. He raised his gun at Denver’s retreating back and ordered him to halt. Denver either didn’t hear or didn’t care. He kept right on. A split second later, the point was moot. Gunfire from the end of the cross hallway announced the entrance of the assassins by the fire stair.

The gunfire was followed immediately by Pirelli’s quiet whoop. “Here come my two,” he bayed like a hound scenting blood. Gunfire erupted somewhere in the back of the floor, at the other end of the connecting hall.

Richter resisted the urge to bolt toward his team. He kept his gun on the two prisoners and tried to interpret what was happening through the chatter and the flashes of light and the shadows moving in the corridor amid the smoke and dust. He was unaware that he was swearing steadily the entire time.

* * *

Seven men in three cars swore simultaneously—one in excruciatingly vivid French—as the clinic and then the street came rapidly into view from the highway exit ramp.

Vin Tanner kicked the back of the passenger seat in front of him, violently, snapping the hinge and rocketing it forward to slam against the dashboard. The driver did not comment. They gunned their engines down the ramp and came roaring onto the empty street.

The street was barricaded, cordoned off at both ends by police cruisers and an ominous black van that sat at the nearest corner, shining wetly under the street lamp.

Seven pairs of trained eyes caught the flashes of gunfire just inside the lobby doors.

“Screw the plan,” Buck said tightly. “Ryan, Josiah, park as close as you can to that barricade. Vin, get the weapons passed out. I want everyone in flak jackets.”

“That’ll take time,” J.D. protested, face white, not tearing his eyes from the building.

“Everyone,” Buck snapped back. The fierce glance he shot at J.D. left no room for argument.

They were out of the door and spilling onto the sidewalk before the cars had rolled to a stop—just parked where they were, haphazardly in the street. Police officers blinked confusedly at them. Trunks popped. Six of the men shrugged into flak jackets.

Kelly met Buck’s eye.

“No jacket,” he shrugged with a smile.

No spare this time. Wilmington nodded. “You stay behind us then,” he ordered.

Secretly, Kelly was relieved. He had thought for a moment he was about to be ejected. But Wilmington couldn’t do that to him. He had led the fight to find Chris. He wouldn’t quit now. Kelly couldn’t help but smile as Buck turned to give orders to the rest of the team.

A police officer from the barricade approached them tentatively from one side. The special tactics team leader climbed from the black van and approached them from the other side. Team Seven,
Kelly in their midst, brushed past both as if they didn’t see either one. At the barricade, seven ATF badges flashed into the lamplight.

The officer at the roadblock looked confused. He looked over to an older officer, a sergeant. The seven badges angled themselves in the sergeant’s direction.

Gunfire crackled from the building, the pop of pistols and the more ominous chug of machine gun fire.

“No one called for backup,” the first officer said to his sergeant.

Buck answered for him. “I did.” The tone was quiet, deadly.

The sergeant hesitated only until Buck turned his full gaze on him. There he saw something he didn’t care to tangle with. “Let ‘em go,” he said to the officer, standing aside. “It’s a federal problem. Let the Feds take care of it.”

The last agent, the tall one at the back of the group, gave both police officers a knowing grin as he passed under the lamplight. “Render unto Caesar what is Caesar’s.” he quoted. “And unto God what is God’s.”

“What the hell’s that supposed to mean?” the special tactics leader snarled, his hands on his hips.

“Stay out of the way,” the veteran sergeant replied with a surly grunt. “And mind our own business.”

“Is that a warning?” the special tactics officer bristled.

“Son,” said the sergeant wearily, laying a calloused hand on his zealous colleague’s black sleeve. “It was advice. Now let’s get back to our stations and do our jobs, so they can do theirs.”

The special tactics officer remained in the street, watching with a professional eye as the new arrivals fanned out around the building. Although he could not hear any words, he knew they were doing a headset check. A vest check. Then they separated into pairs. Three of them taking up station at the lobby entrance.

He watched the man at the right of the doors give a series of hand signals to the two on the other side. A moment later, one of the men on the left pulled open the door. The three slipped inside, high, low, middle. Clean, practiced, precise.

The special tactics team leader returned to his van and continued his long wait.

* * *

The gunfire in the lobby had stopped by the time Buck, J.D., and Ryan Kelly took their positions alongside the clinic doors. Buck struggled to stay detached as he considered what that might mean.

The others checked in.

Josiah and Nathan took opposite routes around the building and arrived at the rear.

Vin found a route to the roof and under Nathan and Buck’s joint admonition to be careful, was using his safety line as a climbing aid to help him scale the wall alongside a network of drainage gutters. Ezra, unable to follow Vin, reported that he was moving on to the lower fire doors at the side. He would attempt to gain entrance there.

From further inside the building, Buck could hear the pop of the fighting resume. He could see
nothing of the interior. He signaled J.D. to go in low and for Kelly to bring up the rear. Kelly nodded. He reached around J.D. and pulled open the door. He was right on their heels as Buck and J.D. slipped inside.

Yellow night lights cast an unhealthy glow onto the occupants of the waiting room beyond the shattered glass of the clinic door. A man in a doctor’s coat stood over two black-clad gunmen on the floor. One was bleeding, the other unconscious. The man in the coat pointed his gun straight at Buck, J.D. and Ryan, a cold, hard look in his eye.

Kelly broke forward, hands up, palms out, his gun to the side. “Richter,” he said.

“Kelly,” the man snarled back. The look in his eye didn’t grow any warmer. He felt rather than saw the hard look the other two men were giving him.

“I brought the cavalry,” Kelly snarled.

“What makes you think I need help,” Richter snarled back, giving the conscious prisoner a kick. He did not lower the gun.

The gunfire from farther inside the clinic popped and crackled.

The two agents behind Kelly exchanged a glance and raised their weapons, pointing both of them straight at Richter’s head.

Kelly looked from Richter back to Buck and J.D. The situation was deteriorating rapidly. Behind him, Buck was still glacially calm, but Kelly wasn’t sure how long he would stay that way, now that he had seen Richter face to face.

Richter glanced over at the two agents, seemingly undisturbed. “This your famous Team Eight?” he asked mockingly.

“No,” Kelly said slowly. He heard a click as Buck pressed his trigger part way.

“Team Seven,” Buck answered, quietly, evenly, deadly. “Where’s Chris?”

Richter did an impressive job of masking his surprise, but Buck saw the eyes widen a fraction. Before he could answer, he put his hand up to his headset mic, lowering his gun as he did so. He flicked his gaze down the corridor to his left. “He’s down there,” Richter answered. “In the room by the fire exit.”

Richter suppressed his surprise and his grin when the mustached agent began barking orders into his own headset.

“Vin, Ezra, Chris is in the room by the fire door.” He poked his head into the hallway. “Gunfire’s pretty thick. Hard to see, but it looks like the bad guys are in the stairwell.”

He listened for a second. “Copy,” he responded to the unheard reply. “Be careful.”

He turned to the young agent alongside him. “Ezra’s in the fire stair. He’ll come up from below. Vin’ll come down from the roof and squeeze them into the hall.”

He leveled his gaze at Richter. “How many men you got back there?”

“Two,” Richter said, ordering himself not to smile. It was easier this way. Get the guns where he needed them. There’d be time for truth later. “I can get one more on the way.”
Pirelli had just called in that his two were out of the contest.

“Jimmy,” Richter spoke into his mic. “Are yours secure?”

“They’re dead,” Pirelli replied.

“Damn,” Richter snapped.

“Well, it wasn’t all my fault,” Pirelli griped back.

Richter didn’t ask for an explanation. That could wait. Instead he gave orders. “Leave them. Get yourself down to the connecting hall to back up Martinez. They’ve pinned the militia in the stairwell.” He lowered his voice and turned sideways. “You’ll have some unexpected help.”

Pirelli caught the note of disdain in Richter’s voice. What help? He was up to his eyeballs in unwanted help right now.

Richter raised his voice just a notch as he added, “Martinez says Goldman’s keeping them out of the exam room, but they’re getting sprayed pretty good in there.”

He wondered why Richter was telling him this. He had a headset. He knew what was going on with his teammates, including the steady stream of expletives coming from the waiting room. Perhaps it was for the new ‘help’.

Message delivered. Out of the corner of his eye, Richter saw the youngest agent start forward. The one with the mustache, clearly in charge now, reflexively pushed him back with a hand on his chest.

Richter pressed his lips together hard to keep from smiling. He actually had no idea how Goldman was doing down there. He was so used to the man’s non-stop complaining he had tuned it out almost as soon as the bullets started flying. If there was a real problem, Nico would let him know. But it seemed a likely motivator to get this Team Seven into the hallway where he needed them.

The mustached agent was on his headset again. “Nathan, Josiah, can you make your way up the back hall to the fire exit? There’s a connecting hall in the center.”

Apparently the reply was affirmative because the mustached agent muttered, “good.”

“Is the back hall clear?” he asked Richter impatiently.

“Yes,” Richter answered. “Except for two dead militia men.”

The agent relayed this information to teammates somewhere at the other side of the floor.

He turned then to Kelly and the young one. “You an’ me, Kid,” he said. “Kelly, you stay up here with him.” He jerked his head toward Richter and no one missed the disgust in his tone.

“Let’s go get Chris,” Buck said with a tight grin.

J.D. nodded back with a tight grin of his own. They pressed back against opposite walls and slid into the corridor.

Richter gave a poisonous smile to their retreating backs. “I can guard these two,” he said to Kelly. “Why don’t you make sure the ambulances are ready to go when the bullets stop.”

Kelly, stared down the hallway after them, shuffling his feet, wishing for all the world he had his jacket. Then Richter’s words penetrated his mind. He glanced thoughtfully at Richter. “Sure,” he
said. “I’ll just use that phone.” He picked up a pockmarked phone from the floor, reassembled it and used it to call down to the waiting police crews.

Richter turned away in disgust. He didn’t mind directing the extra guns down toward Goldman and Martinez, but he didn’t need anyone’s help up here. Nor did he like the sense he got that Kelly had been left to guard him not the militia. He said nothing.

“Why don’t you go around the back corridor,” he said to Kelly. “It’s clear.”

Kelly made no move.

“Alright,” Richter said disgustedly. “You stay here with these two and I’ll go down the back corridor.”

Kelly only glared back.

“Fine,” Richter snapped and sauntered off, muttering his loathing under his breath. Even as he moved off he realized it was the better plan. He didn’t need Kelly or anyone else stumbling across the injured agent somewhere in the back of the floor. Wherever the man had gone off to, he could damn well wait until the shooting stopped. If they were all lucky, the man had found a quiet place to pass out and wouldn’t reappear until Richter’s bluff was played out. Should have sedated him as soon as the doctor left, Richter thought sourly. Now it would all have to wait until they finished nailing down the loose militia.

Kelly watched him go, certain that Richter was up to something. He reported the move to Buck.

Neither had time to wonder what Richter might have up his sleeve as the gunfire suddenly escalated in the exit corridor, flaring into a fierce, short firefight. Then it stopped abruptly.

Vin and Ezra’s voices sounded in his ear, snarling, tumbling over top of each other in a tangle of words.

“Put ‘em down. On your knees. Git down. Drop your weapon.”

There was the brief sound of a scuffle.

“You alright, Ez?” the Texan rasped after a moment.

“Splendid, Mr. Tanner,” came the acid reply, only slightly out of breath. “I’ll send the dry cleaning bill to the militia.”

Kelly couldn’t see, but he could almost picture the sniper’s toothy return grin.

At the end of the corridor, the fire door banged against the inside wall. Tanner stood silhouetted in the red light.

“Clear,” he snapped.

“Stairs clear,” Ezra reported.

Coming in from the connecting corridor, Josiah and Nathan reported. “Corridor’s clear.”

Buck and J.D. moved forward, guns up, catching Nathan and Josiah at the connecting corridor. They swept forward, together. “Clear,” they reported.

Martinez stepped in from an exam room on their right. Kelly heard him mutter his own name and
“Shit, shit, shit,” Tanner’s whisper floated onto the line. A red and black silhouette at the end of the hall, he had his shoulder pressed into the door closest to the fire exit. He threw himself against it hard as his whispered words gave wings to his teammates’ heels. Kelly held his breath.

As Buck drew closer he could see that the door and the rest of the corridor for 25 feet all around was riddled with holes, pockmarked, spattered, scorched by gunfire. The door itself was Swiss cheese. It cracked under Vin’s shoulder, but it held closed. Wouldn’t budge. Blocked tight. Buck halted.

From the fire stair, Ezra threw Buck the militia machine gun. He had the two men face down in the corridor, half in and half out of the fire door. Their opposite hands were yanked across their backs and cuffed together, with Ezra’s single pair of cuffs. He was rifling their clothes for more weapons.

Josiah saw him wince as Tanner threw his shoulder against the door one more time.

This time a pain-filled voice swore from inside the exam room door.

“Hold your damn horses,” it said. “I gotta move the nightstand.”

There was a sliding noise; then the door gave, Vin practically falling into the room. In the doorway stood a stocky, broad-shouldered agent, holding one arm limply at his side. He blinked at them. The red exit light shone blackly on the blood that dripped off the ends of his fingers.

The six unfamiliar agents who appeared on the other side of the door took absolutely no notice of Goldman’s pain. Four of them brushed him aside as they shouldered into the room.

Goldman followed their gaze blandly. Immediately after the shooting had started he had realized the virtue of his decision to leave the bed. Unfortunately the door had provided no cover at all, the bullets barely slowing down as they passed through its cheap, hollow interior and slammed into the bed behind. It took Goldman two full minutes of the fire fight to scramble out from behind the door, now bleeding from a hole in his arm. The other side of the doorway was safer but now he had a hard time getting a good shot off at the militia in the fire escape.

Nico had noticed and made a nasty comment about pulling one’s own weight.

Goldman had remarked that while he was having trouble sighting the fire stairs he did have a clear shot on Nico’s door and could prove it if Nico liked.

Goldman suddenly realized why these men were all staring at the bed. By that time, he discovered that the men had already realized there was no blood on the sheets and no body in the bed. Now they were staring at him intently. Goldman forced his brain to catch up.

“The bed’s empty,” he said, his tongue feeling thick and realizing that he was still a few minutes behind.

Suddenly, two hands were wrapped in his collar and he was pushed back and down onto the floor. Two blazing blue eyes bore down on him. “Where is he?” the man demanded fiercely, applying a knee to Goldman’s chest and twisting his collar tighter.

Goldman would have liked to answer. The man was talking about the prisoner obviously. No, not a prisoner, Goldman thought. Larabee. Denver ATF. He would have liked to give the man him the
information he so clearly wanted. But he didn’t know where the man had staggered off to. And he could no longer draw breath to reply.

Black spots danced alarmingly, beguilingly in the air in front of him. He tried to look around them for a familiar face. He spotted Martinez, pressed up against a wall, with an elbow in his throat. Goldman’s eyes traveled up the elbow to the face of the largest man he had ever seen.

Now the sound had gone bad, as well as the picture, and a rushing noise filled up Goldman’s ears. He felt his eyelids settle down.

Just as suddenly, the pressure was gone. The sound came back on, and as it cleared he heard someone with a soft southern accent telling someone named Tanner that killing another agent was likely to “irrevocably blemish” his record, thus “irretrievably damaging” his future “potential for advancement.”

The dancing blobs cleared, and Goldman was treated to the sight of Richter and that other guy from Denver nose to nose in the corridor, fighting apparently, although they couldn’t have been shouting because Goldman couldn’t follow the words. He tried to rub his throat, but he couldn’t move his left arm. Rolling his head sideways, he saw why. Martinez was holding it under his right knee.


Martinez looked up at a tall black agent that Goldman didn’t remember seeing. “They said you’re a medic,” he snapped. “Could use a bandage here.”

The unfamiliar agent’s eyes narrowed coldly. “Use your shirt,” he said. “My bandages are reserved.”

The other agents looked at the man with surprise, but did not dispute. Their faces closed ranks into like expressions. It dawned on Goldman that they must have all arrived together. Who are you?

Goldman thought fuzzily. But the words didn’t leave his lips.

Then he let out a yelp as a sharp stabbing pain shot up and down the whole length of his arm. He swore at Martinez, who had just tied a knot mercilessly into his bleeding arm.


“Fuck you,” Goldman shot back, which only made Nico grin.

Richter and Kelly had finished arguing apparently, but Goldman couldn’t figure out who won. It was Kelly who stalked off, taking the unfamiliar agents with him as if they were tied onto him with a string. But it was Richter who looked seriously steamed. Richter watched them go, then looked down at the two agents on the floor. He regarded Goldman silently with pursed lips. Then suddenly squinted up both ends of the corridor.

“Where the hell is Pirelli?” he asked suddenly.

Two police officers appeared in the doorway. “Ambulance is waiting,” said one jerking his thumb backward up the corridor.

“I’m fine,” Goldman snapped irritably. Or tried. He was vaguely aware that it had not come out clearly.

Richter glared at the patrolman, then at his agents.

He pointed down at Goldman. “Take him to the ambulance,” Richter snapped. He didn’t wait for
them to move but turned to Martinez. “Get up,” he ordered. “Find Pirelli.”

Nico rolled his eyes conspiratorially at Goldman, then rapped him once, hard, right on the knot over his bullet wound, before sliding past Richter out the door.

Richter ignored the hiss and snarl of his agent on the floor and stalked back up the hallway.

On his feet now, Goldman shrugged off the helping hands of the local police. More police officers materialized around him. Two EMTs in blue jumpsuits shuffled out of the connecting corridor, two body bags swaying gently between them.

For the first time, Goldman began to wonder whether he hadn’t lost a few minutes back there at the exam room. Outside, under street lamps that seemed way too bright, he counted four militia men, in black, kneeling, face down, or sitting, surrounded by seething police men.

Now he was certain he had lost some time. He was pressed down onto the bumper of a nearby ambulance. He gave up trying to figure it out, and gave himself over to the surprisingly gentle ministrations of the EMT who began to treat his arm.

* * *

The seven of them had long since fanned out through the clinic, dismantling closed doors. Police moved out of their way.

There was no information about Larabee’s current condition, and it began to dawn on Buck that Chris might well have left the building, or perhaps tried to and was now lying bleeding in some other stairwell. He pushed down the choking lump that was climbing up his throat and forced himself to think straight.

Kelly retreated up the back corridor, noting almost absently that the two corpses had been hauled away. He stopped short: Pirelli’s two targets. Wasn’t Pirelli supposed to have joined them? He should have entered the firefight before Nathan and Josiah, before Kelly--should have preceded all of them up the corridor. He had not arrived. A cold hard lump accompanied the implications that presented themselves to his mind. He redoubled his efforts.

The rest of Team Seven began to spread to the stairwells and upper floors. To the roof. To the basement. They were calling Chris’s name. Buck radioed a description to the cops outside.

Richter was directing the cleanup in the front reception area, curiously silent on the subject of his own missing agent. Cool. Collected. His face closed down, revealed nothing. Kelly’s jaw muscles began to burn where he had his teeth clamped together. He turned toward an area he had not explored yet and found himself before the pharmacy door.

It was more of a storage closet really. The lock had been sprung—by one bullet that had smashed its mechanism and continued on into the storage room interior.

Kelly took a breath. He thought to call Buck, but the words stuck. He pushed down the images in his head and steadied himself, gun before him. He stepped sideways and reached across the door to push it slowly open. Nothing happened. He poked his head cautiously around the corner.

There were two men in the room. One was relieved to see him. The other was long past caring.

At Kelly’s slow entrance, Jimmy Pirelli’s eyes got even wider, a silent plea written large across his face. He was bent backwards, against the broken glass of a formerly locked pharmacy cabinet. As Kelly looked closer he saw that Pirelli’s right arm had been driven straight through the glass door
front and then out again through the glass in the left side. Chris’s back blocked Kelly’s view of the rest of Pirelli, but he could see that Larabee was leaning, bracing himself against a nearby shelf.

Pirelli’s arm stuck out awkwardly, hung up in the jagged glass. Blood dripped on the floor from Pirelli’s arm. More blood dripped down the red matted sleeve of Chris’s white doctor coat. Judging from the amount pooling slowly on the floor, the two men had held this position for several minutes.

The blood did not hold their attention. All three men in the small space now focused their full concentration on the gun that was shoved quite determinedly up and under Pirelli’s jaw, jammed into the hollow between his neck and chin.

Kelly licked his suddenly dry lips.

“Chris?” he croaked hesitantly.

There was no response except for a slight repositioning of the pistol grip in Larabee’s blood-slicked right hand.

Pirelli was white faced with fear and blood loss, unable to move without driving more glass into his lacerated right arm. Larabee shifted his weight slightly and Pirelli cried out sharply. Kelly could see now that Pirelli’s left arm was trapped against a metal shelf, under Larabee’s right hip. The angles of his fingers suggested they were broken. Kelly could see that Pirelli’s body was angled so far backward that he needed both legs to keep from sliding down onto the jagged shards under his armpit.

“Chris?” Kelly said again, a bit louder.

Larabee turned his head slowly toward him, to Kelly’s immense relief. But his relief was short lived. The eyes were unfocused. Unfocused and furious. Successive tremors ran through Chris’s whole body, except for the gun. Arm braced against the same shelving unit that trapped Pirelli’s left arm, Larabee leveraged the pistol against Pirelli’s chin to keep the hand steady. It was clear to Kelly that any involuntary twitch in a finger would blow Pirelli’s head clean off.

“Let him go,” Kelly ordered, his voice firm but soft, careful not to startle either one of the two men. Larabee continued his burning glare. Even unfocused, it sent a chill up Kelly’s spine. He ignored it, not even sure who or what Chris believed he was seeing.

For a moment, just a moment, Kelly saw the green eyes clear. Focus. Pin him.

“He killed them,” Larabee whispered.

Kelly had no time to reply.

The gun hand relaxed suddenly, unaccountably, until without further warning Chris pitched forward on to his face, sliding down across Pirelli’s body and pulling his arm further into the glass. Pirelli screamed as the jagged edges drove their points up into the flesh of his underarm. Kelly winced as he heard Larabee’s head thud onto the worn linoleum.

Without hesitation, Kelly called into his headset. He’d found him. Ludicrously, he radioed Nathan that Chris was hurt.

Ignoring Pirelli’s hollering, Kelly slid his arms under Larabee and flipped him over easily. Surprisingly easily. There was blood on his white coat and blood on his hands, deep gashes in the knuckles and in his left forearm beneath the ripped sleeve of the coat, and in the soles of the bare feet. Beneath the open coat, the greenish healing bruises stood out against livid new ones, still red
and starting to purple up. Clearly Pirelli had put up a good fight. But in the end, it was Pirelli’s gun that was tucked into the elastic waistband of Larabee’s pale green scrubs.

Kelly looked up at the agent who was trying to pull himself up, to free his impaled arm using the broken fingers of his other hand. He looked back down at Chris and wondered how the hell he had won this fight.

“He’s crazy,” Pirelli spat as if in answer, casting a venomous glare down at Larabee, who was now tucked tight against Kelly’s chest. Kelly glared back up at him, and Pirelli remembered what he had forgotten when Kelly had magically appeared in the doorway and asked Larabee to let him go. He was alone. By himself. His allies had fled.

Pirelli yanked his arm free as his feet slipped in the blood on the floor. He suddenly felt dizzy. The room began to close to a dim tunnel. He sat down heavily, forcing himself to strip off his shirt. He wadded it under his arm to stop the blood.

Kelly was lightly tapping Larabee’s cheek, speaking his name. He was rewarded with twin slits of green.

“Stay with me,” Kelly said, holding two fingers to the side of Chris’s neck and wishing Nathan would hurry.

The eyes caught his face and fluttered wider. Chris gasped suddenly and tried to pull away from Kelly, with more strength than Kelly would have believed possible.

“They’re dead,” he gasped, folding his knees up to his chest. He looked at Kelly desperately. “They’re dead.”

“Yes,” Kelly agreed, not knowing what else to say.

He knew instantly he had made a mistake. Chris jerked suddenly away from him, Kelly’s hands sliding off the sweat-slick skin. Larabee’s hand fumbled for the gun that had been in his waistband. It was no longer there. He looked wildly, ferociously at Kelly and scrabbled to his knees.

Kelly lunged for him, grappling, trying not to hurt him any more.

“Help me out here,” he grated at Pirelli, who sat to one side, pale and clenching his right arm tight to his side.

“Fuck both of you,” Pirelli snapped in disbelief.

Chris slipped Kelly’s grasp and lurched to his feet. Inexplicably, a gun appeared in his shaking hand.

“Shit!” Pirelli gasped and scrabbled the spare two feet across to the door.

Kelly leaped to his feet and threw himself between Pirelli and Larabee. The hand, arm, and gun shook wildly and Kelly feared Chris would spasm on the trigger. The papers would report that ATF Agent Ryan Kelly was shot dead with his own gun.

“Chris,” he said desperately. “Give me the gun.”

As he said it, he met the green gaze. Fury animated Chris’s body, but his face was contorted into a raw grimace. His eyes were blazing.

Kelly was staggered. What was it about the two dead militiamen in the back corridor that had Chris
upset like this?


He saw Larabee’s eyes widen. The last of the blood drained from his face. He tried to speak. The green eyes filled with tears.

Buck saw it coming before Kelly did.

“Catch him,” Buck snapped springing forward even as Chris’s knees buckled. Kelly reacted swiftly, but Buck still got there first, folding the blond agent down to the floor.

Nathan shouldered his way into the room.

“Get him,” Jackson snapped with a glance down at Pirelli.

Josiah’s giant arms reached into the space and dragged Pirelli out into the hall. Kelly retrieved his gun and followed, breathing hard, suddenly needing the air.

Chris was still trying to speak. He struggled to pull away from Buck.

“Keep still, Chris,” Nathan said, straddling Chris’s legs and pinning him down.

“Told you to get out,” Chris choked out, coughing.

Buck and Nathan exchanged a bewildered glance.

“What are you talking about, Chris?” Buck asked, holding his struggling friend in both arms, trying to keep him still. Close now he could see the yellow-green bruises on his face, the slowly fading lines where stitches had been absorbed or removed, the hollow cheeks under the days-old scruff. Could feel heat coming off him through the coat. Could smell the sweat and the fever. The battered body felt thin inside the circle of Buck’s arms. And Buck didn’t know where this fight could still be coming from.

At the sight of the fading bruises across the side of Chris’s face, Nathan tried to shine a light into Chris’s eyes.

“He’s hot, Nathan,” Buck muttered. He felt cold inside. “Lost a lot of weight.”

The look Jackson threw Wilmington carried with it the rage the medic was fighting to put aside. No shit, Jackson thought angrily. Like I hadn’t noticed.

Nathan cut the coat off, peeling the matted material from Chris’s arm. It stuck to the cuts. He had no time to be gentle, he tore it from the drying wounds and eyed the purple, green, and red bruising that covered Chris’s side. “Lift him up,” Nathan said. He felt his jaw clench together as he saw the matching bruising all down Chris’s back, some still clearly boot-heel shaped. His assailant had shown no pity, even around the bullet hole, which Nathan could see had begun to fester, confirming the medical reports he had read. He pressed his hand against the discolored spots above Chris’ ribs, clearly visible. Chris’s knees bucked, but his attempts to throw Nathan off were steadily weakening. “Feels like his ribs are still busted,” Nathan said, forcing his clinical mind to override his anger. “Ease up if you can.”

Buck slid his arms obediently upward to Chris’s chest, murmuring all the while in Chris’s ear.
One by one, faces crowded at the doorway. Buck knew who they were without looking. The gasp was J.D.’s. It was followed by a murmured curse. Then silence. Ezra planted himself in the doorway, on guard. He heard Vin in the corridor outside softly, threateningly ordering Josiah to let him by. He heard Josiah’s equally soft voice telling Vin there wasn’t room for all of them. To let Nathan work. Buck kept his concentration on Chris, kept talking to him, trying to hold him still. Avoiding his ribs. Trying not to hurt him.

“Stop struggling,” Nathan ordered the injured agent fiercely.

It penetrated the fog.

Chris stopped struggling. His eyes were glassy now. He was shivering and his breathing was hard, harsh.

In the rasp, Buck almost missed the whispered words. Quiet. Half growl and half a sound that Buck hadn’t heard since that sunny morning nearly four years ago. Buck had been struggling for dear life to keep Chris pinned down the first time he heard that sound, too. It had taken him days to shake that strangled sob from his memory.

Rocketed back in time, it took Buck a full second to process the words Chris had just spoken. “He told me you were dead.”

The eyelashes fluttered. The green eyes unfocused.

Buck stared, trying to understand.

“Went back for me,” Chris whispered through cracked lips.

Then the eyelids closed completely. The body in Buck’s arms went slack.

Nathan didn’t hear the words, but he felt Chris go limp, and he saw Buck jerk as if someone had stuck him with a hot poker. In one move, Wilmington slid his long limbs out from behind Chris and rose to his feet, swearing violently. Before Nathan could even react, Buck grabbed Chris under the arms and hauled the unconscious form backward, over the shattered glass littering the floor, shoving him up against the dented steel door of the cabinet below the splintered panes.

“What the hell are you doing?” Nathan snapped, as Buck dragged Chris out from under him and over the glittering shards.

They crunched under Buck’s knees. He was oblivious to the glass, but not to Nathan. He shoved the medic aside, climbed across the still form and grabbed the slack jaw hard. He gave it a firm shake. There was no response.

Furious now, Nathan protested.

“Shut up,” Buck snapped over his shoulder.

Nathan shut up. He could count on one hand the number of times he had heard that tone from Buck. The hair stood up on the back of his neck. And he didn’t know who he was afraid for.

“Chris,” Buck said fiercely, over the hammer of his heart. He gave the jaw a harder shake. “Open your eyes, god damn you, and look at me.”

When there was still no response, Buck banged the blond head, frustratedly, against the metal cabinet door.
J.D. leaped forward. Ezra shoved him back into the hall, and turned his head away. Nathan stared, momentarily paralyzed by disbelief.

At the sharp thunk, the green eyes fluttered, snapped suddenly open. The blond gasped and stared straight into Buck’s blue eyes.

“You with me?” Buck asked. His throat was tight. His temper was rising with his desperation, and he fought to keep both down. He watched Chris struggle to focus.

*C’mon, Chris. Fight.*

“Buck?” Chris mumbled. The eyes narrowed, struggled to understand.

“Right here, Pard,” Buck answered. His hand slid up away from Chris’s jaw to grip the back of the blond head. His heart thudded hard against his breastbone. “I’m right here.”

“We’re all here,” Buck added more forcefully. “All of us.” His hand tightened in the sweaty blond hair, as if to confirm his words.

The green eyes cleared for a moment, then unfocused again. Rolled backward.

Buck gave the head another shake, his fingers clenched in the damp hair.

“You hear me?” he demanded, his voice rising, more strident. His vision blurred, and he blinked the moisture off impatiently. “Chris?”

The blond head lolled almost drunkenly.

Cursing violently, Buck grabbed Chris under the shoulders and hoisted him up a little straighter. The blond gasped sharply as torn muscles pulled across broken ribs. Buck felt Nathan’s hand grab his arm, but he threw it off.

The green eyes focused. Widened in surprise. “Buck?” he rasped, confused. The words were broken by the harsh breathing, fading so Buck could hardly hear them. “Fire… Dead… Told me… Went back…”

“God damn it!” Buck snarled. A wave of white-hot fury rolled over him, burning everything but the icy pit in his stomach.

His hands shook. He fought to control them as he grabbed both sides of the battered face, forcing Chris’s eyes to turn toward him.

“Who told you we were dead?” Buck growled.

The green eyes looked back at him, confused.

Buck swore again, the cold in the pit of his stomach climbing up his spine. Nathan was practically crawling up his back, adamant, saying something.

“Who said we were dead?” Buck demanded, louder now, shoving Nathan back with his elbow.

Pressure applied suddenly to a badly punctured arm elicited a howl from the hallway outside. Chris stiffened. Straightened. Green eyes glared at Buck with sudden clarity.

“Richter said you were dead,” Chris breathed. Anger suddenly animated the bloodless face.
Half alert now, partly focused, Chris tried stubbornly to push away from the cabinet.

Buck held him back. “It’s all right,” Buck breathed, the air shuddering as he fought to control it. He pushed the sweat-soaked blond hair roughly back from Chris’s forehead, his hand lingering there, unwilling to break the contact.

“We’re all right,” he repeated, his voice sounding strangely thick.

His mind whirled.

*Richter.*

His fury threatened suddenly to choke him. He focused back on his injured friend beneath him. He knew what needed to be done now. But Chris didn’t need to hear it.

Buck licked his lips and glanced back toward the furious medic behind him. Then he locked eyes with Larabee. “You let Nathan take care of you,” he ordered. He waited for the feverish eyes to focus again. “You hear me?”

He didn’t add that he was leaving, but Chris was still Chris, no matter what shape he was in. And he seemed to sense what Buck had in mind. A blood streaked hand twisted into his sleeve. Buck gently untwisted it. “Do what Nathan says,” he said firmly. “I’ll be back.” Then he climbed to his feet.

Nathan slid into the spot Buck had just left, the elbow he had received to his chin forgotten as what Richter had done began to sink in. He let it sink no further. Buck could have his revenge. Nathan had to get the bleeding stopped and then get a blanket over his shivering teammate. As he staunched the blood oozing from Chris’s arm, Nathan listened with one ear for an ambulance crew. What the hell was taking them so long?

Buck turned his face to the door. He did not look back. The doorway was filled. He felt like they were sucking the air from the storeroom. He shouldered his way through them, not looking at or seeing any of them until his eyes lit on Vin.

He grabbed the sharpshooter’s arm. “Get in there and stay with him. Don’t leave his side,” Buck ordered. His voice was controlled. His face was controlled. Every muscle in his body was carefully controlled. “Tell him we’re all right. All of us. Keep telling him until he gets it through that rock hard head.”

Vin eyed Wilmington. The fingers dug into his arm, but he didn’t jerk away. He nodded. “What are you going to do?” Tanner asked, suspicion evident in his tone.

“Find Richter,” Buck snarled softly. He did not elaborate. What happened next was best left between Richter and him.

Vin didn’t press, but he knew that whatever Buck had planned, Richter was going to pay and pay dearly.

Buck hesitated a moment under the sniper’s sharp gaze. He attempted to turn away, but the words still echoing around in his head were too big to hold onto. They threatened to spill out. He felt like his insides weren’t big enough to hold them and the anger, too, and Buck wanted to keep the anger. He had plans for the anger. So he released the words.

“He told Chris we were dead,” Buck said softly, venomously. “Told him we got killed going back for him.”
Vin ripped his arm suddenly from Buck’s grasp. He whirled toward the end of the corridor, but Buck grabbed him and spun him back toward the storage room.

“Stay with Chris,” he grated. “Make sure he understands we’re alive.”

Buck didn’t wait for acknowledgement. He wasted no more words but strode away toward the reception room.

Vin literally saw red. He had to wait for it to clear, wait to grip some sort of calm. He had to calm the pulse in his temple that called for Richter’s blood. Push it out of his system before he went into that storage room. His teammates yielded to let him through. He got his breathing under control, then slid over the broken glass to take his place at Chris’s back.

Nathan spared him a glance, and Vin could see the tension in the medic’s face. “He’s out again,” Jackson grated. “You see an ambulance crew out there?”

Vin shook his head, suddenly finding it hard to breathe, let alone speak. He propped Chris up against his shoulder, one hand against the clammy forehead. “I got you, cowboy,” he said, forcing the words past the jagged lump that had risen in his throat. “We’re all here. We’ve got your back.” He hoped somehow, somewhere in the black void of unconsciousness, Chris would hear.

At last they heard unfamiliar voices outside. Josiah had to literally move Ezra and J.D. aside to let the ambulance crew come in. The little room got suddenly hot and crowded. Vin was ordered from the room. He lingered uncertainly at the wall, until his friend was rolled safely onto a stretcher. Then he ducked gratefully outside. Behind him Nathan rattled off a list of stats and medical information as the EMTs prepared to take Chris away.

“Where’s Buck?” J.D. asked, looking suddenly around.

Ryan Kelly followed Dunne’s gaze. He had gone up the hall to fetch an EMT and inform Richter what had happened to Pirelli.

Buck was nowhere to be seen. Kelly swore. He saw Tanner slink sideways into the hall.

“Where is Wilmington?” Kelly asked more forcefully.

Josiah looked at him blandly, but his eyes sparked. “Head start,” the profiler said.

“What?” Kelly asked, his voice growing hard. A bad feeling was rising belatedly in the pit of his stomach.

“To what?” Kelly asked, his voice growing hard. A bad feeling was rising belatedly in the pit of his stomach.

“To get a crack at Richter before the rest of us,” he replied and smiled unpleasantly. Kelly was reminded of the stories he had heard, about what the former preacher’s teammates backhandedly referred to as “getting Old Testament.”

He stifled another curse.

“Look,” he said as calmly as he could manage. “We’ve got Chris. I’ll make an official complaint. Let the brass deal with Richter.”

Josiah’s smile never wavered, only his eyes grew harder. “You’re talking about the kidnapping,” he stated. His voice deceptively pleasant. He watched the puzzlement blossom on Kelly’s face.

“You’re not,” Kelly said matter-of-factly, realization dawning. More swear words echoed in his head and he wondered absentely when he had started swearing so much.
Josiah shook his head. “We would’ve let it go with just a threat for kidnapping. Shit move, sure. But Chris wouldn’t let it go further than threats for that. Not on his account.”

He spoke conversationally. With infuriating calm.

Kelly felt like fire ants were crawling through his insides. What the hell had Richter done?

“Nope,” Josiah continued as if Kelly had spoken. The smile gradually being replaced by something far more chilling.

Kelly swore to himself and willed Sanchez to just spill it already.

“But for telling Chris we were dead. And that we got killed going back for him.” He shook his salt and pepper head. “For that Richter pays in blood.”

Swear words ran rampant through Kelly’s head. And he knew down to the cold hollow in his stomach that the swearing had become a habit since Chris Larabee got killed and he ended up chasing around after him with Team Seven. That was when the swearing started. And he knew it would not stop until they all got back to Denver and back to normal.

And that would not happen until and unless he now went and prevented Buck Wilmington from beating Senior Agent Matthew Richter to death—or perhaps just shooting him outright.

He turned a baleful, serious eye back to Sanchez.

“That way,” Josiah said, pointing down the corridor in the direction Buck had gone.

Ezra Standish unfolded himself from the doorway as the stretcher emerged. “We’ll be along directly,” he said in the drawl that was now devoid of any of the warmth and charm usually associated with the climes of the man’s native region.

Kelly fixed both of them with a hard gaze.

They stared impassively back at him. Except Nathan and Vin, who followed the stretcher from the storeroom, headed in the other direction.

“One for me, Ez,” Vin said, his voice low, as he turned away.

“Sorry, Mr. Tanner,” Ez drawled, real malevolence in his tone. “My vengeance card is filled today. Mr. Larabee has claimed every dance.”

“Give ‘im hell,” Nathan grunted as he passed. He and Tanner turned and hurried after the two EMTs.

J.D. Dunne cracked his knuckles.

Shit shit shit shit shit! Kelly thought. For a second he thought to simply turn and follow Vin and Nathan. Walk away. But he couldn’t. Couldn’t walk away while three other federal agents watched with tacit or even outright approval as Richter got the hell beat out of him, perhaps even killed.

He was reminded suddenly of Pirelli.

He stood in front of them. All of them.

“If you do this,” he said, “you’re no better than Richter or Pirelli.”
“We’ll soon find out,” Josiah answered evenly, leading the way up the hall.

Kelly had no choice now but to follow.

* * *

When he saw the mustached agent coming, Richter had not been concerned. Pirelli and Goldman were on their way to the hospital. Hurt but not seriously. The militia were secured and on their way to processing and interrogation. He was on his way up, up, up. He had allowed himself to savor the moment, the back pats, and congratulations from the local authorities. Feeling magnanimous, he had included Martinez, letting him bask in the glory, too. After all, the man had redeemed himself after the stairwell. Goldman had held the room despite the number of bullets flying into it. Even Pirelli had done his job well—except for the dustup with the Denver agent. Richter meant to ask Pirelli later just how a man in Denver’s condition had managed to beat him in a fight. Overall, things had gone splendidly.

Perhaps it was this golden aura that blinded him when a frowning, puzzled-looking Buck Wilmington asked him to come back inside to clarify some evidence in the fire stairs. He graciously agreed, generously remembering to thank the man for his team’s timely help. Remembered to inquire how his team leader was doing.

“You must be relieved to see him again,” Richter said smoothly, kindly.

Wilmington gave him a grateful smile. Had Richter not been so busy wondering what sort of people actually name a child Buck, he would have noticed that Wilmington’s smile never reached the hard blue eyes. But he didn’t notice.

They trudged up the stairs nearly to the roof, until Buck stopped.

“Here it is,” he said, bending his tall, lanky frame to examine the bottom of the fire door to the roof.

Richter squinted then bent closer to see what the man was looking at.

He found himself suddenly over the railing dangling in the thin air. He flailed for a foothold, a handhold, anything before he realized Wilmington held him suspended.

“You struggle, I’ll drop you,” the voice in his ear whispered. It wasn’t a threat. It was a fact. Richter willed himself to be still. Fury and fear competed for control.


“I don’t think your team leader would approve,” Richter grunted. He was held under one shoulder and across his neck. The pressure on his chin made it hard to speak. It got suddenly harder to breathe.

“His name’s Chris,” the voice snarled back. “Christopher. Middle name, Michael. Confirmation name Thomas. Last name, Larabee. Chris fucking Larabee. Remember it.”

Richter began to turn red from anger and lack of air.

“Had him almost three weeks. Took the time to make him think he got us killed. But you never even bothered to learn his name.”

It was the most innocent of Richter’s many transgressions lately. He hadn’t thought it really mattered until he felt himself slip down two more inches, the grip around his neck none too subtly loosened.
He scanned the stairwell below him for a railing he could possibly try to grab before he crashed into the cement basement three stories below.

He strained to look up at his captor. “Let me up now and I won’t press charges,” Richter bluffed.

The man found that funny enough to laugh. “You won’t press charges,” he said with certainty. “You’ll take your punishment like a man, you piece of shit.”

Richter’s mind whirled, hoping the punishment didn’t involve him breaking his spine on the concrete below.

The big agent hauled him up suddenly, rolled him over the railing and propelled him head first into the fire door. The agent pushed the door open and flung Richter onto the roof. Richter staggered forward trying to gain his footing on the slippery, wet tar and gravel surface. At least it had stopped raining.

Team Seven’s de facto leader came onto the roof behind him, stripping off his flak jacket and a host of weapons.

Richter belatedly reached for his holster, but his hand came back empty. He searched his memory. He hadn’t heard it fall through the stairwell.

Then he saw it in Wilmington’s big hand. The man flung it across the roof.

Richter’s grin glinted oily white in the darkness of the rooftop. Wilmington meant to fight him. Well, Wilmington had no idea who he was dealing with. Matt Richter knew more martial art forms than AD Rivers knew loopholes in the regulations.

He did not wait for his adversary to be ready. He simply attacked.

He was stunned to feel the air rush from his lungs as Wilmington’s big foot planted itself in the center of his diaphragm. Wilmington pushed him away. “Better show me something else,” he spat. “Because I’m going to kill you.”

One look at the man’s eyes, his face, his whole stance confirmed the words. It was not an idle threat. He began the fight in earnest now, wondering how long it would be before Nico lazily got around to being curious about what had happened to his boss.

When the stairwell did open, it was not Martinez who emerged. It was Them. He had begun to think of them collectively. He hated Them. Kelly included. He staggered backward from a blow but not before he delivered an elbow solidly to the side of Wilmington’s head.

He stepped back a moment. Regrouped. Groped for a new strategy.

Richter had landed more than a dozen solid hits. He had heard ribs crack. One of the man’s eyes was swelling shut. Blood dribbled down his chin. Still the big man didn’t seem to know when to quit. Had hardly seemed to care or notice that he had been injured. He had reach on Richter and he was deceptively fast for his size. He used both factors to his advantage.

Richter was tired now and getting more so. He was having trouble catching his breath. Blood was dripping into his eye from a cut above his eyebrow.

*Just give me a gun*, he thought sourly, as the other agents appeared. He glared at them all. *Someone give me a god damn gun and we’ll finish it right now.*
Of course, no one picked up his telepathy, and his throat was too raw to speak.

“Mr. Wilmington,” tisked the southerner. “You have selfishly taken all the good shots for yourself.”

Wilmington laughed. “Come on in Ezra,” he said, gesturing at Richter.

Standish eyed Richter as if he were something on the bottom of his shoe. “Don’t think it would be sporting,” he said. “Can’t think I’d have the self-restraint to use only my hands.” He nodded at Buck and settled back against the edge of the doorframe “Please continue.”

Richter spat out a mouthful of blood. The last kick to his head had him seeing stars. Now the roof was slowly revolving as the fatigue started to take its toll.

“What’s wrong?” Wilmington mocked him softly. “Easy to win when your opponent’s already hurt, isn’t it?”

Richter swore. Damn Larabee. Damn him and all his friends. No one was worth this much trouble.

He dodged a punch directed to his head and feinted sideways intending to land an elbow to Wilmington’s newly cracked ribs, but his steps were slowing.

The taller agent twisted away, taking only a glancing hit. He continued his turn and landed a knee solidly into Richter’s lower back. Richter staggered forward, carried by his own momentum and slipped on the loose, wet gravel. He slid onto his elbows.

The knee landed in his back, flattening him onto the roof. Then his arms were yanked up behind him until he felt his shoulder pop out. He didn’t give the man the satisfaction of hearing him scream. He felt his head forced down onto the tar and gravel surface. Panting, he found himself face down, the gravel digging into his mouth. He spat, pushed with lips and tongue made a gap to breathe in.

“Buck,” said a voice that Richter dimly remembered as Ryan Kelly, goody-two-shoes liaison from Denver ATF. “Perhaps now is the time to stop,” Kelly said.

Now you speak, Richter thought. His stomach lurched violently as his other shoulder popped out of joint. He fought not to vomit into the air hole he had just created.

“Buck!” another voice joined, alarmed now, higher, more strident, even as Richter felt the pressure on the back of his head increase, felt his face ground harder into the rooftop.

He had one last trick in him before he would give up. Play dead, he thought. He stopped flailing. I’m dead. I’m out. Ease off the pressure you stupid bastard, he thought furiously, as if he could force the words into Wilmington’s tiny little brain. He tried to make himself convincingly limp.

* * *

Oxygen, an IV line and fresh blood coursed into the battered body. Bruised lungs inflated. Memory returned.

Dead. All of them. Dead. Because of me. I killed them. They’re dead.

Familiar searing, white hot pain.

Dimly a distant voice interrupted. …All here.

All here?
He struggled to make sense of his confused thoughts.

He believed if he could just get his eyes open, he could figure it out.

He fought to get his eyelids unglued.

His head left the pillow with the effort.

“Easy, Cowboy,” came the startled response.

The whole room lurched. And he succeeded in popping his eyes open, just as water and bile rushed up his throat. He ripped the mask off his face, rolled into his restraints, and vomited over the side of the bed.

An EMT in blue loomed instantly over him. He tried unsuccessfully to move her aside, looking for that voice.

Why was the room moving?

*Ambulance.* The word came to him.

A face came into focus. Two blue eyes, as familiar as his own were staring down at him. Vin. He grinned in disbelief, feeling his lips crack. His eyes stung. He blinked it away impatiently and examined the blue eyes. Worry was written all through them.

He frowned. *Worry? About what?*

He ignored the EMT. He ignored his stomach. He ignored the swaying vehicle. He grabbed Tanner’s proffered hand like a lifeline as memory plowed into him hard, leaving him gasping.

The EMT pulled out another set of straps. Restraints.

Tanner said something Chris had never heard him say to a woman.

She dropped the strap without a word.

Vin pulled the oxygen mask back down over Chris’s face.

“Wait,” Chris coughed. He looked around the ambulance.

Tanner waited. Impatient. But he waited.

“Where’s Buck?” Chris asked, coming fully awake now.

Tanner shrugged, but a fraction of hesitation, the sideways flick of his eye gave him away. Told Chris as much as he needed to know.

“Give me your phone,” Larabee snapped, getting both hands free now.

Tanner’s eyebrows shot up.

The EMT protested.

“Give me the god damn phone,” Chris spat, beginning to cough.

Tanner fished it out of his pocket. He watched Chris fumble with the buttons. Brow furrowed in concentration, laboriously entering words into a text message. Tanner pulled the oxygen mask down
over Chris’s nose and mouth. Larabee didn’t protest, his full attention on the phone. He hit send.

Then he lay back and closed his eyes, breathing hard. Concentrating gratefully on the quiet Texas drawl that washed over him and the hand that closed firmly around his own. Like an anchor, holding him here.

* * *

The phone vibrated in the dirt, twenty-five feet away, next to Buck’s flak jacket and his weapons. He heard the hum. Heard it rattle against the gravel. Twice. It stopped.

Buck’s head snapped up. Now he was going to have to go over there and get it.

He glanced at the phone, glanced at his three teammates, his friends, who stood tensely at the stairwell door. Ready to jump in and pull him back from committing what would surely be murder. He glanced at them and back down at Richter below him. If he had made a mistake, he knew these men would lie for him. But he would ask them not to. If he made a mistake.

But he hadn’t.

“Get up,” he snapped in Richter’s ear.

Richter didn’t stir.

Buck pressed him down hard into the gravel, grinding him once more with his knee as he pushed himself up to stand.

Richter grunted painfully and began to move.

Wilmington went to his phone, while Richter struggled to his hands and knees. He spat out the bloody gravel and pushed himself up.

Across the rooftop, Buck activated the light and read his text message.

Josiah, J.D., Ezra, and Ryan Kelly were startled to hear him laugh. Out loud. And real.

Buck hauled Richter up by his collar and pushed him across to J.D. and Ezra.

“Drive this trash to the hospital,” he spat.

Ezra grinned contemptuously at the bruised and bloody Richter. “Rest assured. We shall hit every pothole on the way.”

J.D. cuffed Richter’s hands behind him. “So you’ll behave,” the young agent said, a note of warning in his tone.

Kelly led Richter into the stairwell.

J.D. turned back to Buck.

He was certain Buck had meant to kill Richter. And certain they wouldn’t be able to stop him. He would lie at the trial, of course. And Buck would have his head. But he’d go to jail for perjury anyway, and gladly. The phone had saved both of them from the sentencing.

Then he realized that Buck had not planned to kill Richter. More like show Richter what it feels like to know death is coming. To know that he was powerless to stop it. J.D. shivered.
Then his eyes fell on the phone, still open in Buck’s hand. “What was the message?” he asked suddenly curious.

Buck flipped the phone around for his teammates to read.

In neat block letters the message read: DON’T MAKE ME COME BACK THERE. --C.L.

Ezra grinned and shook his head in disbelief. Josiah and J.D.’s relieved laughter rang out over the rooftop into the night.

In the stairwell, Richter waited with Kelly, whose narrowed eyes promised no intercession of mercy. He fervently wished that the whole damn lot of them, and Larabee especially, had, in fact, died when that warehouse blew up.
It had taken the silent plea in the blue eyes and the earnestness in the Texas drawl to convince the nurse to call Dr. Kahar at home. She knew the doctor had had a long day. She made the call anyway. She explained that she was talking to Agent Tanner of Denver ATF. She was surprised when Kahar agreed to come back to the hospital.

She smiled at the agent when she told him Kahar was coming. He smiled at her—a nice smile, she noted—and said a quiet, courteous “Thank you.” And called her “Ma’am.” She watched him walk off.

His other friends were not all so polite. One of them was being roughly escorted across the floor by a tall African-American man, who was shoving him toward the ER doors, berating him all the while. For his part, the one being shoved was howling his protestations, while holding a giant ice pack over the entire left side of his face.

“Dammit, Nathan!” he cried, clipping a doorframe as Nathan shoved him onward without pity.

“Dammit, nothin’,” the medic said fiercely. “You’re goin’ back there. An’ you’re gettin’ your face looked at. An’ you’re gettin’ it stitched from the looks of it.”

He raised another protest and was silenced.

“Then you’re gettin’ your ribs taped. And THEN,” he said, yanking the taller man firmly toward the doors by the neck. “When you look human again, we’ll tell you where they put Chris.”

“Look human again?” Buck roared, insulted.

“It’s your own damn fault,” Nathan snapped back. “Stop arguing.”

A doctor stretched out his hand and took Wilmington’s elbow. Buck twisted to glare back at Nathan, but he twisted on the wrong side and let out a yelp.

Nathan shook his head, scowling. He called after the doctor. “If you gotta give this fool stitches, make sure they’re big ones.” The door swung closed, leaving Nathan muttering to the air. “Big ugly ones. Leave a damn nasty scar. Fool,” he repeated.

He was still muttering when he returned to the waiting area and dropped into the plastic chair he had been pacing agitatedly in front of when Josiah had finally shown up with Buck.

“Stubborn, mule headed, ornery…”

He looked up to see Josiah grinning at him.

“What are you grinnin’ at?” he demanded. “You’re no better than the rest of ‘em.”

“No, Son,” Josiah agreed, slouched down in his chair, long legs splayed out before him. “Looks like we’re all alike in that regard.”

Nathan gave him a sour look and returned to his muttering, unperturbed at Josiah’s quiet mirth.

J.D. was pacing a steady line back and forth across the front of the ER doors.

“Mr. Dunne,” Ezra said finally, sifting a deck of cards impatiently through his fingers. “Would you
mind taking a rest? I believe you are making the good patrons of this establishment sea sick.”

“I can’t sit,” J.D. said earnestly. “I just…” He trailed off, distractedly.

Ezra looked at J.D. closely and realized it was entirely true. My Lord, Ezra thought, rolling his eyes heavenward. Sit? The boy can’t even finish a sentence. Did no one remember to keep him away from the coffee?

“Then go pace somewhere else,” Ezra suggested aloud. “Somewhere out of my line of vision.”

J.D. complied. He went to the rear of the waiting room and paced along the wall behind Ezra’s head, where the sensitive—some termed it paranoid—undercover agent could feel his presence, every step, back and forth. He clenched his teeth together.

“That’s splendid, Mr. Dunne. Thank you,” he said sarcastically.

J.D., who missed the sarcasm entirely, replied, “You’re welcome.”

Vin chuckled.

Ezra turned his head at the sound of it. “I’m convinced he does it on purpose,” Standish whispered confidentially.

Vin snorted, and grinned mischievously back at him.

Ezra turned back to his cards, hiding his delight that he had been able to provoke such a response from the teammate whose sharp wit had been much absent the past few weeks.

Leaning against a wall to the side, Kelly watched them. For a few short hours, he had been among them. Been one of them. Filled in a gap. But they were reclaiming their rituals now. The shared habits that bound them together as a team. He was glad to see it. Relieved. And yet it made him feel oddly homesick.

They were here waiting on Chris. Their missing piece.

He was waiting on the piece of dirt who had been willing to sacrifice a fellow agent—a damn good one—to his own ambition. Kelly had called Travis and gave him the facts, most of them anyway. Some details would serve no purpose but to stoke up the fire. He didn’t think anyone needed that right now.

Travis had then called Richter’s AD. She had thanked him for the information but had no plans to come pick her agent up. Kelly doubted that Martinez would show either. He had disappeared by the time Kelly had brought Richter down from the roof. So Travis had given Kelly the distasteful responsibility of seeing that Richter at least got home all right, that is if the hospital decided not to keep him.

Looking over at Team Seven, he hoped for Richter’s sake that the doctors would not be keeping him here overnight.

Doctor Kahar had arrived. He had nodded to the agents in the waiting room and disappeared beyond the Emergency Room doors. Team Seven relaxed visibly. And Kelly grinned. He wondered if Kahar could be transferred to Denver. Anyone who had a way with Team Seven would be of invaluable use to their local hospital.

This time, with the legal next of kin present and with the identity of the patient known, Kahar was
able to get important medical history information faxed to him from Four Corners General. He was not at all surprised to hear that Agent Larabee’s file was thick enough to occupy two file folders. He smiled to himself. Agent Larabee clearly had a very interesting history.

After looking at the patient’s medical history, and at Agent Tanner’s request, Kahar went lightly on the sedatives, leaving it up to the painkillers to keep the man out for the night. The largest of the agents had smiled gently at that and said that the presence of friends was sure to do more to guarantee a peaceful night’s sleep than any drug could. Kahar was not, therefore, surprised when six ATF agents, including one with a newly bandaged face followed him up to Chris Larabee’s room. He brought them extra chairs and left instructions at the nurse’s station to let the men stay as long as they wished. He explained everything in the plainest terms he could, getting Agent Jackson’s promise to clarify anything they still didn’t understand. Then Doctor Kahar left them outside the door.

“How many stitches, Buck?” J.D. asked softly, looking at his friend’s face, and actually remembering to keep his voice down.

“One,” Buck said sourly. Then he brightened. “But the nurse told me that even if there is a scar, it’s sure to be a cute one.”

J.D. made exaggerated gagging noises.

The figure in the bed inside the room stirred softly.

They stole into the room. Each of them laying a hand carefully, almost unconsciously, on their leader.

Kelly found them like that hours later after he’d put Richter in a police cruiser, with instructions to get him settled before the cops left him. The police had promised they would. After all, to them Richter was a hero.

Now Kelly stood in the doorway and looked at the members of Team Seven, in uncomfortable chairs, all pulled up close to the bed, as if they were still assuring themselves that Chris was really there. J.D. Dunne slept with his head on his arms at the foot of the bed, one hand on Chris’s shin. Buck Wilmington was sprawled on three chairs, his feet propped up. The bruises that stuck out from the bandages were shiny in the lamplight. Someone had covered him with a blanket, but he would have a sore neck in the morning. His left arm and hand rested on the edge of the bed beside Chris’s. The sight of Standish sleeping at Chris’s other side made Kelly laugh softly. So neat and impeccably attired at all times. Some of his teammates—and Kelly could easily guess who—had waited until the undercover agent nodded off, then adorned his head with a hat made of folded newspaper. Kelly did not fail to notice that in sleep, one of Standish’s hands lay across Chris’s arm. And Nathan Jackson, the medic, next to Standish, chin on his chest, legs stretched under the hospital cot. One hand on the edge of the bed. Sound asleep.

Only Tanner and Sanchez were awake. Josiah sat near the head of the bed, legs crossed, reading a book under the night light. His lips were moving, and Kelly wondered whether he was reading aloud. Tanner was pulled up on the right, on the other side of Standish. Hands folded under his chin, he stared, just watching the steady, rhythmic ventilator-less rise and fall of Chris’s stomach.

Josiah looked up as Kelly stepped softly into the room. Kelly nodded silently, questioningly toward Chris.

“He’s doing okay,” Josiah replied quietly. The sleeping agents stirred. Dark blue eyes cracked open at him, then closed again, as Buck adjusted his head to a more natural position.
“Fever’s coming down already. And he’s quiet.” Josiah said, satisfaction in his voice.

Kelly smiled. “Glad to hear it. He know you’re here?”

Josiah looked over at his team leader, a smile sliding across his face. “We told him. He talked to us. But I don’t think he’ll remember.” He shrugged and smiled fondly. “Like Buck said, we’ll just keep telling him until he gets it through his hard head.”

Kelly studied the expression on the clean-shaven, sleeping face. It struck him, as it had at times in the past, how different sleeping looked than unconscious. Asleep Larabee looked relaxed. Peaceful.

“Deep down, I think he knows,” Kelly said.

Josiah nodded silently. He looked back up at Kelly, realizing again the debt they owed him. “Do you want a chair?” he asked.

“No thanks,” Kelly replied. The room was already crowded. He felt strangely awkward. The way he had felt once as a child on a camping trip when he had walked accidentally into another family’s tent.

Josiah seemed to sense his discomfort. “We owe you, Ryan,” he said quietly, seriously, his eyes lending force to his words. “We won’t ever forget it.”

He meant to say something glib, smart, cavalier, but the words stuck in his throat. He just nodded.

Gave another long look at his friend, his colleague who had fought harder than hell to come back to a team that had fought harder than hell to get to him. He smiled softly to himself and then headed for the elevator, his hotel, a shower, room service, and his bed, in that order. He had no intention of getting up tomorrow until he darn well felt like it.

Darn, he noted suddenly to himself, pleased. His language was improving already.

* * *

It took several tries, several patient explanations and re-explanations of the same information, but by mid-afternoon, Chris finally seemed to be aware of what was going on around him. Now he went to work trying to fit together the indistinct pieces of memory that floated through his brain.

Buck eyed his old friend closely, although he attempted to do it in as subtle a way as possible. Not subtle enough apparently.

“Stop it,” Chris growled.

“Stop what?” Buck grinned innocently. He couldn’t help it.

“Looking at me like that,” Chris snapped back.

At a noise from the hall, Chris shot a glance toward the door.

“They’re still here, Chris,” Buck said, still smiling. He knew Chris was looking for them, his other five agents. He had watched the green eyes take attendance every time Chris woke up since the early hours of morning. “They just have to eat, have to move, have to take care of personal matters.” He waggled his eyebrows.

“I know that,” Chris muttered irritably.

Buck was still grinning at him patronizingly. “I know,” he said. “You’ll just feel better when you can see them all together in one place.”
“Shut up,” Chris retorted. Buck was right. God knows he didn’t expect them to spend all their time here. Hell, HE didn’t want to spend any more time here. He was faintly surprised, somehow touched, to see that they had spent the entire night. It had taken him a little more time to absorb how dog tired they all looked, some falsely cheerful, some strangely silent, and he felt vaguely guilty about that, that somehow it was his fault, although he was still not sure what he had done.

He shifted uncomfortably in the bed. His head hurt. His arms and hands hurt. His chest hurt. His ribs hurt all the way around. Even the bottoms of his feet hurt, although Josiah had told him that was because he had walked barefoot over broken glass. When had he done that? And why?

He continued to take stock of the pains, the sharp shooting ones, the dull throbbing ones, the indistinct diffuse ones that spread through his insides. In the end he concluded that everything hurt. It hurt to talk, hurt to breathe. It even hurt to think too hard.

Well then, he counseled himself in a voice that sounded strangely like Buck, just take the painkillers. But he couldn’t bring himself to do so because more than anything, he desperately wanted the fuzziness to clear out of his brain, so he could start to feel like himself.

Buck knew that Chris was already trying to figure things out. Could tell from the pinching at the edges of his eyes, a frown here and there, and most tellingly the way he had cocked his head slowly to one side, as J.D. had tried lamely to tell a truly terrible joke. Buck wanted to smack the kid upside the head. He had told him to act natural, not pretend that everything was dandy.

As for Buck, he was doing his best to slow Chris down. He had banned Josiah’s newspaper from the room, from the vicinity, from the floor if possible, and he told the nurses that no one was to bring newspapers to Larabee’s room. They hadn’t even really had a chance to talk to him about what happened yet. Buck sure as hell didn’t want him reading about his own miraculous resurrection—or worse yet, ATF Agent Matthew Richter’s stunning capture of four militia men and the subsequent release of information leading to the confiscation of another large cache of weapons early this morning.

Chris had yet to completely absorb the idea that nearly three full weeks of time were missing from his memory. Winter had ended and spring had come since Chris had been unconscious. Even in Denver. But the change was more pronounced here in Texas. It was not lost on Chris. And Buck’s heart hurt to glimpse the brief bewilderment that flashed across his friend’s features when he looked out the sunny window for the first time and saw flowers lining the courtyard walkways.

He had yet to be told what Team Seven had been up to in his absence.

The sounds of cheerful banter came up the hallway, accompanied by an irascible crack that elicited irritated commentary from someone with a southern drawl. Buck saw the recognition and relief cross Chris’s face even before J.D., Ezra, and Vin appeared in the door. J.D. and Vin were grinning. Ezra rolled his eyes, but couldn’t hide the smile that broke over his face.

“Good Lord, Mr. Larabee,” said the southerner with mock astonishment. “They have let you sit up.”

“Progress, Ezra,” Chris returned. His voice was still rough and his throat still felt like he had swallowed ground glass, but at least his brain felt like it was beginning to catch up.

Buck passed him a cup of ice chips.

Ezra looked like he wanted to say something else, but then his face closed up again and the moment slid away.
“Hell Cowboy, you look a sight better than you did when we left,” Vin said, swatting Chris on the leg as he entered the room.

J.D. gasped softly at the sound of the smack.

Chris’s eyes flicked to his youngest agent. “I’m not going to break, J.D.” he said with the barest of smiles.

J.D. flushed. “I know that,” he said covering his embarrassment.

Chris’s eyes narrowed slightly, but he returned his gaze to Vin.

“Besides,” Vin drawled, a toothy smart-ass grin lighting up his features. “Even half outta yer head, ya seemed to have no trouble takin’ on Texas’s finest. Course ya did put yer arm through a glass cabinet.”

Chris’s gaze flicked down to his bandaged arm and the stitches in his knuckles.

Buck swore silently to himself. Great, Tanner. Now we gotta explain that. Chris looked back over at Buck as if he had heard the thought. Probably did, Buck thought sourly. It was hell having a boss who knew him inside and out.

Chris was still looking at him.

Damn, Stud, he thought. I don’t think you’re ready for the whole story.

The blond head was cocked thoughtfully to one side, and Buck knew if he didn’t start telling Chris something, that Chris would just ask J.D. And J.D., being honest, and not having the sense to know any better, would just tell Chris everything. Whether Chris was ready to hear it or not. He took a deep breath.

“J.D.,” he said cheerfully. “Can you go get me a really big coffee? Chris an’ me are gonna have a talk.”

The young agent looked hurt. He was being dismissed. He glared at Buck. No, not dismissed. Shielded. Again. And that bothered him even more.

“Sure, Buck,” he said with false cheer and turned to leave.

Ezra muttered a quick, “I’ll join you,” and hurried out on J.D.’s heels.

Chris frowned, puzzled. “You leavin’, too?” he asked Vin.


Buck shot him a truly dirty look.

But Chris had heard the anger in Tanner’s voice. He stared at him, tried to fathom it out.

Buck cleared his throat and Chris turned toward him. “I’ll just give you the highlights,” he said. “Then later on, you can ask questions and we’ll try to fill in the details. All right?”

No, it wasn’t all right. But it was the best offer he was likely to get. He could continue working on fitting the pieces together afterward. And, he reminded himself, if all else failed, he could always ask J.D.
“Good,” Larabee said, looking over at Buck. “You can start with what happened to your face.”

“Got in a fight,” Buck said simply and began to fill Chris in.

Buck was good. Vin had to give him that. He listened to him deftly, glibly, humorously glide right over the part where the whole team thought Chris was dead. And then sail smoothly right on to the part where they found out he wasn’t. Buck was good, all right, but no one was that good.

“Stop,” Chris said suddenly, holding up his hand.

“What?” Buck asked innocently, attempting to resume where he had left off.

Chris gave him an exasperated look.

Further words died in Buck’s throat. He looked at Vin for an escape.

“Don’t look at me, Bucklin,” the Texas sharpshooter responded sourly. *You think you know how to handle Chris. You handle him.*

Sure, Buck thought, staring daggers at the blue-eyed Texan. *Tell him how he put his arm through a glass cabinet; then clam up on me. Thanks for nothin’, Junior.*

The two glared at each other over top of Larabee’s bed.

Chris looked from one to the other. “Back up,” he said quietly, rubbing his forehead, where yet another dull ache had begun to blossom. He looked up again at their faces. “You thought I was dead?”

Buck and Vin exchanged a look that passed so quickly Chris hardly had time to read it, but the sentiment was plain as day. Chris’s whole body stiffened.

Buck cleared his throat. “We don’t have to do this now,” he said softly.

He ought to have known better.

Anger flashed through Chris’s eyes. “Now, Buck,” he snapped.

Vin looked away at the wall.

Buck sighed. There was no escape and no hope of rescue. Best just to give in. “We thought you were dead,” he said simply, honestly.

Chris’s piercing gaze tried to read the eye that wasn’t swollen almost shut. Vin wouldn’t even face him.

“Who told you that?” Chris demanded, his anger rising.

“No one told us that,” Buck snapped back, more harshly than he intended. He heard his next words but couldn’t stop himself. “You never came out of the warehouse. It blew up. Killed a hundred people. We waited around for six hours till they brought us your stuff.”

The blood drained from Chris’s face. “My stuff?”

“You know,” Vin said icily. “Your melted badge. Your mangled gun. Your vest.”

“Vin,” Josiah warned from the doorway.
Chris’s head snapped up. They were there. They were all there. He hadn’t heard them arrive. He stared up at them, white-faced. Mouth open. He struggled to speak, but Tanner was just picking up steam.

“Vin, nothin’,” Vin snapped back at Josiah, suddenly furious. “He wants the story. Here’s the story.” He turned back to Chris, his eyes blazing like Chris had never seen. “They found your badge and gun underneath the burnt up body of the guy who was wearing your vest and your coat. We identified all the pieces. We took your badge and gun home in an envelope.”

“We super-glued your door shut,” Ezra offered, hoping to derail what was clearly a train-wreck in the making.

Buck shot the undercover agent a grateful look, but the comment accomplished only one of its intended effects: Tanner halted. Then he got a good full look at the horrified expression on Chris’s face, swore twice and fled the room.

“Vin!” Chris called, lurching forward to grab Tanner’s arm, a shirt tail anything. But all he succeeded in doing was stretching his bruised and cracked ribs. He swore, swore again, and flung his cup of ice chips at the wall, sending stabbing pains through his whole left side. “Fucking stupid,” Chris cursed furiously, curling up into a ball. “Goddamn fucking idiot.”

“Great idea, Buck!” J.D. snapped, flying to Chris’s side. Talking softly.

Buck threw himself out of his chair, ran his hand over the side of his face without the bruises, then turned and kicked his chair to the wall.

Nathan knelt beside J.D. He was asking Chris if he wanted the nurse. Chris shook his head, squeezing his eyes closed against the pain. Nathan gestured to Ezra to get the nurse anyway.

“I’ll do it,” Buck spat. “This was my brilliant idea. I’ll get the nurse.”

“Let Ezra do it,” Josiah said calmly, gripping Buck’s arm firmly. “One of you two story-tellin’ fools has got to stay here.”

Buck stared at Josiah like he had three heads. Josiah nodded his head at Chris. “You don’t think it’s Tanner he’s cursing out over there, do you?”

Buck looked at Chris again and saw the guilt written all over his pain-wracked features.

“Shit,” Buck said, getting his breathing under control, his face twisting over with his own guilt. “Guess we’re both a couple of fucking idiots.”

The nurse made Chris take the painkillers this time. The only choice he had was how he wanted them. She settled him back into the bed, spoke a few reassuring words and shot a warning glance at each of the six men in the room before she left again.

“Jesus,” Chris said again, his eyes still tightly closed. The virulent stream of curses had stopped, interrupted by Chris’s unwillingness to vent his rage in front of the nurse. He pressed his bandaged hands against his forehead as if he were trying to hold his head together. The green eyes opened and he looked at his men. “I fucked up, didn’t I?”

It was supposed to be an apology. Not much of one, he knew, but he had to start somewhere. Figure out how to make it right. It came back to him that he could never make it right. His stupidity was so obvious that he could not understand the blank looks of disbelief they gave back to him.
He dragged the hands down over his eyes.

Ezra frowned. “Well, I don’t know,” he said finally, breaking the dumbfounded silence. “I suppose that depends on what it is you think you did.”

Buck looked up at the undercover agent and over at Chris.

J.D. was in the doorway, looking like he wanted to flee, but standing his ground.

Nathan was perched on the bed and Josiah had resumed his chair, protectively settled at Chris’s head.

“How exactly do you think you failed us?” Josiah asked, gently removing both hands from Chris’s face. But his own hand remained lightly on Chris’s head. He watched discreetly, as Chris struggled to hide the shame that glimmered in the green depths of his eyes.

J.D. spoke up. His voice trembled slightly, from anger or sorrow, Buck couldn’t tell. “Who was the guy? How did he get your jacket and gun?”

Chris rolled his eyes upward toward the wall behind him, encountered Josiah there and rolled them quickly away. There was nowhere to hide. Time to face the music. He owed them that much.

“Let me up, Josiah,” he said quietly. An order. Josiah lifted his hand, and Nathan helped him adjust the head of the bed back up to a sitting position.

He looked at each of them. Wished Tanner had returned. He didn’t want to have to say this twice. He bit off his pride. He’d say it as many times as he had to. For what he now knew he’d done to them, it was a small price to pay.

“He was one of the militiamen,” Chris said, taking a deep breath. He rushed the words out, partly to get them out before the painkillers knocked him back to la la land, and partly just to get them into the air, so his men could do what they wanted after that. “Right after I ordered you out, they started to break ranks. I knew something was up, so I stuck tight behind a crate and tried to figure it out. Some of the militia lines began to break and run. There were no cops, no agents anywhere in sight and they were running for the doors. That’s when I knew it was going to be bad. I decided to just make a break for it, when suddenly there’s this guy in my face. I never even saw him coming—then suddenly there he is, screaming at me to hand over my vest and jacket. My badge and gun.”

“So you gave them to him,” J.D. said in shocked disbelief.

“Well no,” Chris said, awkwardly. “First he knocked me into a stack of crates and cracked my head on the concrete floor. Then I played possum and let him have whatever he wanted.”

J.D. continued to stare, open mouthed.

Chris swore to himself again. He couldn’t expect them to understand. “My gun was empty. I couldn’t shoot my way out. If he thought he could get by the ATF in disguise, he could try. I figured you guys would know he wasn’t me, as soon as someone notified you.” He stopped, his tongue growing heavy. “Only I guess it didn’t happen that way.”

“How did you escape?” Nathan asked. Chris hadn’t said it, but he had looked at the charts. He knew enough to piece together a good part of the story. He knew that Chris had acquired his two bullet holes well before he tried to leave the warehouse. Well before Pirelli and Walsh had found him. The militia had had access to armor piercing bullets. The Kevlar had little effect but to slow one bullet slightly. Still it had been close enough range to go right through him. The other bullet, a different
kind and caliber never even touched his vest, slamming into his unshielded right arm and taking out a chunk of bone and muscle. The militiaman had found Chris wounded and fought him for the disguise he thought would save him. He had left Chris on the floor to die.

Chris yawned, as the painkillers started to take effect. “When he left, I took his camouflage jacket. Figured if it would work for him, it might work for me. Figured I could identify myself as soon as I got picked up. Then I saw the rocket launcher, so I dove for the nearest concrete bunker. Turned out to be the dumpsters.”

They stared at him. No one said anything for several minutes.

He felt himself beginning to drift. “It was night by the time I woke up. You know the rest,” he finished lamely.

Right, Nathan thought bitterly. For six hours we stood around doing nothing, while you were lying bleeding under a dumpster. And when you finally did walk out of there, you got yourself beat up. And you think you failed us?

“Damn, Stud,” Buck said quietly.

Chris didn’t look up, afraid to meet their eyes, expecting recrimination for the apparent havoc his last ditch and totally unethical escape plan had caused.

Josiah shifted in his chair and scratched his head. “Let me see if I understand this. You let the guy have your empty gun, badge, and vest, so you could get out of the way of an incoming missile. That about right?”

The tiniest smile of irony tugged at Larabee’s lips. “Yeah,” he said, his eyes drifting closed. He knew what Josiah was trying to do. He was grateful.

He did not see the long look the others exchanged. But Ezra’s words echoed in his brain as the painkillers sent him drifting away.

“My dear Mr. Larabee,” his problematic undercover agent said with quiet wonder. “At long last, you have developed an instinct for self-preservation.”

* * *

The first words he heard on awakening in the late afternoon were “I oughta kick your ass.”

He cracked his eyes open. Tanner was standing over him, hands on hips.

“Probably wouldn’t be too hard right about now,” Chris cracked back, the words garbled by the wad of cotton he was sure someone had stuffed in his mouth while he was sleeping. The pain had dulled to a muffled ache. Still everywhere. But distant.

Tanner glared at him. “Ain’t you even gonna ask why?” he said, sounding sort of disappointed.


“The boys told me your side of the story,” Vin replied, still angry.

Oh, that’s why, Chris thought. He struggled to sit up to resume his attempt at an apology. Or so Tanner could kick his ass. Either one.

Vin put a hand in the center of his chest and pushed him back down, pinning him with a blue-eyed
glare. “Surviving ain’t fucking up.”

The force of the words hit him. He looked up at the angry eyes. Not angry, he decided. Frightened. Fierce.

“I must have put you through hell,” Chris replied quietly, earnestly.

“Pirelli, Richter, and the militia put us all through hell,” Tanner snapped back. “They just took you along for the ride.”

Chris laughed at that, ended up in a spasm of coughing, and Vin thrust a cup of water with a straw into his hands.

“Besides,” Tanner said with an ironic grin. “I reckon you ain’t gonna be too happy with us when Buck gets around to telling you what else happened while you were away.”

Chris raised a questioning eyebrow.

Tanner grinned and remained resolutely silent.

Vin took the cup back and Chris’s eyes drifted slowly closed again, pulled him toward sleep. As he drifted off, he marveled at the forgiveness his team had given him. Again.

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Later, in the early evening, he enjoyed a blessed hour to himself. He was feeling more like himself now. And had already begun quietly pumping his agents for information. Separately. Carefully. He had talked to Ryan Kelly. Had even gotten Kelly to give him a copy of the ‘squelched’ police report detailing his own assault. With his wits about him now, he hid the police report under his pillow and cajoled his agents into going to dinner somewhere reasonably nice. He promised not to get up. Promised not to do anything stupid. Even promised to call a nurse and take his medicine if he felt pain or just felt like crap. He had J.D.’s cell phone on his nightstand. They swore they’d be back in an hour, two at most. He told them to relax. They all looked at him doubtfully, but in the end, they went.

So far, he’d been very good. Except for the meds, but dammit, he couldn’t think with that crap fogging up his brain. And he needed to put the pieces of his memory together. At least now he remembered how he managed to put his hand through a glass pharmacy cabinet and why he had tried to shoot another federal agent. He felt a little bit bad about it, but after considering the police report again, he decided that as long as he didn’t actually kill Pirelli, he could put that guilt aside. Besides, at the time, he had believed that Pirelli had killed his teammates. The thought made him feel cold. He shoved it back down.

The team took the two hours, but Buck came back earlier to find that someone had given Chris a small hand mirror and he was examining the bruises on the side of his face. Buck grinned at him from the doorway. The man just didn’t know how to work a good thing. He had used his own livid bruises to garner sympathy and attention from the young and attractive females on the wait staff at the restaurant.

“Hey, hardhead,” he greeted from the doorway. “See somethin’ you like?”

Chris grinned, suddenly embarrassed.

Buck sauntered in, that gangly, long-limbed walk that Chris hadn’t seen in what seemed like ages. He squinted down at the piece of paper poking out from Chris’s pillow. Chris figured out he was
caught a second too late. Buck had it in his hand. Storm clouds gathered on his face as he read it. Then he glared at Chris.

“Where’d you get this?” he snapped.

“Doesn’t matter,” Chris said tiredly.

Buck glared at him for a moment more, then plopped himself down in a chair. He sighed. “So you got it all figured out yet?”

“Mostly,” Chris said. “Still got some blank spots.”

“Shoot,” Buck said, giving in.

Chris looked at him suspiciously.

Buck shrugged. “I promised you could ask.”

“What happened to Pirelli and Richter and the others?” Chris asked.

Buck was surprised that was his first question, but he answered. “Treated and released. Next.”

“What exactly have you boys been up to in my absence?”

Buck hooted with laughter. The first question was bait. This was real gold.

“Oh not much,” he said, rubbing the back of his neck ruefully. “Ran your three replacements off the floor—and probably right out of the ATF. Went AWOL. Misappropriated some surveillance equipment, dressed Ezra up as a priest, broke into Samuel Bautiste’s house, extorted information from him at gunpoint. That’s it, really.”

Chris gaped at him. “Think you might have gone a bit overboard there, Buck?”

Buck shrugged, chagrined. “It seemed reasonable at the time,” he replied.

Chris shook his head in disbelief. “Anything else I should know?”

“Yes,” Buck said brightly. “Dowd sold the rocket launchers to the militia, and Travis’ll be here tomorrow.”

“Great,” Chris said through his teeth. “Wait till he finds out I handed over my badge and gun to a known militant.”

Buck snorted. “Son, I think the ass-chewin’ will be for the rest of us. You just keep your head down.” Then he grinned. “By the way, he got your insurance reinstated and your records restored.”

“Shit,” Chris groaned, leaning his head back on the pillow. He hadn’t even thought about the paperwork involved in being declared alive again.

“Now if I can just convince that guy we sold your house to, to give it back.”

Chris’s head snapped around to look at him.

“I’m kidding, Stud,” Buck said, laughing at the horror he saw on Chris’s face. Then he sobered. “Never even read your will, actually,” he said wincing. “Couldn’t bring myself to do it. And I’m pretty sure no one else wanted to hear it either.”
It was Chris’s turn to wince.

Buck forced a cheerful grin. “Next question.”

“An easy one,” Chris said, changing the subject back.

“Good. Shoot.”

He brought the mirror back up. “Any idea how I got these bruises on my chin?”

He had meant it as a joke. He knew he had made a mistake when he saw Buck’s forced smile melt away.

“That was me,” the big man said quietly. “I was trying to get your attention.” He lifted his eyes to his old friend’s face. “I thought you were going to quit on me.”

Chris’s gut clenched at the sorrow that crossed his oldest friend’s face. “Sorry,” Larabee said, even as he realized how totally inadequate it must sound.

“Don’t be sorry,” Buck replied evenly, giving Chris’s leg a squeeze. He stared directly into his old friend’s eyes as he delivered his message. “Just believe me when I tell you that the two weeks you were dead were the worst two weeks of my life.”

Chris cocked his head to the side and regarded Buck through narrowed eyes for a moment. Buck nearly smiled. God he had missed that mind reading look.

“You did what I ordered you to do,” Chris said finally, his voice soft, gentle. “Exactly what I needed you to do. You protected the team.”

“I know,” Buck answered quietly, looking up at eyes he knew as well as his own, eyes he had long ago learned to read on account of their owner being so damn tight lipped. “But that don’t mean I didn’t hate myself for leaving you.”

Chris reached out and gripped Buck’s arm. He didn’t say anything. What could he say to answer the pain he had caused?

A shadow crossed the door. They both turned to look.

“Damn,” Buck said, astonished.

“Damn is right,” Chris grumbled back. “Who called the Air Force?”

“Travis probably.” Buck shrugged and turned to regard his friend seriously. “He had to tell him you were dead.”

Chris rolled his eyes disgustedly. Buck was not fooled. He got up from his chair.


“Sorry, Stud,” Buck said. “You’re on your own this time.”

“Shit,” Chris swore.

There were few things on this earth that could make Chris Larabee nervous, and one of them had just arrived in the doorway.
Buck moved casually toward the door.

The tall, dark haired officer in the doorway regarded him silently with a thin-lipped grimace. An identical twin to Chris’s own.

“Wilmington,” The General said coolly, his dark eyes narrowing into a penetrating gaze.

“General,” Buck replied in kind.

“I’d like a moment alone with Christopher,” he said, in a tone that showed he was accustomed to being obeyed.

“Sure,” Buck said lightly, but the pleasantry did not reach his eyes. As he stepped toward the door, he spoke again. “Play nice,” he said, his voice low and warning.

The glare he received in return was pure Larabee, through and through.

Buck took up station next to a major outside the door.

“Why don’t you go get yourself some coffee,” the major suggested, eyeing the scruffy, battered man before him. He assumed the man was ATF. General Larabee appeared to know him.

“Don’t think so,” the man said calmly, leaning on the door frame.

The major pursed his lips, containing his irritation. “The General specifically asked for privacy. It’s his son. Surely you can respect that.”

The agent’s smile was anything but pleasant. He leaned forward to squint at the Major’s nametag, and gave a flick to the gold braid that marked the major as the General’s aide. “Major Swann,” he replied. “You watchdog your Larabee. I’ll watchdog mine.”

They fell into stony silence, watching the identical profiles, alike except for their hair and eyes. Those Chris got from his mother.

General Matthew Larabee grimaced as he regarded his battered middle child. He was a man who prided himself on being able to handle the most difficult situations. He had fathered seven children, raised six to adulthood. Had served his country with pride. Had fought wars. Had sent men into battle and brought them home again. There was not much he looked back on in his life and regretted.

But of those few things he did regret, almost all of them revolved around this one. This boy. This one confounded him. It seemed no matter how he tried, he couldn’t seem to bridge the gaps. Gaps he wasn’t even sure how he created. Or when. He watched Christopher’s eyes slide away from him and steeled himself to try again.

“You all right?” the General asked, placing his hat on the nightstand and straightening his meticulous uniform.

“Fine,” Christopher answered automatically. He eyed the uniform and General Larabee watched the shields come down over the boy’s eyes. That look. The one that Christopher was so good at. The one that told his father absolutely nothing. He regarded his son silently.

“You all right?” Christopher asked after a moment.

“A lot better since they bothered to tell us you’re alive.”

Christopher winced and Matthew Larabee kicked himself. That was not what he wanted to say. Why
he couldn’t say what he wanted to say, he would never know. He had spent almost three weeks regretting the words he had never spoken. And now he had another chance. A miraculous gift, this boy, alive again, and he still couldn’t say it. He took a breath.

“What’s with the uniform?” Christopher asked. A strangely troubled look passed across his father’s face and he recognized it.

Matthew snorted to himself. Typical with this one. Two minutes in and Christopher had nailed him already. “I can’t stay,” he said regretfully.

“Oh course,” Christopher said, looking away again.

Matthew cursed to himself. “I can’t tell you what’s going on, but believe me I’d rather be here.”

Christopher nodded and looked back up at him with those green eyes. His mother’s eyes. Matthew swallowed. He’d missed those eyes.


Matthew smiled. He reached out and touched his son’s face. Flicked back a stubborn lock of blonde hair. “Get a haircut,” he said fondly, a lump in his throat.

A corner of Christopher’s mouth quirked up into an almost smile.

The General paused. Licked his lips. And opened his mouth to speak. Then his aide’s cell phone rang.

“Dammit,” The General barked, whirling toward the door.

“Sir,” said the aide, covering the phone. “We have to go.”

“Can’t this wait?” General Larabee snapped. But he already knew the answer, or his aide wouldn’t have spoken.

“Duty calls,” Christopher said, a smirk twisting up his lip and twisting up his father’s gut. He knew this boy too well.

“I’ll call you,” The General promised.

Christopher nodded. And Matthew saw that his son didn’t believe him at all. He regretted suddenly every moment the Air Force had stolen from him. Every moment he should have spent with this child instead. Every moment he would never get back.

He turned and walked out the door, feeling Buck Wilmington’s eyes on him. The General glared at the mustached agent. He wanted to tell him off. Wanted to tell him he didn’t understand what it was like. To mind his own business. Instead he put out his hand. “Take care of him,” The General said.

“I always do,” Buck Wilmington replied, taking the proffered hand.

“I know,” General Larabee said quietly. “And thank you.”

Buck nodded. He watched the General go. They were so alike, he and Chris. Yet they couldn’t seem to reach each other at all.

“You okay, Stud?” Buck asked coming back into the room.
Chris shrugged indifferently. “Same shit, different day.”

J.D. chose that moment to make his entrance, thumbing his finger back down the hallway and then whirling to look again himself. “Did you see…? Was that…?”


J.D. gave him a dirty look.

“Tall guy? Looked just like Chris?” Vin asked.

“More stars and gold braid,” Nathan said thoughtfully.

“And the hair was wrong.” Josiah added teasingly.

*You saw him, too?* Chris thought acidly, smirking at his own joke. *Guess it wasn’t my imagination then.*

J.D. ignored his teammates’ teasing. “Chris, your father’s an Air Force general?” he asked astonished. Did they all know this? Should he have known this?

He missed the look that flashed across Chris’s face before he buttoned up his expression.

“Yep,” Chris said easily, aware that Buck was regarding him with narrowed eyes. “Stars and everything.”

“Cool,” J.D. said, grinning. “Where’s he going?” He wondered why Buck was glaring at him.

“Duty calls,” Chris answered, forcing a smile.

Buck’s second glare stopped J.D. from asking when the general was coming back.

Ryan Kelly had come by to say goodbye. He was taking a late flight back home and was looking forward to spending the night in his own bed. He gripped Chris’s bandaged right hand in his own, and smiled down at him.

“Now,” Kelly said sternly, “if you get into trouble between now and when they finally kick you out of here, you know which team to count on to find you and save your ass.” He smirked.

“I know which team can find me,” Chris said, with a smirk of his own. “But their damn team leader keeps losing me.”

“Shutup, Larabee,” Kelly growled, but couldn’t hide his grin. “I’ll tell the boys they saved your bacon.”

Chris still smirked, but it turned serious at the corners. “Tell ‘em I owe ‘em a round at the Saloon.”

Kelly’s grin grew broader. “That’s good,” he said. “’Cause you been buying the drinks since I called them last night.”

Chris laughed. He’d best hurry home or that was going to be one hell of a bar tab.

Kelly released his hand. “See you.”

Chris nodded. “Thanks,” he said, but his expression conveyed his gratitude far more eloquently than words ever could.
“Anytime,” Kelly said and meant it.

He shook hands with the rest of Team Seven as he went out the door, bag in hand. They watched him go then slumped back into the room, taking the chairs they had sat in all day, as if their spots were reserved. Buck at his right. Vin at his left. Josiah at his head. Ezra farther down his left side. Nathan off the right side at his feet, where he could watch all the equipment, read the chart, and keep an eye on everyone’s behavior, but especially Buck’s and Chris’s. He thought he was being subtle. No one was fooled. And finally, J.D., smack at the foot of the bed, where he stifled a yawn and put his head down on his arms, folded at the edge of the mattress.

Chris looked at them appraisingly. “Now what do I have to do to get rid of the rest of you?” he asked.

Buck gave him an exaggerated hurt look.

“Seriously,” Chris said. “You all look like hell. If Buck spends another night in that chair, he’s going to end up in traction.” He glanced down at J.D., who still had his head on his arms. He shook his head and added. “And J.D.’s liable to get an accidental boot to the head.”

J.D.’s head popped up. “I’ll move,” he offered quickly and scooted his chair back a foot.

Chris rolled his eyes and shook his head again. He looked to Vin.

Vin caught his look, and grinned that infuriating smart-ass grin back at him. Still he did as he was silently requested.

“I think what Chris is tryin’ to say,” Vin drawled, “is ‘Thanks boys for savin’ my sorry hide and hangin’ out all day keepin’ your grouchy ol’ boss company. Now why don’t you put yourselves up at a nice hotel and get some sleep’. That about right?” he said, smirking at Larabee.

“Just about,” Chris said, smirking right back at him, and thanking him as silently as he had made the request.

Tanner lifted one eyebrow slightly as he stood, as if to say “It’s nothing.” “Besides,” he said yawning thickly as he stretched his aching back. “These chairs are getting a mite hard.”

Buck shook his head at the unspoken exchange, and couldn’t help his smile. He wondered if Chris had any idea how long it had been since they had seen Tanner’s smart-ass smile. He wondered if Tanner had any idea how much they’d missed it. Knowing Tanner, probably not.

“But somebody oughta stay here,” J.D. said worriedly, breaking into Wilmington’s thoughts.

Buck rubbed his neck and eyed Chris thoughtfully. “Kid,” he said finally. “The militia isn’t after him. Richter’s learned his lesson. We don’t have any enemies in Texas—who know about us anyway.” He gave Chris another close look. “I think he can manage tonight.”

“But…,” J.D. protested. He looked around for support and his eyes fell on Ezra.

Ezra shrugged and drawled indifferently. “If knowing that Mr. Larabee has a loyal guard will help our young friend to sleep peacefully, then I believe I can sacrifice the pleasures of a motel mattress of dubious cleanliness as well as the stereophonic delights of Messrs Sanchez and Jackson’s synchronized snoring.”

Chris cocked his head to one side and skewered Ezra with a knowing look.
Ezra wore his indifferent mask to perfection.

“You’ll stay, Ezra?” J.D. asked, with obvious relief.

He raised his eyebrows. “I believe that’s what I said. Is it not?”

J.D. ignored the dig. “You’re sure?” the young agent pressed.

Ezra shrugged. The perfect picture of nonchalance.

It didn’t escape Chris’s notice, though, as first Vin, then Buck, then Nathan and Josiah, too, each touched the undercover agent’s shoulder as they filed out of the room.

Ezra noted, however, that Chris was still staring sideways at him, when the silence fell over the room. He cleared his throat.

Chris cocked one eyebrow. “Drew the short straw? Or couldn’t stand to leave me?”

Standish rolled his eyes. “Please, Mr. Larabee,” he scoffed, painstakingly straightening cuffs that still looked pressed despite the long day. He looked back up at Chris with an expression of disdain.

“Have you ever shared a room with either Nathan or Josiah? One of them could wake the dead. Both together defy description.”

Chris grinned. He knew from experience that for once, the southerner was not exaggerating.

Shortly afterward, the long day took its toll. For the second time in two days, Ezra sat beside Chris’s bed and watched his team leader sleep. Ezra knew the day had worn Chris out. Too many visitors. Too much talking. Too much trying to piece together what had happened to him and to the team while he had been unconscious. Most of all, too much pretending that he was made of some indestructible, bullet-proof alloy and therefore felt perfectly fine.

*God forbid anyone worry on your account, right Mr. Larabee*? he thought acidly.

Chris’s fever was up again slightly, which had made Nathan purse his lips in that too serious way, but the medic had held his tongue. And Ezra was glad. Otherwise they might never have left. And Ezra agreed with Chris. They needed to go, if not for their own sakes, then for Chris’s and if not for Chris’s sake, then Ezra just wanted them to go.

He was damn tired and grateful for the silence that fell over the room after they left. It wasn’t the talking that he thought of as noise, so much as the presence of them. The commotion they created even when they said nothing or hardly moved. The messages in the silences, the thoughts revealed on their faces. Navigating their fears, and their personal space. It was all too close. Too close when he was about to leave them.

Without conscious thought, his eyes swept the room, inspected Chris, fell on his face. Relaxed. Sleeping quietly, comfortably. Ezra smiled slightly since there was no one there to see him. Who would have thought that last night, in a hard plastic chair, slumped over crookedly against another person’s hospital bed would be the best sleep he’d had in weeks? And when he had seen Vin and Buck, in the early light, in equally awkward poses, he had seen the peace on their faces, too.

He knew the reason. Everyone on the team knew the reason. His lips twisted up into a grim smile as he regarded Chris. *Well, almost everyone*. The reason was they were together, complete, whole. Invincible once more. He had felt the bonds close around him, as they learned again how to joke, how to poke at each other’s sensitive spots without fear that the team would break. He had felt them each relax joyfully into familiar patterns. Felt them tug him comfortably back as they fell back into
It left a desolate hole in the center of his heart.

He had always felt that he had a special relationship with Luck. She was a fickle mistress, he knew, but it seemed she had always reserved her special regard for him. Still, sometimes her cruelty staggered him.

A scant few weeks ago, the one person who had given Ezra purpose and direction beyond himself, beyond material gain, who had looked at him and seen some mysterious potential, who had given him a second chance when he deserved none, died. Dramatically. In a proverbial blaze of glory. Taking with him forever, that sharp gaze that dared Ezra to do better—to be better—that bespoke its owner’s faith in him. Lost forever, the surprise of finding himself—even unwillingly—rising to the challenge. Terminated with vicious finality the secret he shared with no one—his childish joy whenever that same green-eyed gaze said silently but certainly, I knew you could. So in a moment of blind, burning, self-pity, Ezra had thrown it all—his career, his new-found friendships, his own sense of self-preservation, all that had been his life in Denver—on the funeral pyre beside his friend and his leader. Destroyed by his own hand. A fitting monument.

Then suddenly, miraculously, Fate had changed her mind. Death had opened its gaping, greedy jaws and spat Chris Larabee back out. Thrown him back into the waiting circle of his team, ready to resume, pick up where they left off, go along on the course they were charting together. All Ezra would have had to do was simply pick up his share of the load and resume the journey.

But Ezra had burned the bridge that would carry him safely back to them. He cursed the resignation he had written in anger. He thought briefly about begging Travis to take him back. But he knew that the manner in which he had resigned as well as the insulting insinuating tone he had used ensured that the brass would not take him back. Which was, perversely, exactly what he had hoped to accomplish.

Chris Larabee was dead.

Ezra’s career lay in ashes.

Only now Chris was not dead.

Absently, Ezra passed a deck of cards through his hands. The words came unbidden to his brain. Chris’s words: “Don’t you ever run out on me again.” He sighed and fought down the emotion that threatened to choke him. Looks like that’s exactly what I’ve done. What the hell was Chris going to say when he found out?

The undercover agent breathed out. Practiced his poker face and wondered again, as he had so often recently, when he had let this man, these men, come to mean so much.

Vin Tanner leaned against the white plaster hotel room wall with his thumbs through his belt loops and one eyebrow cocked knowingly at Buck.

“What?” Buck said exasperatedly, pulling on a clean T-shirt. He hated that look.

Vin grinned and narrowed his eyes. “Well I can figure all right why Chris was in a hurry to get some space, but I reckon I’m still wonderin’ how you let it go so easy.”

Buck narrowed his eyes back. That Texas drawl didn’t fool him one bit. He could tell by that look on Tanner’s face that he wasn’t “wonderin’” at all. He knew darn well. Buck didn’t reply. He picked up the hotel room phone and dialed the other room.
Josiah’s deep voice answered.

“We need to have a meeting,” Buck said into the phone.

“Be right there,” Sanchez replied.

A minute or two later, Jackson and Sanchez came through the open door. They were no more surprised than Tanner had been.

“Figured it was something like that, when you agreed to give Chris some space,” Nathan said, with a sly grin.

Buck did not return the grin. He ran a hand along the back of his neck and eyed his team.

J.D., seated on one of the double beds looked up at Buck with a slight squint. “I wondered what was up,” he said grimly.

“We need to talk,” Buck said without further preamble. “Travis will be here tomorrow. And I imagine he’ll have plenty to say to us.”

“I imagine much of it will be said quite loudly,” the big profiler said philosophically.

Nathan snorted sarcastically.

Buck grimaced and looked around at his team. “Look,” he said seriously. “Whatever Travis says stays between us and him. Chris doesn’t need to know.”

It was Vin’s turn to snort. “Just how you plan to keep him out of it?”

“I don’t know,” Buck snapped irritably. “But we sure as hell need to try.”

J.D. looked up at him crookedly. “You already told him what we did. Don’t you think he’ll figure it out?”

Buck grimaced again. “Hell, yeah, I think he’ll figure it out. But we did what we did all on our own. And if Travis or the directors want to read us the riot act, that’s our tough luck. Chris don’t need to come rushing in and take a career bullet.”

The sudden uncomfortable silence made him curse the unfortunate metaphor. But it was accurate. Chris had fought long and hard for autonomy in matters of discipline, and Buck had lost track of the number of times Larabee had faced down Travis or even a director, blocking them, resisting them tooth and nail, telling them in no uncertain terms that they may suggest whatever they like, but he alone would administer discipline to his team. There was no negotiation, and his hard line stance had earned him an unpleasant reputation among members of the brass and the rank and file as well.

But Chris didn’t care about his reputation. He cared about removing obstacles that prevented his team from doing their jobs. He cared about members of his team being able to exercise their good judgment without having to worry about agency politics. And he cared about clear and unconfused lines of communication and command. He had made this abundantly clear to Buck at the outset. He had told Travis that those were his conditions, take them or leave them.

Buck was pretty certain they were either going to be fired outright, or would face one hell of a disciplinary hearing from the brass. But Buck also knew with utter certainty that nothing would get Larabee out of bed faster than finding out that his team was standing unprotected before the directors. Bullet holes, infection, exhaustion, or the devil himself, nothing would stop him from being there to
redirect the fallout—most likely down onto his own head. And Buck was not about to let that happen.

On the other hand, Buck had been trained by Larabee himself, and he was not about to let his teammates take the flak for decisions he had made as de facto team leader. “I called the shots. I made the decisions. I gave the orders. Let me do the talking,” he said firmly.

“We talked about this, Brother,” Josiah said. “We were all willing to take this road with you.”

“That’s not the point,” Buck said. “There’s no reason for us all to become martyrs. We did what we did. I don’t want anyone to lie. I don’t want anyone to hide anything. But I was the team leader on this mission, and I’ll take the flak, just like Chris would.”

He glared at them, each of them. Dared them to defy him. He saw their lips press together into thin white lines of disagreement, but they held their tongues. They knew he was right. There was a chance that some of them might still salvage their careers.

As for Buck, he had no desire to lose this job. He loved law enforcement. He loved his team. But if he were honest with himself—and he usually was—he knew he had made a serious error, and he was willing to pay for it. In his position, Chris would do the same.

A small smile twisted up his lips. He was pretty sure Chris would never find himself in quite this position. Not that Chris hadn’t pulled some damn stupid stunts in his life. He had. He might well have gone AWOL on some kamikaze mission to destroy the militia, but Chris wouldn’t have allowed the rest of the team to come with him. Buck knew from long experience; Chris would have simply disappeared somewhere between one breath and the next. And, just as he was, back at that damn clinic, he would have been surprised to find that anyone had come looking for him. Hell of a tactician, but still an idiot, Buck thought, and felt a small smile curl his lips.

He was brought back to reality by J.D.’s resigned “Okay.”

The dark-haired head popped up a second later. “We’d better tell Ezra,” J.D. said suddenly.

Buck grimaced. “I’ll tell him,” he replied, hoping J.D. would be satisfied with that. And drop the subject.

For reasons Buck didn’t understand, Ezra had not told the team about his resignation. Buck hadn’t even thought he was serious, when he said he was going to resign, but something about the hard glint in the undercover agent’s eye on the day they left had made him wonder. It didn’t take long for the note of resignation to attract attention. The buzz had reached Buck’s ears soon enough. But Ezra’s career path was not high on Buck’s list of priorities at that moment, and he had ignored it. Now the fallout was clear. Now that it was too late to do anything about it.

J.D. was looking surreptitiously at his teammates for a clue.

Buck sighed. They would all find out, of course, but it was not his place to bring it up. Ezra had yet to open his mouth. Buck might have failed to prevent his career suicide, but he could at least keep what he knew in confidence until Ezra chose to reveal what he had done.

“So,” Nathan said slowly and tried to phrase his question as neutrally as he could. “Whatever they ask we answer. We take our lumps. And until this happens, we tiptoe around Chris and try to keep this a secret?” He failed to keep the sarcasm out of his voice, and, uncharacteristically, also failed to tell his brain when to shut up. “Should be easy enough,” he continued, almost as if speaking to himself, his voice growing steadily harder. “After all, we managed to keep the whole Denver ATF in
the dark about our plans. It was almost two whole days before they figured out we were gone. Fooling one guy in a hospital bed shouldn’t be too hard. Even though he’s our team leader. Like he won’t take one look at Vin or J.D., or hell, at the rest of us, and know we’re lying. Maybe we should just fly back now and avoid him all together.”

Josiah stared at him. Vin and J.D. stared at him.

“Finished?” Buck asked icily.

“Maybe,” Nathan returned stonily.

“You got a better idea?” Buck growled back.

“Yeah, maybe I do,” Nathan said.

J.D. and Vin’s eyes flicked back and forth between the two. They caught each other’s glance then slowly turned back to Buck and Nathan.

“I’m all ears, Jackson,” Buck snapped.

Josiah nearly stepped forward to intervene, but at the last instant, he didn’t. He halted. He watched the exchange with narrowed eyes.

“Why don’t we just tell Chris? And if he wants to ride to the rescue, let him. It’s what he would want, and we’re sure as hell going to need it. What’s so wrong with that?” Nathan said.

Buck glared at him.

Vin’s head slowly drifted over to one side as he regarded Jackson.

“You want to drag Chris through the mud with us?” Buck accused.

“Get real, Wilmington,” Nathan retorted, his voice rising in volume and pitch. “If we get the boot, his reputation’s in the mud anyway. He’ll be The Team Leader Who Let His Team Get Fired From Under Him and Didn’t Lift a Finger to Stop It. You think anyone will remember the circumstances? You think he’ll just hire himself a new team?” He glared at Buck now. “And once the brass gets finished with us, we’ll all have to stand around while Chris rips into us for not telling him. How is your solution any better?”

“Because,” Buck started, but something happened. He didn’t finish. He knew exactly why his solution was better. His solid arguments were all lined up. They died in his throat under the overriding truth that had suddenly popped into his brain. He glared hotly at Nathan and his hands balled up into fists.

“Because,” Josiah said softly, interceding, at last, his hand on Nathan’s shoulder, but his eyes coming to rest on Buck. “Because he protected us. Because we retreated and left him behind. Because we lost him. And now we have him back. Now it’s our turn to protect his career like we should have protected him back at that warehouse.”

Buck swallowed hard. That was why.

Vin turned his blue-eyed gaze to the wall. “I agree with Bucklin,” he said quietly.

Nathan glared around at all of them. “Bunch of damn fools with a martyr complex,” he grumbled.

Josiah gave the shoulder a squeeze. Nathan jerked away. “I heard you,” he snapped. “I just don’t
know that it’s the best tactic.”

Unbidden, J.D.’s memory skipped back to the warehouse. He heard Chris’s last order in his headphones. Heard him order the team to retreat. The best tactic under the circumstances. J.D. hadn’t fully understood the consequences of that “best tactic”. Not until he had faced Buck’s sleepless nights. Until he had watched his team disintegrate. Until he had begun to understand what had passed from his own life. It was easy to forget it now that it was over.

He blinked back a sudden stinging in his eyes. Relieved that no one had seen. “I’m with Buck, too,” he said, his voice steady, mature, even to his own ears.

Nathan bit back the urge to mutter a sarcastic “Surprise!” He turned to Josiah, his only source of support, but saw immediately in his friend’s eyes that he stood alone. He shook his head at the floor. “If you guys would rather piss off Chris Larabee, just so you can face the brass alone, then there’s no help for you,” he said.

A moment of silence went by. Nathan felt his teammates’ eyes upon him.

“You with us?” Buck asked quietly.

“All for one. One for all,” Nathan said. “And all that other crap that’s only going to get me into more trouble.”

Josiah smiled grimly and whispered quietly, “You and the rest of us, Brother.”

Buck nodded, taking in all of them with his eyes.

“We’d best hit the hay,” he said as he dismissed them. “I have a feeling we’ll need to be sharp tomorrow.”

It was surprisingly early when Chris began to stir. It took him a few tries to get his eyes open. Then it took a minute to focus. When he did focus, he wasn’t sure he shouldn’t just go back to sleep again.

He regarded the figure of Orin Travis, looking as disheveled as the rest of the team had. He sat beside the bed, the gray light of early morning reflecting off his gray clothes, his gray face. Everything about him seemed gray, as if the color had leaked out of the world while Chris was sleeping.

Chris glanced once around the room. Where was Ezra? Had he left during the night? Knowing Ezra, he had had the instinct and foresight to just disappear the second he scented Travis somewhere on the floor. Chris hoped so. He hoped Travis hadn’t had a chance to talk to Standish first, or any other member of the team. At least not before Chris had had a chance to gauge his temper or how much he actually knew about what the Team had been doing. From the grim set of Travis’s face, he knew things were not good.

“Hey,” he managed finally through his dry throat.

Travis gave a small start, and then turned his eyes to meet Chris’s gaze. He gave what he evidently thought was a cheerful smile as he returned the greeting. But cheerful smiles don’t generally turn the eyes down at the corners. Chris regarded him thoughtfully.

“You look terrible,” Travis said lightly.

“You don’t look so hot yourself,” Chris replied, still staring at him piercingly.
“Turn down the eye beams, son,” Travis said with the barest of smiles. “I didn’t come to talk shop. I came to see how you are.”

Regret flashed across Chris’s face. He had not considered Travis’s position. He swallowed. “Heard you had to call The General,” he said.

Travis rolled his eyes. “Yes, a pleasant experience.”

Chris laughed and coughed. He reached across to the cup that sat on a nearby tray. Orin handed it to him, and while Chris’s attention was momentarily fixed on not spilling on himself, eyes that had too much practice at this sort of thing took in the Team Leader’s condition. Thin, Travis thought, seeing how much weight had fallen from the already lean frame. He thought back on his own son, another law enforcement officer, who had given his life in the line of duty.

He looked up to see the green eyes watching him. Caught in the act.

“I’ll be all right,” Chris said.

Travis nodded. “So says your doctor.”

Chris nodded back, seemed satisfied. He let a moment slide by, “They’ll be all right,” he said.

Travis nodded, his lips tight. We’ll see, he thought grimly.

Chris continued to look at him. He understood why new recruits whispered that Larabee could read minds.

He reached out and placed a hand on Chris’s leg, changing the subject. He didn’t even try to be subtle. “Mary sends her regards,” he said. “And Billy does, too.”

That wasn’t exactly what Mary had said. She would have to deliver her exact message herself. She had had hot words for her father-in-law when he had told her Chris was dead. Angry at Chris for not fighting harder. When he had told her that Chris had somehow survived, tears sprang into her eyes. She turned away, embarrassed that the AD should see his tough, newspaper reporter daughter-in-law, stoic widow of his murdered son, shed tears for someone she only admitted to a professional association with. Travis knew better. They were not exactly friends, Chris and Mary; in fact they bickered like cats and dogs, but somewhere between them was a stubborn spark of mutual caring. It didn’t hurt either that Billy was crazy about Chris.

The mention of Travis’s daughter in law and her little boy drew a faint smile from the team leader. Remembering suddenly his promise to his small grandson, Travis reached into his jacket pocket and withdrew a folded piece of paper. Two other sheets fell out with it. He handed the drawing to Chris, but he put the other two papers back in his pocket.

Chris unfolded the childish drawing done in crayon. Navigating the awkward spelling, it bore the message “Get well soon. Your friend, Billy.” It had a house, a tree, and a horse on it. Two stick figures, a tall one and a small one looked to be riding the horse. Both were blond. He couldn’t help but smile, even as his heart turned back to another child’s awkward spelling and the way he drew horses on everything. “Thanks,” Chris said quietly.

“You’re welcome, son,” Travis said, giving his leg a pat. He slid his chair around to look Chris full in the face. “Now,” he said more forcefully. “You’re to do what the doctor says. That’s a direct order. Got it?”

A devilish smirk that lit up his whole face was Chris’s only reply. It was the same smirk he wore
when he made the down payment on the telephones. Travis shook his head. He should have known. He smiled despite himself. The smirk told him more clearly than any doctor’s report that Chris would truly be all right.

“Come home soon,” Travis said quietly. “But take your time coming back to work.”

Chris nodded. He could see in the Judge’s gray face that the last few weeks had taken its toll on him, too. He wondered how much flak he had taken from the directors. But the AD didn’t seem so much angry as unhappy. That was probably bad. Angry might be righteous indignation. Might mean he’d go to the brass and tell them they were wrong. Angry might also mean that he was ready to rip right into the boys as soon as they set foot on the floor. Get it over with. Unhappy was worse. Deeper somehow, and it signaled a more deep-seated problem. It would take longer to resolve.

A short time later, after small talk had worn Chris out without telling him anything useful, as the AD was leaving, Chris wondered if Travis’s unhappiness had anything to do with the papers that had fallen out of his pocket. Chris had not had time to read anything, but he had recognized Ezra’s neat script signature at the bottom of one page. He made a note to himself that he was going to have to get the details out of Buck and soon. He needed to know exactly what they had done. What the brass knew and what they didn’t know. Otherwise how would he plan out a strategy for deflecting the fallout?

He did not know he had been outflanked.

Chris Larabee’s early awakening had given Travis just the opportunity he needed. He was waiting for them when they stepped off the elevator. They pulled up short, but he had to give them credit. They hesitated only a moment before Buck took his place at the front and they came to stand before him. Only five, though. Standish was curiously absent.

“Missing someone?” Travis asked. His tone was icy. He hadn’t meant it to be, not at the outset, but his irritation had risen in full force as he had recognized their bantering voices before the elevator door even opened.

They did not flinch at his question. Nor did they feign ignorance. He had expected no less of them.

“Ezra’s around here somewhere,” Buck answered evenly, no hint of fear or hostility evident in his tone.

Travis let out a grim sigh. “You’d better come with me,” he said, a stern gaze resting briefly on each member of his wayward team. “All of you,” he said for emphasis.

He requested and was given directions to a meeting room that was currently unoccupied. The five members of Team Seven followed him into the room. He closed the door.

After the initial reaming, the meeting was civil. They heard him out. Then they let Buck do most of the talking. They volunteered nothing, neither details, nor apologies, nor excuses. Unless asked a question directly, they deferred to Wilmington. And Travis knew they had prepared.

It made him furious. He could have made a case for them, that they had gone AWOL in a fit of anger. But they had clearly thought out what they were going to do. Just as they had clearly thought out how to face the brass. The directors wanted blood, and Travis had just about made up his mind to let them get it, to wring it out of Team Seven until they finally learned their lesson.

Another part of him, however, the part that had hired Chris Larabee to begin with, nearly stood up and cheered. Unrepentant of the stunt they pulled, a spectacularly stupid, career-ending, reputation-
smearing, you'll-never-work-in-law-enforcement-again kind of stunt, they stood together as a team, and awaited the outcome together. Chris had trained them well. Buck, as leader of this fiasco, stood before the team to take the heat. Just as Chris had always done. The rest of the team stood firm behind him, holding the line, adhering to the rules that Larabee had established.

The directors would not like it. They’d have a fit, to be exact, as it became abundantly apparent that their early fears were indeed grounded. Larabee’s autonomy had created a team that was not loyal to the ATF. It was loyal to itself. To Larabee. A cult of personality. Travis could feel the flames already.

The furious part of him won out. He pulled six plane tickets out of his briefcase. He gave them all to Buck, who passed them out.

Travis kept his glance stony. He kept his voice hard.

“Gentlemen, you are expected in the office on Monday morning, at eight-thirty A.M. sharp. Anyone who does not show at the appointed hour may expect to be immediately fired. You will wait in the 14th floor conference room waiting area. You will be called when the directors are ready to see you.”

They looked back at him. They did not look surprised. Nor did they look particularly angry. Nor did they look particularly resigned. They did not look particularly anything. He might have told them the sky was blue and the grass was green for all the reaction that showed on their impassive faces.

He closed his briefcase with a snap. “Any questions?”

As one they opened their plane tickets.

“These tickets are for today,” J.D. Dunne said with astonishment.

“That’s correct,” AD Travis replied.

Dunne’s voice faltered, but only for a moment. “But it’s only Saturday. What about Chris?”

The others turned toward Travis darkly, questioningly.

Travis resisted the urge to tell them this part wasn’t his doing. Instead he replied, “Agent Larabee will remain here until his doctors consent to release him or have him flown to Four Corners General. Until then, you will have to do without each other’s company.”

Dunne looked like he wanted to protest. He wasn’t the only one. They shared a look. But no one said a word.

That’s a start, Travis thought to himself.

“You have a few hours to say goodbye,” he said over his shoulder as he headed out of the room.

There was complete silence in his wake.

Then Buck let out a long breath. He turned in his swivel chair and regarded the others. “Well,” he said uncertainly, a brief impish smile pushing up one corner of his mustache and crinkling up his good eye, “that could have been a lot worse.”

Josiah’s deep chuckle resonated quietly across the table. “No one got shot or beat up,” he offered.

“We’re not fired,” Nathan offered. He added a belated “Yet.”
J.D. had a different assessment. “Oh man, are we screwed,” he said, putting his head down on the table.

Tanner shrugged. “Knew that when we left Denver.”

Buck grinned momentarily at the ex-Army Ranger’s cavalier attitude.

He looked around at all of them. He was proud to have led these men, this team, if only for a short time. Whatever the outcome of the firing squad they were about to face, this was one hell of a team.

Of course, Chris was probably going to go up one side of him and down the other, without mercy, when he was feeling well enough to realize how very far outside of the lines Buck had taken the team. And he would be right.

Damn, he thought suddenly. “Whatever you say,” Buck reminded them with a pointed look at Tanner and Dunne, “no matter what you do, don’t tell Chris.”

J.D. looked at him like he was crazy. “Sure, Buck,” he griped. “Should I tell him I’m flying back tonight because I’m sick of the cafeteria food, or should I just not show up on Sunday.”

Buck glared at him. “If you can’t keep your mouth shut, then you can go back to the hotel and pack up right now.”

J.D. blanched. Buck was serious.

“We’ll let Ezra tell him,” Buck said more gently. Buck did not add tomorrow morning. He was pretty sure Ezra would not be on that plane. Ticket or no ticket. He did say with all the certainty he could muster, “Ezra will figure out what to say.”

Then he glared over at Tanner. “And you keep your secret signals to yourself,” he said. He had meant it sternly. But he understood why the whole team broke up in laughter.

“Come on,” Buck said, rising from his chair. “If we don’t show up soon, Chris will think something’s up. And we can’t afford him getting suspicious so soon.”

* * *

Standing at the front doors of the hospital, awaiting his taxi, his fury slowly ebbing away, Travis replayed the meeting and considered the upcoming inquisition. Chris wouldn’t even be there, yet Chris was by no means free of the fallout. He had formed the team. He had trained them. He had instilled the codes, the rules, the procedures they ran by. He had assumed full responsibility for their discipline and their actions. He had stood by them, right or wrong, in every case, every action, every board of inquiry. He had set the precedent. The directors were likely to follow it. The actions of the team were a result of Larabee’s leadership.

He was reminded of his initial interview with Chris. His research into the agent’s background had all but convinced him to drop this one like a hot potato—no matter what politician wanted the team instated. He had no intentions of kowtowing to politics or patronage. There was too much at stake. As far as he was concerned, the interview was a mere formality on the way to writing a diplomatic letter of rejection.

He had asked Chris about his philosophy of leadership. A favorite question. A stumper. One he used to weed out candidates he felt were unprepared or unqualified. He scratched notes as he waited for a response.
Silence was not unusual after this question. Most candidates needed time to formulate a response to the question, especially since so few had ever bothered to think about it. This time the moment of silence stretched longer and longer until Travis raised his head.

He was about to advise Larabee that if he intended to lead a team he should take the time to think about his philosophies, when he realized that the agent before him was not thinking about it. He had clearly, at some point in his life or career, already given it lengthy consideration. He was sitting forward in his chair and waiting silently until Travis gave him his full attention. He got it. Travis never even felt himself put down his pad and pencil as Chris started speaking.

Typically, the response was succinct, but in its own way surprisingly eloquent. He told Travis that a leader serves the team, not the other way around. He said that a good team leader can expect the team to run itself in the leader’s absence, in the same manner as if the leader were there.

Jokingly, Travis asked if that wouldn’t put the team leader out of a job.

He had seen the hard, shadowed glint in the green eyes and the cold smile for the first time. “Lots of things might put the leader out of a job. The team will still finish theirs.”

The AD thought back to Buck, standing his ground before the others. His teammates lending him their unshakable support. Fully functional. Fully cohesive. Their essential teamwork undamaged. Maybe Chris had trained them too well. Maybe the brass did need to exert control. Undoubtedly, Chris would face his own inquisition, alone, as soon as he was deemed healthy enough to return to work.

Travis scowled. Scowled at the driver as he got in the taxi. Scowled at himself in the rear view mirror. Scowled at the entire city around him. And he told himself that he knew his duty. He knew what he needed to do. Trouble was, those two things were not the same.

Chris awoke again at mid-morning, thoroughly irritated with himself. Not only did the fact that he couldn’t seem to stay awake much longer than a couple of hours at a time interfere with his planning to contain the fallout once the team returned to Denver, apparently he had also missed his teammates as they came to wish him well. He woke up to discover himself and his hospital bed strewn with small folded notes. Most of them obnoxious. He wondered how the hell he had slept through it. Then they had gone. Back to Denver on an afternoon plane.

He smiled a deadly smile. They must think the doctors had removed his brain, if they thought he wouldn’t figure out what had happened. It would take a hell of a lot more than a few painkillers and sedatives to keep him from realizing that Travis had called them back, probably to face a board of inquiry, scheduling their flight for today on the mistaken assumption that they would not have time to meet to form a plan to deal with the inquiry. The fact that Travis had not mentioned it during his visit meant that he either wanted Chris to stay out of it, in which case Travis was deluded, or that the decision had been taken out of the AD’s hands, in which case Travis was likely to be pissed as all hell at them, too. Just came to see how I’m doing, my ass, Chris thought darkly.

Where the hell is Standish? He thought glowering at the door. A note bearing Ezra’s signature or handwriting was conspicuously absent. If he had not left with the rest of them, then the undercover agent was avoiding him, which was probably a good idea at the moment, for several reasons that Chris could think of and undoubtedly some he had yet to learn about.

By the time Standish got up the courage to show his face, Chris had eaten something completely tasteless and semi-solid for lunch, and had kept all of it down. He had also seen Doctor Kahar. The doctor had hid a small smile. (Apparently, he had been aware of the letter bomb that had exploded over his patient. Chris himself suspected that his five teammates had stood in the doorway pitching
them at him and probably keeping score on the direct hits.) Then he had been gratefully unhooked from his various wires, tubes, drips, and monitors and wheeled to a new room.

He was now seated with his legs dangling over the edge of his bed, contemplating the distance to the bathroom. He was supposed to call for assistance if he wanted to get up. *Like hell.*

“Thinking of going somewhere, Mr. Larabee?” the Southerner drawled casually from the door.

He was met with a full-force Larabee glare, and was thus given to know that he was completely and totally screwed.

“Yes,” Chris said through his teeth. “Back to Denver.”

“Rather a long walk for a man in a hospital gown, don’t you think?” Standish said, stepping slightly backward from the door.

Chris’s glare intensified. “That’s where you come in,” he replied with a small malevolent smile. Standish tried to change the subject. “If you are getting up, might I offer my assistance?” he asked with all the courtesy his Southern upbringing and largely European education could generate.

“No,” Chris said shortly. “You can go to the nearest store and get me some clothes to wear. Then you can go buy both of us plane tickets back to Denver.”

Ezra stared at him. Not that he was surprised. He had expected it. Just not quite so soon. After all, the man still had a slight fever, was barely able to stay awake for more than a couple of hours at a time, had only been unhooked from his machines for an hour now, and as far as Standish had been able to ascertain, had managed to keep down one actual meal. Apparently, to Chris Larabee, those were clear indications that he was ready to leave the hospital. Today. Now, preferably. Would teleport if he could.

Ezra cleared his throat. “Should I comply with your request, Mr. Larabee, I suspect that Mr. Wilmington will have my proverbial head.”

Chris snorted mirthlessly, sliding gingerly to the floor. He grimaced as his feet took his weight for the first time since the storeroom. His legs wobbled slightly. He forced them to obey him, and he ignored the stinging cuts in the soles of his feet, thankful for even the inadequate cushioning of the gauze pads covering the antibiotic gel the nurse had slathered them with.

He steadied himself against the bed and returned his glare to Ezra. “If I were you, I wouldn’t waste time worrying about what Buck’s going to do to you,” he said. “Because if I get there first, Buck had better run.”

It took all of Ezra’s might to resist making a crack about Chris’s ability to run on his lacerated feet. Apparently, it was not enough to resist speaking. One must also resist thinking. How had he forgotten this important rule in a mere three weeks?

Chris fixed him with a smile that made the hair stand up on Ezra’s neck and said, “I don’t need to catch him to shoot him.”

Ezra cleared his throat, hiding his smile behind his hand and smoothly replied. “What I meant to say was what size do you require?”

He wrote the answer down and slid the paper into his shirt pocket. He moved back out of the doorway, keeping one eye on Larabee’s first step away from the bed, as he looked up the corridor to
see whether there was a nurse nearby or whether he was going to have to go in there and pick Chris up himself when he collapsed halfway across the tiny room. Fortunately, Chris didn’t collapse. He got all the way across the room. He shut the bathroom door firmly behind him.

Ezra lingered only long enough to make sure Chris emerged from the bathroom. Then he got the nurse. He stood uncertainly outside the hospital’s front door and briefly considered his predicament. How did he get into these situations? Better yet, how could he get out of them? He had resigned from the ATF in a fit of anger. And he had yet to tell his boss. Said boss had now ordered him to help break him out of the hospital. His abnormally temperamental teammates were likely to do him bodily harm if he did. His abnormally dangerous boss would probably shoot him somewhere inordinately painful if he did not.

Realistically, he decided his best bet would be to book a flight to Brazil without delay and without mentioning it to anyone. But when the taxi rolled up he climbed into the backseat and asked for transport to a reasonably inexpensive clothing store. He fingered what was left of the cash he had brought with him and wondered what the hell he should get Larabee to wear.
It was afternoon by the time the undercover agent had accomplished his tasks. He had not yet had lunch, and he was aggravated. Therefore, he decided, any further dealings with his irascible boss could wait until Ezra P. Standish had had something to restore his blood sugar levels and his temper to normal. Unfortunately, exceptionally bad counter service and a large, scalding hot cup of coffee spilled down his shirtfront by another patron’s careless backhand only served to worsen his mood. He vaguely wondered where this anger was coming from. But he did not have time to wonder long. The thread of thought snapped when he saw what awaited him in Chris’s new room.

Technically, the two of them weren’t awaiting him. They were not awaiting anyone. They had the person they came for. Cornered. A virtual prisoner. Ezra stopped dead, jerking himself backward out of sight, but not out of earshot. He very nearly reached for his gun. Alarmed at his own display of temper, he got his hands under control and forced himself to listen to the conversation.

“There’s no need for this to get ugly,” the woman’s voice said smoothly.

Silence was the only answer.

She continued, an almost undetectable note of irritation marring her otherwise perfect delivery. “You’ve obviously been through a lot. Mistakes were made on both sides. Wouldn’t it be easier if we could just smooth this over now and be done with it?”

Silence again.

The irritation in her voice became a bit clearer along with a sly, threatening edge. “We all know that mistakes happen, particularly in situations that can be—shall we say emotionally charged.”

Ezra wished to God he could see inside the room from his position. But he knew if he crossed the doorway, he would give himself away. He leaned his head back against the wall and listened carefully.

“AD Rivers,” answered Chris’s voice finally with deceptive politeness, “I’m a little tired. So if you’ve got something to say, say it. Otherwise leave.”

Inside the room, Rivers smiled. Alright, then, she thought. Let’s talk turkey. It was better this way. She was much better at out and out intimidation.

She looked him right in the eyes, as she said, “It’s a curious fact, don’t you think, that at the same time that your team was AWOL from Denver, noted arms dealer Samuel Bautiste’s home was invaded. Apparently by people with impressive expertise in both surveillance and covert operations.”

She was mildly disappointed to see that the agent in the bed before her did not flinch. She was faintly disturbed to see his lips twitch minutely upward.

“I hadn’t heard,” he said, his tone still conversational, almost cheerful.

She narrowed her eyes. “Some might even call it suspicious,” she ventured.

He tilted his head slightly, and the corners of his mouth turned up a bit more. “Surprising, actually,” he replied thoughtfully. “One wouldn’t think a man in Bautiste’s business would report to the police that his own house was broken into.” He frowned artfully. “A story like that gets around and it might damage his reputation.” He looked up at her with feigned puzzlement.
She smiled patiently, icily. “He may not have filed a police report, but stories get around.”

“Oh,” he said, his brow furrowing even further, as he cocked his head over to the side. “I’m still surprised he would let a rumor like that get around,” he said, seemingly to himself.

“Oh,” she replied, almost airily, in a tone that reminded Ezra of his mother at her most deceptive, “He denies it, of course. Without a police report it’s hard to prove anything.” She skewered him with a penetrating glare. “If you know what I mean.”

He actually laughed. It was short and brittle.

She bristled.

In the hallway, Ezra edged closer to the door. Prepared. Ready to intervene.

“Fortunate then,” Chris’s gravelly voice replied, “that I got a copy of my police report when I did, isn’t it?”

Standish risked a peek into the room.

For the first time, Rivers flinched. Her head jerked around at Richter.

He stared back at her. Then turned a threatening glare on Larabee. “There is no report,” he said, calling his bluff.

Richter’s heart dropped into his stomach when Larabee, still wearing that cold smile, reached under his pillow and pulled out the very report that Richter and Rivers had maneuvered out of existence.

“Must be my mistake,” Chris replied dangling the nonexistent report from his fingers. He returned Richter’s glance coldly. “I’d let you take a closer look at it, but you don’t seem to have a free hand.”

Ezra nearly choked as he swallowed his laughter. Buck had dislocated both of the other agent’s shoulders in the fight. Richter stood in the room, both arms temporarily immobilized.

“Boys,” Rivers interceded smoothly. “There’s no need to be hostile. We are, after all, on the same team. We all want the same thing, the capture of the militia leaders who destroyed so many lives.”

She turned up her act as she refocused on the Denver agent. “This happened in our city. Surely you can understand why we take it personally.”

Larabee rolled his eyes, the smile disappeared and the green eyes glittered dangerously. She was reminded of a snake. But not a cornered one. A hunter. In its prime.

“You came here to deal,” he said. “Either spill it, or get out.”

Her eyes glittered back at him.

He reached for the call button at his side.

“Fine,” she said, irritated at suddenly finding the terms being dictated to her. “I want you to bury that report. Forget what happened and stay out of our way. You do that for me, we won’t press assault charges against Agent Wilmington and we’ll bury the Bautiste break in. It’s a simple exchange. Do we have a deal?”

She was unable to read much in his expression as he slowly repeated the terms back to her. “You and your boy there will refrain from starting unsubstantiated rumors about Bautiste and you’ll drop
any impending charges against my agent, if I’ll forget that one of your agents assisted in assaulting me and that your team leader kidnapped me and more or less blackmailed me into participating in a sting operation? Is that the idea?”

“Yes,” she hissed tightly.

“Not much of a deal,” he said. He put on an elaborate display of making up his mind, but she could see his eyes get harder. He looked back up at her. “What if I say no?”

Richter twitched forward threateningly.

Rivers put her hand out, as she sensed his forward motion. He stopped.

She looked hard at Larabee. “Then I will chase those rumors hard until I have proof that your team committed an illegal breaking and entering and possible assault with a deadly weapon, motivated by a desire for revenge. I will press charges for the assault of an ATF agent, who has become a hero to this city, at the hands of an interfering, glory-grabbing, hot-dogging agent from another jurisdiction. I will also detail your assault on and attempted murder of agent Pirelli, another hero to this city. Believe me it won’t play prettily in the papers.”

For a moment, she thought he was going to tell her to go to hell. Instead his voice was steely as he agreed. “Looks like I don’t have much choice.”

She refused to let her triumph show, responding gravely, “You’ve made a good decision, Agent Larabee.” She held out her hand. “We can seal it by burning the police report.”

The full cold, humorless smile took her by surprise as he folded the report and slid it back under his pillow. “I think I’ll keep that,” he said, his eyes never leaving hers. “In case I need to remember.”

For just a split second she considered, pushing him aside to get the report. But she withdrew her hand slowly, recovering her poker face in remarkable time. “Alright then,” she said, tearing her eyes away but adding “But remember it works both ways.”

“Oh, I’ll remember,” he said in a low, measured voice. But he looked at Richter as he said it. A look that promised that punishment for any future troubles would be taken from his precious hide.

Richter looked away, pretending not to notice.

Larabee turned the smile back to Rivers. “Thanks for dropping by.”

Ezra nimbly removed himself several yards up the hall and assumed the manner of a man just arriving. He seemed surprised to see them, as they came toward him. Temporarily blocking their path.

“Agent Richter,” Ezra said with narrowed eyes. “How charming to see you again.” He eyed the slings. “I heard you took a fall.”

Richter narrowed his eyes back at Standish, who continued blithely. “Good of you to be willing to suffer a little pain for the good of your city and your profession. Nice picture in the papers by the way.”

“Go to hell,” Richter responded.

“See you there,” Ezra returned. He nodded at AD Rivers, but he did not move. They had to go around him instead.
He returned to the room to find Chris lying back against the pillows, looking angry. The tops of his cheeks were flushed red. The rest of his face was pale.

He meant to be congratulatory, but it didn’t come out quite right. “In bargaining for their silence, I hope you have given away nothing of importance,” Ezra said, as he looked down at Chris. Even as the words came out, he knew that wasn’t what he meant.

Chris looked at Ezra guardedly, realizing that he had been overheard. “Only the right to press charges,” he replied. To be honest, he had never even considered it until Rivers brought it up.

Ezra pursed his lips. Pirelli and Richter were a couple of thugs and ought to be in jail, not running around looking like gold-plated heroes.

Chris’s eyes narrowed thoughtfully at Ezra, scanning his faraway look. “Is there anything you want to tell me about Bautiste, Ezra?” he asked, sounding a little more suspicious than he meant to sound.

“No, that I can think of,” Ezra replied in his most thoughtful voice. “They say confession is good for the soul,” Chris commented dryly.

Ezra flinched at the choice of words, but true to form, he was quick to find an escape route. “You look like that fever might be up again,” he said smoothly. “I’ll go get the nurse.”

In the hallway Standish swore silently to himself. He cursed Chris, Buck, Josiah, Nathan, Vin, J.D., and Travis all in one long, virulent, muttered stream. Babysitting Larabee was going to be one long unbroken hell. The man would torture him slowly until he confessed. Until he told him everything. And then Buck was going to flay him alive for not keeping his mouth shut. Confession is good for the soul, Chris had said. Ezra snorted. Maybe so, Mr. Larabee, but it is seldom good for the body.

After he sicced the nurse on Chris, partly out of spite, the undercover agent went to talk to Doctor Kahar. After all, as Chris’s doctor, the man had a right to know that Larabee would be breaking out of here tomorrow. For the sake of everyone involved, Ezra thought it would be a good idea to get some medical instructions and prescriptions, which would prove to be entirely superfluous, since Chris was unlikely to take either drugs or advice from anyone but Nathan. Stubborn fool, he could hear the medic now. He wondered vaguely when Nathan had taken up residence in his brain.

He realized then that if he wanted to save his dignity, his sanity, and maybe even his career, he needed a strategy; he needed Chris Larabee, and he needed a strategy for handling Chris Larabee. His step became more determined as he proceeded up the hallway. There really was not that much time to prepare.

***

Ezra leaned against the doorway well out of reach and wore his poker face. Doctor Kahar was trying to talk Chris out of checking himself out of the hospital. Chris had been on the phone when Ezra had arrived with the doctor. He had hung up in a hurry. Then he had thrown Ezra one of those looks that made the undercover agent feel like his skin had just become transparent. He hated those looks.

Larabee listened to the doctor’s sundry good reasons for him to stay and then he simply said. “I understand. But I have to leave, so just tell me what I need to do when I get home.”

The doctor turned to Ezra. “He is your friend. Please try to reason with him.”
From the safety of the doorway, Ezra laughed. “That, my good man, is like trying to reason with a stone wall. Mr. Larabee has made up his mind. Neither heaven, nor hell, nor good sense itself will make him change his mind.”

Chris glared at him.

The doctor frowned darkly. “Fine then,” he said to Chris. “You can sign a form that says you released yourself against my medical advice. But I am faxing Four Corners General in case you end up there with a relapse.”

“Excellent idea,” Ezra said, ignoring the green-eyed glare directed his way.

The doctor wrote out a sheet of instructions and handed them to Chris.

With surprising agility, Ezra stepped forward and intercepted them. “I’ll take those,” he said.

Chris glowered threateningly.

Ezra ignored him and accompanied the doctor from the room. “You shouldn’t in any way feel bad about this,” he said after he made sure he had the instructions correct. “Mr. Larabee has prematurely released himself from the hospital so many times that the staff at Four Corners calls it the Larabee Maneuver. Although, you should consider yourself lucky,” the southerner added thoughtfully. “He’s usually a lot less polite.”

This last was said loudly enough for the occupant of the room behind him to hear it.

The doctor was neither comforted nor amused. He simply said that he did not feel guilty about it in the slightest. He had done his best by his patient. And that was all he could do.

Ezra returned to the room expecting to be met by the famous Larabee glare. He was not disappointed, although he could see that Chris was making an effort to dim it down.

“What time does the plane leave?” Chris asked.

“The plane leaves in the late afternoon,” Ezra replied, looking smugly back at his boss. “There are conditions for your parole, of course.”

“Conditions?” Chris asked cocking an eyebrow at him.

“Conditions,” Ezra said, still looking smug.

One corner of Chris’s mouth quirked up challengingly. “And your conditions would be?”

Ezra laughed shortly. “Do you take me for a fool? You shall discover the conditions when it is time to go, and not a moment sooner.”

Chris narrowed his eyes.

Ezra narrowed his eyes right back.

“Alright, Ezra,” Chris said frostily. “In the meantime how about you have a seat and tell me about your resignation.”

Ezra congratulated himself on not letting his surprise show. He wondered who had told him. It wasn’t a story he wanted to tell when Chris was already obviously irritated with him. “That would be a long story,” Ezra hedged.
“You’d better start telling it then because we have an appointment with a board of inquiry at 8:30 sharp on Monday morning,” Chris replied curtly.

“We?” Ezra retorted, growing irritated himself. Nobody could push his buttons like Chris Larabee. “Does one have to appear before a board of inquiry after one resigns?” Couldn’t resigning have just one good point that he could enjoy?

“Only when said resignation is not accepted by one’s superior,” Chris replied mockingly.

Ezra made a face at him.

“Besides,” Chris said, his grin vanishing, replaced by something far colder. “It looks like I’m not allowed to drive, so someone has to get me there.”

“By ‘someone’, I suppose you mean me,” Ezra retorted.

“Looks like you got left here to be my official babysitter, so you can be the chauffeur, too,” Chris snapped.

“I believe the job title I resigned from was ATF Agent, not Personal Servant,” Ezra countered.

“I believe you’ll be lucky if we can convince the directors to let you have a job at all,” Chris said icily.

Some detached part of Ezra’s brain knew the conversation was not at all going to plan. In fact, if this had been an undercover operation involving an armed felon, the rest of Team Seven would have charged in by now to save him. But there was no backup. And he watched it go downhill quickly, somehow helpless to stop it.

He had meant to tell Chris about the resignation. He had meant to get Chris safely home. He knew that if anyone could get him reinstated, it would be Chris Larabee. And hadn’t Chris just said that was his intention? So, in that sense his plans were working out. It was his strategy for handling Larabee that had gone all wrong.

Chris was getting truly angry now. And the angrier Chris was, the more irritating he became. Right now he was working his way into rare form. Unfortunately, when Chris was at his most irritating, Ezra found it harder and harder to keep his cool. Or control his tongue. Even when he wanted to.

Thus, that previously detached part of his brain he used to monitor his undercover performances stuttered in abject horror, as he heard his mouth say, “What makes you think I want to come back?”

Worse yet, the rest of it fell out before he could stop it. “What could possibly make it worth my while to endure another disaster like this? Certainly not your overwhelming gratitude.”

Silence fell as if someone had dropped a soundproof curtain. Chris stared at him. And said nothing.

Ezra had played a lot of roles in his life, but humility was not one of his stronger points. The words had rolled right out, and he didn’t know how to take them back.

You’re not going to just sit there and take that are you? He asked silently, staring back at Chris. When it gradually became clear that Chris wasn’t going to say anything, he tried to cajole himself to speak. But his famously glib tongue stayed glued to the floor of his mouth.

By then an impassive mask nearly as good as Ezra’s own came down over Chris’s face. “Alright Ezra,” Chris said calmly. Far too calmly. “I could use your assistance getting back to Denver. After
that, your decision is your own. If you don’t want to come back, I’ll accept your letter of resignation.”

No, no! This is not how this is supposed to go. Ezra’s mind screamed, but he felt himself still staring resolutely back at Chris.

Chris broke eye contact for a moment. And when he looked back at Ezra, the undercover agent couldn’t read his expression at all. In detached, official tones, he said, “I’ll see you in the morning.” As he pushed his call button to summon a nurse, he added, “Thank you for getting the plane tickets.”

Ezra stared, dumbstruck. He started to fashion some sort of reply. But the nurse appeared and began a quiet conversation with her patient. Ezra turned, numbly, and walked out of the room.

His feet carried him to the end of the corridor, but he was not aware of it. Even when he pressed the elevator call button. His mind was back in the room, sifting through the wreckage, wondering how the hell he had messed that up so badly. Your decision is your own. I’ll accept your resignation.

“Why on earth do you pick now to start listening to what I say?” Ezra muttered bitterly. He realized he had been muttering to himself when he noticed the man next to him staring at him over his newspaper. He glared coldly at the man until he turned red and buried his face back in the paper.

Chris asked the nurse for a painkiller. Requested no visitors until morning. He took the pill and lay back, waiting for oblivion. Until it arrived, he berated himself soundly. For a minute there, he had thought the team would survive this spectacular series of blunders and errors in judgment. Thought they had escaped. Miraculously. Again.

He was wrong. Clearly, his failure in leadership had just lost him his undercover agent. More than that, he chided himself. A teammate. A friend. He cursed himself and his stupidity. Continued cursing right up until the painkillers finally took hold.

* * *

It was dark by the time Buck arrived at the condo he shared with J.D. Dunne. He jostled the kid awake. “We’re here.”

J.D.’s eyes opened wide for a second, then he ran a hand over his face. Without another word, he stumbled around the truck, stretching in the cool Denver air. It was spring, but the evening still held a chill. He shrugged into his jacket and grabbed his duffel bags from the back of the truck. On the other side of the truck, Buck did the same. They walked up the walkway to their building and then to their door in silence.

Silence greeted them as Buck unlocked the door. J.D. could see the answering machine blinking in the darkened entry to the living room. It was quiet. Empty. It even smelled empty. J.D. stifled a yawn, and proceeded toward his room without turning on the light. He stopped at the answering machine. “Sixteen messages,” he called over his shoulder.

“The ladies must have missed me somethin’ fierce,” Buck replied from the kitchen.

J.D. rolled his eyes, remembered at the last minute to step around a hamper filled with clean but unfolded clothes, and proceeded into his room. He dropped both duffel bags and pitched forward onto his bed.

He heard Buck go upstairs a minute later and then come back down almost immediately. He heard
keys jingling as the older man headed toward the door.

“Where are you going?” J.D. asked, still lying on his face on top of his bed.

“Gotta go check on the ranch,” Buck said.

J.D. picked up his head and looked at the clock. It was early yet. It just felt like the middle of the night.

“For what?” he asked. “Can’t it wait till tomorrow?”

Buck paused, his hand on the doorknob and sighed. Hadn’t they just recently learned—all over again, in Buck’s case—that sometimes there is no tomorrow to do what you should have done. He shook his head to clear it of the grim thought. Then he turned back to J.D.

“Just gonna check the house. Check the horses. Make sure everything’s okay. Tell the neighbors thanks for taking care of the place. Let them know Chris is coming home soon.” He looked down the dark hallway to where he could just make out the dim shape of J.D.’s feet hanging over the end of his bed. “Won’t take long,” he said, pulling open the door.

“Wait,” J.D. called. “I’ll go with you.”

Buck looked toward the ceiling, then put his head down. He thought for a moment that he might just convince the kid to stay behind, but decided he owed J.D. more than that. He turned from the door and made his way down the hall to J.D.’s room. He stopped in the doorway, as J.D. looked up at him questioningly.

“I appreciate the offer,” he said. “But if you don’t mind, this one I’d like to do by myself.”

For a second the kid looked disappointed, hurt maybe, but then he covered it. “Sure, Buck,” he said with a shrug and plumped himself back over on his bed. “That’ll give me a chance to call Casey. Tell her I’m back.” He looked up suddenly and grinned. “I can tell her and Mrs. Wells that Chris’ll be home soon.”

J.D.’s girlfriend lived with her aunt on a small ranching property across the pasture from Chris’s home. They had sent a condolence card to the office, but Casey had sent a special one to J.D. He had not shown it to Buck. It was in his backpack with the others. He wondered what to do with them now.

* * *

Buck made one extra stop before getting to Chris’s ranch. He climbed out into the chilly air and made his way among the shadowy headstones guided by the large moon hanging like a lamp in the sky. Even with the moonlight, it was too dark to read the names on the stones he passed, but he knew the way. He could have found the ones he was looking for with his eyes closed.

He stood for a moment peering down at them in the darkness. Then he knelt in front of the stones. He stayed just that way for a time, the rhythmic hum of insects in the trees and the occasional night bird call filling the silence around him.

“So I didn’t lose him,” Buck said finally to the dark granite shape hunched in the shadows before him. “But I guess you knew that, when he didn’t show.”
He reached out one hand and blindly traced the name so carefully carved into the face of one of the stones.

“I know you miss him,” he continued with a sigh. “But I gotta say I’m glad you’re gonna wait a little longer.” A tiny, sad smile flickered across his face. “Just don’t take him back too soon, okay? I don’t think this old heart can take it.”

He turned to the stone on his right. “That goes for you, too, Junior,” he added quietly, leaning forward to brush his hand across its carved face.

An owl called somewhere in a nearby tree. He paused.

“Miss you both,” he said softly, rising to his feet and brushing his pants off with his palms. Both knees were damp from the grass. He turned back to Sarah Larabee’s headstone, a dark bulk in the shadows.

“Don’t worry. I’m still taking care of him,” Buck assured her before he walked away. “I never break a promise to a lady.”

* * *

The ranch, as it turned out, was fine. As it also turned out, Buck wouldn’t have needed J.D.’s help. When he arrived in the driveway, Vin was already there. Together, they inspected the property, both men knowing that Chris’s neighbors would have taken good care of the place. Everything was in order, in the house and out. A fence had been repaired in the west pasture. The dishes had even been done.

The elderly couple had been Chris’s neighbors for a long time. They had watched over his property discreetly through the long months after Sarah and Adam died. When Buck asked them to keep an eye on the place until he returned, they had readily agreed. Chris had been a good neighbor to them over the years. This time, when Buck stopped in and told them that Chris was not dead and that he would be home soon, he saw tears gather in the fading blue eyes of the wife. The husband simply shook his head in a sort of knowing disbelief and offered Buck a drink. He was driving. He declined.

Inspection completed, the two men stood in the driveway, and regarded each other silently.

Vin grimaced as he looked up at Buck. “I reckon I still owe you an apology for throwin’ ya out of here.”

Buck shrugged. “Forget it,” he said lightly. “It ain’t the first time.”

It was too dark to see Buck’s expression even with the porch light on, but the sharpshooter could hear the undercurrent of pain in the other man’s voice, and he knew the story behind it. “Still,” Vin pressed. “I had no right. What happened…” he stopped suddenly and grinned. Then corrected himself. “What didn’t happen, wasn’t your fault. You were following orders, same as the rest of us.”

Buck looked down at the gravel at his feet. “Don’t worry about it,” he said.

Vin shook his head. “Ya know, I’m tryin’ to apologize, but you keep interruptin’.”

Buck grinned silently, ducking his chin into his collar. A speech like this was a rare thing from Tanner. He ought to enjoy it while it lasted.
“Anyway,” Vin said, watching his foot slide along the gravel. “If I’m bein’ honest, I wasn’t any madder at you than I was at me.”

“I know,” Buck said quietly, searching for the blue eyes in the shadowed face. He smiled softly, sadly. “Like I told you, I been there before.”

Vin’s smile mirrored his own. He reached out a hand to seal the apology, to renew the friendship.

Buck eyed the hand. Then he took it and pulled the young agent into a trademark Buck bear hug. He slapped him on the back twice and then released him.

“Meeting tomorrow,” Buck said as he moved off toward his truck. “We’ll meet here. At ten A.M. We better discuss some tactics for dealing with the brass.”

Vin nodded. *Tactics*, he thought as he watched Buck’s truck roll up the driveway and onto the road. For a second it crossed his mind that maybe Nathan was right. Maybe they did need Chris. He would know how to deal with the brass. Or at least he’d have a plan.

Vin put the thought out of his head. They had gotten themselves into this mess. They should get themselves out. Or at least take their punishment like men.

* * *

Later, in the early hours of morning, Buck turned in his bed. He was awakened by the raw scream clawing its way up his throat. His eyes snapped open and the sudden silence of the room descended on him like a heavy blanket, torn by his own harsh breathing. He felt the sweat soaking his t-shirt, but this time he told himself it was only a dream. Yes, the pictures in his head had really happened. But they had not ended the way he thought. He reminded himself, until his heart stopped pounding and his breathing quieted. Reminded himself until he believed it. When he drifted away again, the nightmares had lost their power.

* * *

In Texas, Chris was dreaming dreams of fire and guns. Mixed up images of Sarah and Adam, of Buck and Vin and the team. Dreams of Ezra shouting to him across a burning warehouse. And he couldn’t understand what he was saying. And he couldn’t seem to get him to leave. Not even when he saw the roof was about to collapse, could he get Ezra to stop talking and just get out.

But once, once in the middle of the barrage of confusing, blurring, superheated images, the roaring of flame, images of charred ceiling beams, and the smell of burning rubber, once there was a short dream. Of no place. Like a fog. Pearly, misty gray. But it smelled sweet, like summer rain on mown hay. And she was there. His Sarah. He didn’t see her, but he heard her whisper and felt her hand as she touched his forehead, like she used to do to both of “her men” when cold season came and they looked to be running fevers. Her hand was soft and cool, the way he remembered. And she said something softly in his ear. He couldn’t hear the words, but it seemed to him that he could understand. And though he knew it wasn’t real, he felt himself relax. Just for a bit. A short respite before the nightmares took him again.
It was still relatively early when Ezra returned to the hospital. He had taken a long shower during which he argued with himself about how to straighten out the mess he made yesterday when he let Larabee provoke him. Unfortunately, most of the conversation consisted of alternately complaining about how irritating Chris Larabee could be and chiding himself for letting Chris get to him.

After all, he had played his undercover roles to absolute perfection in countless difficult cases. He had never yet faltered. They had never yet cracked his cool. So how could it be that one man could do this to him on a regular basis?

He told himself to just back off. To play nice. To explain that he said those words in haste. He realized that it would be the smart play. He got ready to do just that.

He stopped at the nurse’s station on the floor, balancing his bundles carefully against his leg, as he inquired of the nurse on duty whether Mr. Larabee was awake yet.

“You can go ahead in,” she replied. She stopped Ezra as he picked up his bags. “So you know,” she said, “he had a rough night.”

Great, Ezra thought sardonically.

“The doctor should be coming shortly,” she added.

Ezra nodded and thanked her politely, showing his dimples, practicing the attitude he was going to take with Chris. Polite. Deferential. Plainspoken. He repeated those three words to himself as a reminder. Then squared his shoulders and set off resolutely down the hall.

“You look like utter hell,” were the first words out of his mouth.

He expected a retort, but realized quickly that he wasn’t going to hear one. When the green eyes fluttered open, they were slightly glazed. Ezra realized that couldn’t be good.

He dropped his packages and his bags.

“Did you sleep at all?” he snapped, taking in the tense expression on Chris’s face. “Not a good first step to getting out of here today.”

He watched an annoyed light flicker into the green eyes. Wonderful, Ezra, he scolded himself. I said polite, deferential, and plainspoken, not blunt and accusatory.

A glare was Chris’s only response. It lacked its usual force.

Ezra took a breath and calmed himself. Polite, deferential… He was interrupted by the arrival of the doctor.

Kahar reviewed the charts briefly, his frown growing steadily darker.

His examination of the patient himself was even quicker.

He faced his patient frankly. “Your fever is up again. The infections are slowly clearing up, but still present. My recommendation is that you remain here a few more days. We might be able to arrange to transfer you to Four Corners General in Denver sometime tomorrow or the next day. Frankly, looking at you, I can’t imagine that you still feel up to leaving today.”
The green eyes rolled toward the doctor. He said nothing, but his determination was obvious.

The doctor looked at Ezra. Standish shrugged. What was there to say? He had already warned the doctor.

The doctor sighed. “If you are determined, then you have my instructions,” he said, directing his gaze toward Ezra.

Ezra nodded, reaching instinctively into his jacket pocket and fingering them.

“Good luck,” Kahar said, shaking Chris’s hand.

“Thanks,” Chris said, unclenching his teeth just long enough to get the words out. “For everything,” he said. He meant it. His sincerity was as evident as his determination.

The doctor shook his head and then shook Ezra’s hand, wishing him even more luck. Then he gave last minute instructions and disappeared.

Ezra stood for a moment staring at Chris. He didn’t need the doctor or the chart to tell that Chris’s fever was up. It was obvious just looking at him. He looked even worse this morning than he had yesterday.

Ezra remembered his last hospital stay and how much he had wanted to leave. Had mentioned it the very first night. Nathan had laughed at him, told him that was the IV talking. Ezra remembered how good an IV can make you feel, as it delivers sugars, hydration, blood, painkillers, medication, whatever you need. If you’re stubborn enough and willing to overlook the obvious, like tubes and wires sticking out of your body, you might even feel like you could manage on your own.

Then they took it away, of course, and a hundred small pains and all the large ones became glaringly apparent. Then he began to really understand the violence that had been done to his body. It only gets worse if one stubbornly, inexplicably refuses to take painkillers. Like his mule-headed masochist of a boss.

“Rough night?” Ezra asked.

Chris barely nodded in response. He was too busy vowing to himself to never take painkillers again. If there was a bright spot, it was that at least this morning he wasn’t going to lose whatever was left in his stomach. He took a deep breath, dug down inside and found his game face. Then he slowly raised the head of the bed.

Ezra took another look and decided that perhaps now was not the best time to broach the subject of his resignation. It might just take all his determination to get Chris to the airport. His problems could wait.

“As requested,” Ezra said with forced cheerfulness opening one of his shopping bags. “I brought you some clothes to wear, in the sizes you indicated.” He pulled out a pair of soft, lightweight nylon wind pants and a T-shirt. “All in your preferred color. Black.”

He laid them on the bed. Then he pulled a heavyweight flannel shirt from one of the bags. “Have you any idea how hard it was to find one of these at this time of year?” he asked. He felt Chris’s eyes on him, but he continued with forced cheerfulness. “Nevertheless I persevered. And,” he said as if he were a spokesmodel showing prizes on a game show. “It’s actually black. Well, it does have a little blue running through it, but overall, not so bad. And, fortunately not bright red.”

He had hoped for the tiniest of smiles in reward for his efforts. He was disappointed.
“Ezra,” Chris croaked out instead, a strange look passing over his face.

“Good Lord!” Ezra exclaimed as Chris bolted suddenly, awkwardly out of the bed, tangling a foot in the sheets, staggering, stumbling, but hitting the bathroom just in time. Still holding the flannel shirt in the center of the room, Ezra recovered from his astonishment long enough to wince at the retching sounds from the bathroom. *That has to hurt,* he said silently, thinking about the bruises and the broken ribs. He didn’t know whether to go in there or not. Was there any comfort he could offer? Would he even be welcome? He stayed where he was, mutely, awkwardly, stupidly, still clutching the shirt.

Chris rested his head momentarily against the cold metal of the pipes, the bitter taste in his mouth working to calm the flutter in his stomach that heralded the next bout of nausea, something he desperately wanted to avoid. Both arms were wrapped around his middle and he became aware that he was kneeling on the cold floor. It occurred to him that this did not bode well as a start to his escape.

He sat back on his knees and dragged a shaky hand impatiently across his face, wiping away the sweat and tears, trying to clear his head. *Damn painkillers.* He hated that fuzzy feeling. He’d rather have the pain.

He pushed himself determinedly back to his feet, nearly losing his footing on his slippery, medicated, gauze-wrapped feet. But he grabbed the sink and reached gingerly to press the lever that would get rid of the evidence of his weakness.

*Guess I was wrong about that, too,* he thought dimly, as he watched it spiral away. *Wrong about a lot of things lately. They’re all down the toilet, too.*

“Mr. Larabee?” the southern voice called tentatively.

He turned to the door, purposely avoiding the mirror before him.

Ezra was relieved to see Chris reemerge from the bathroom. Stiffly, pain written into his very posture. But thankfully, he was at least standing upright.

Chris caught sight of Ezra, still holding the flannel shirt up, a strange perplexed expression on the southerner’s face. And he couldn’t help smiling. It wasn’t every day the unflappable Ezra Standish was taken by surprise.

His gaze fell on the shopping bags and he eyed Ezra’s purchases for the first time. He raised his eyebrows in silent approval.

“I believe I have everything you requested,” Ezra said, catching Chris’s expression and feeling for the first time in days a familiar feeling of understanding pass between them.

Chris’s lips twitched, looking again for the moment like his irascible, indestructible self. “I don’t suppose you have a real toothbrush in there anywhere?”

There was a definite note of appeal in the raspy-throated question. It was Ezra’s turn to grin.

“Funny you should ask,” he replied, reaching into the bottom of the next bag. He withdrew a small, soft rolled travel kit filled with personal items in convenient small sizes.

Chris smiled, lowering his head as he took it. *Leave it to Standish,* he thought, humbled at the undercover agent’s thoughtfulness. Troubled at his inability to reach him and make him want to stay.
He looked up at Ezra again, taking firm hold on his resolve. He couldn’t give up yet. There were hours in which to attempt to make him change his mind. *I won’t fail you again,* Chris thought.

Ezra felt Chris’s eyes bore into him again, but he waited until he was sure Chris was not looking before he risked a glance in Chris’s direction. The team leader was leaning on the sink in the bathroom, slowly, stubbornly, working his way through getting himself in order. He found himself staring, somehow moved by the determination etched into the bruised, haggard face. He turned back to the task of removing tags and laying out the clothes, resolved that he could find at least as much determination in himself.

Chris was winded when he returned from brushing his teeth and washing his face. He hadn’t bothered attempting to shave, to Ezra’s immense relief. Doggedly, he set about putting on the clothes Ezra laid out for him.

Ezra watched him struggle for a moment with clumsy bandaged hands and arms that had begun to shake slightly. When he could stand it no more, he realized he would either have to help or leave the room. “May I offer my assistance?” he asked tentatively, and was not sure what he hoped the answer would be.

“No,” Chris said shortly, aggravated. His head snapped up a second later, throwing him slightly off balance. Ezra caught his arm. “What I meant,” he said, trying again, “was thanks, but I need to do this on my own.”

Ezra smiled to himself. “I’ll be outside the door if you need me,” he replied, fingering the imaginary brim of an imaginary hat. It was a convenient escape, since he had yet to bring in the one purchase he knew Chris would hate. Conditions of parole.

After what seemed like a long time, he peeked back in the door. Larabee was seated on the bed, breathing hard, but mostly dressed, except for his bare feet.

For a moment, Ezra thought he had purchased the wrong sizes. But he hadn’t. He had purchased the sizes Chris had indicated. Yet the T-shirt hung limply from Chris’s shoulders and he could see about a half a mile of drawstring cinching in the pants. *A man ought to know what size he wears,* Ezra thought, confused. It dawned on him only then how much weight Chris had lost. Weight Ezra didn’t even think the man had had. It was disquieting. He felt himself grow inexplicably angry. And swallowed it back down again.

“Ready or not here I come,” he called into the room as he entered.

He looked Chris over and tried not to let his expression give anything away.

Chris cocked his head and narrowed his eyes, a sardonic twitch at his lips revealing what often passed for a smile. “No shoes, Ezra?”

“Ah, no,” Ezra said, clearing his throat. “I believe I mentioned there were conditions to your parole.”

“I see,” Chris said, the corners of his mouth twitching again, amused but by no means complacent.

Ezra continued as if he hadn’t noticed. “To be perfectly blunt, Mr. Larabee,” Ezra said, launching quickly into his patter. “At the speed you are moving, we would have needed to leave for the airport yesterday. Clearly you are not capable of walking much further than the distance from the bed to the bathroom. Also, I don’t want anyone tracking us by the trail of bloody footprints.”

“Don’t you think shoes would take care of that?” Chris said with a smirk.
Ezra ignored him. “Therefore, I have made a small purchase for the sake of speed and convenience.”

He unfolded and set out the portable folding wheelchair.

Chris eyed it doubtfully.

“You’ll get to board the plane first,” Ezra said in a voice that sounded suspiciously like the kind of voice one would use when trying to bribe a screaming toddler with a cookie.

Chris’s lips pursed together, as he tried not to grin. “You reckon that thing’s strong enough to hold me?” he asked.

He eyed Chris’s gaunt frame. Right now, Mr. Larabee, a good-sized spider web looks strong enough to hold you. But all he said was “Positive. I asked at the store where I purchased it.”

Chris’s eyes moved from Ezra’s face back to the chair. “All right,” he said, and nodded as if trying to convince himself.

Ezra blinked in surprise. He resisted the urge to ask Chris to kindly repeat that for posterity. He did commit the moment to memory to share with Nathan. He wondered whether he should be concerned. He shook the thought away.

“You do not, however, have to go barefoot.” He reached into the shopping bag and pulled out the final items. He held them out for Chris to inspect: the thickest, softest, heaviest, most padded pair of hiking socks that Chris had ever seen.

When Chris looked up at him, Ezra saw the gratitude written in the green eyes.

Ezra pushed on before Chris might say something embarrassing. “They only came in gray and brown,” he said with a shrug.

The gratitude was replaced with a spark of humor, as Chris smiled a lopsided smile. Ezra was relieved.

“You chariot awaits, sir,” he said, waving his hand toward the chair with an exaggerated flourish.

Chris slipped off the bed, took two slow steps, wincing even with the heavy socks on, and slid gingerly into the chair. Ezra put up the foot rests as far as they would safely go, placed the flannel shirt in Chris’s lap, slung the travel bags over his shoulder and pushed Chris toward the door.

Chris watched him shoulder the bags. He offered to take one. Ezra only grunted, but when he banged the chair and an elbow on the doorframe as he attempted to maneuver them out of the room, Chris had narrowed his eyes and ordered him to hand over one of the bags. He handed over the lightest one and they made it out of the room without further incident.

* * *

The rest of the day passed relatively uneventfully. Relatively. After they left the airport anyway.

At the airport itself, the curious stares he garnered at the airport put Chris’s teeth on edge. The sympathetic looks were even worse. Both men gritted their teeth and tried to ignore them. Truthfully, Ezra could hardly blame them. Chris looked like a one-man train wreck.
He noted the irony of his situation. He was an undercover agent. He was trained to hide in plain sight. And well he knew how Chris hated to call attention to himself. Yet, here they both were, in a situation practically guaranteed to bring the curious eyes of every traveler in the airport down upon them. They had been in the airport less than twenty minutes and Chris was already getting hot under the collar, and Ezra really wasn’t sure how long he was going to be able to keep him in the chair.

Standish bit his tongue as they passed through ticketing. He clenched his jaw as security directed them through a special gate, and Chris grated out, “I can manage to walk through the gate.”

“You’ll stay in the chair,” Ezra snapped, steering the chair around in the direction the guard indicated before Chris made up his mind to get up.

Everyone waiting in the long line watched their progress through the separate gate. Only some of them had the good grace to look away when Ezra returned their gaze. But every one of them found his or her shoes or the far wall suddenly very interesting, when Chris turned his glare on them. Standish grimaced. He could well imagine Chris Larabee glaring his way through an entire airport. He was glad that Chris did not have a gun. He was glad he had put his own gun in his checked luggage.

As soon as they got through the metal detectors, Ezra headed for the nearest newsstand. He parked the chair just outside, where he could keep an eye on its occupant, and purchased two news magazines and a pulp fiction bestseller guaranteed to be filled with lots of totally unrealistic shootings and picturesque explosions. He also bought some bottled water.

He handed the bag with the reading material to Chris. “Read something,” Ezra ordered between his teeth. “And ignore the uncouth masses.”

Chris looked at him, exasperated, but seeing the sense in Standish’s advice and not having anything else that needed his particular attention, he pulled out the bestseller and began to read.

Ezra congratulated himself on his cleverness. Then he saw the Starbucks and realized he had plenty of time for coffee. He ordered two. Chris was getting the hang of the chair now and wheeled himself toward the napkins, with two bandaged hands and his stocking feet.

Ezra watched him go with irritation, psychically sending a stream of epithets raining down upon his rock hard head. Then he saw the gargantuan man in the black shirt and jeans with many rings on his hand. He was large in every direction. And Ezra knew with the sharp instincts he had honed over years of undercover work that this was going to be trouble.

In an obvious hurry, the man shoved his bulk in front of the wheelchair, cutting Chris off, bumping the chair hard, and spilling the hot coffee into Chris’s lap.

“You don’t mind, do ya pal,” the man said without noticing what he had done or looking back. He apparently didn’t hear the soft epithet. But Ezra did.

“I do mind,” Chris said frostily, quietly, dangerously.

The man reared back. He looked Chris over. “Excuse me,” he said, with evident hostility. Clearly, he was used to getting his own way. He stared down at the man in the wheelchair.

“I said, I do mind,” Chris repeated, evenly. “And you’re in my way.”

The man reared back. He looked Chris over. “You don’t look like you’re in a position to do anything about it,” the man snorted derisively, nodding his head at the chair. Then he turned away.
The silent string of impolite adjectives Ezra directed at Chris got even longer and more colorful.

If Chris had been standing up, the man would have had at least four inches on him. If Chris had been in his typical shape, the heavyset gentleman would have had almost a hundred pounds on him. Even so, in a fair fight Larabee could have taken him easily. As Ezra caught sight of his boss’s malicious smile, he knew it was not going to be a fair fight. But he didn’t know who would need to be rescued.

He grabbed his change and his coffee and sprinted the five steps to the chair, hoping to intervene. He was too late.

In one move, Chris swung his legs up over the outside of the chair and launched the chair toward the man. He caught one leg between the footrests, jerked the man expertly off balance and sent him falling into a nearby table, pulling the chair over and spilling Chris on top of him. Chris recovered quickly. Grabbing the toppled table for balance, he put his knee against the man’s throat.

From a step away, Ezra could not hear the exact words Chris said, but he saw the man’s eyes suddenly go wide and his huge fists go limp. He could also see airport security running toward them at a full on sprint.

“Great,” Ezra snapped between his teeth, pulling up short beside the two men.

The larger man’s eyes were wide and fearful, as they turned toward Ezra. He turned his eyes back toward Chris and croaked out the word, “Yes.”

Chris removed his knee. Ezra grabbed Chris’s good arm and yanked him none too gently to his feet. Without another word Chris returned to the chair, put his feet back on the footrests and turned to collect two napkins.

Airport security began interrogating all three of them.

There was no emotion of any kind on Chris’s face, as he replied to their questions. “No there’s no problem,” he said. “Just had a little accident with my chair, that’s all.”

The other man rubbed his throat and glared hotly at Larabee but said nothing.

Airport security looked suspiciously at each of them, but since no one seemed inclined to say anything more about the incident, they gave each man a stern and threatening glance and then returned to wherever they were waiting.

The man picked himself up off the floor and walked away, muttering. A boy, still in his teens came to clean up. He did not look at anyone, just ran a mop over the coffee, picked up the empty cup and walked away quickly. Ezra grabbed the wheelchair handles and started to push, but Chris held up his hand.

“Wait,” he said.

“What ever for?” Ezra shot back, nearly forgetting to keep his voice down. “Did you want to make another scene? Was this one unsatisfactory?”

Chris looked blandly up at him. “I need my coffee.”

Ezra looked from his boss back to the counter. The long line had melted back for the oversized lout that Chris had just assaulted. As Ezra watched in disbelief the man ordered another coffee exactly like the boy had just cleaned up off the floor. The man paid for the coffee and handed it to Ezra. He took it. Stupefied.
“Fucking lunatic,” the man sputtered taking one last look at Chris. Then he moved quickly away through the crowd.

Still dumbfounded, Ezra pushed the wheelchair back into the main stream of foot traffic.

It was another minute before he found his voice. “What kind of a stunt was that?” he demanded hotly. “It would serve you right if he pressed charges. Serve you right if you pulled the stitches out of your hands. At the very least I hope it hurt like hell!”

Chris grinned back at him, broadly, genuinely. “Oh it did,” he said frankly. “But it was the most fun I’ve had in weeks.”

Ezra rolled his eyes toward the ceiling and the heavens beyond. Not for the first time since he had signed on with Team Seven, he wondered if he were being punished for a specific transgression or just on principle.

* * *

Perhaps Chris had just needed to get it out of his system, Ezra reflected, from his cramped center seat. He watched Chris sleep, slumped up against the bulkhead, the heavy flannel shirt, which should have been way too warm for the spring day was buttoned up to his neck and a small blue airline blanket was draped over his legs. The ludicrously little pillow provided by the airline was wadded up and jammed into the crack between the seat and the bulkhead. Chris had asked for the blanket and the pillow nearly the second they got on the plane. He was out like a light well before take off. He came to groggily as the lunch cart went by. He refused anything to eat. Ezra asked the attendant to get him an apple juice and shoved one of the bottled waters into his hand. He drank several sips of the water. He was asleep again before the juice arrived.

Now Ezra watched the gentle sloshing of the amber liquid as the plane moved slightly in the air and felt a pang of jealousy. Perhaps that was the key. He just needed to throttle some idiot who desperately deserved it. Then maybe he could sleep peacefully, too. He rolled his eyes and leaned past Chris to look out the window. *Perish the thought that it could be so easy,* he thought.

The young woman on his left, after nearly an hour and a half of not-so-subtle staring finally got up the courage to ask Ezra what had happened to his friend.

Ezra turned a baleful glance on her and whispered his reply. “I had to teach him a lesson. It was unfortunate. But it had to be done.”

She stared at him, mouth slightly open. “What do you mean?” she stammered, whispering back.

Ezra smiled toothily and purred in his best aw-shucks southern boy drawl, “He just wouldn’t mind his own dang business.”

She jerked, pressed her lips together and shot him an indignant look before turning away. She did not speak to him or look at either of them for the rest of the trip.

Standish smiled to himself as he opened his magazine. Perhaps Chris was right. He did feel better.

* * *
Chris slept right through the landing, didn’t notice when the barely touched apple juice was removed, or when Ezra put up his tray table and checked his seat belt. He stirred only slightly when the attendant, with Ezra’s help, pushed his seat up into the upright position. Ezra waited until they were the last passengers left on the plane before he attempted in earnest to awaken Chris. Something he looked forward to doing about as much as he would want to awaken a sleeping bear.

“Mr. Larabee,” he said quietly. There was no response.

He shook Chris’s arm.

The eyes snapped suddenly open and he looked around confused.

“We have arrived,” Ezra said calmly.

It took a second for Chris to catch up.

“Oh,” he said, stifling a yawn. He rubbed his eyes with his palms and shook his head in an effort to clear it. In addition to the sundry aches and pains clamoring to make themselves known, he added a stiff neck from sleeping awkwardly against the bulkhead.

Ezra was already out of his seat and unfolding the chair in the aisle by the time Chris had thrown back the thin blue blanket and attempted to stand. Burning pains stabbed through the balls of his feet. He had forgotten. Stubbornly he sidled into the aisle anyway. Perhaps if he just ignored the pains, they would all just go away.

Ezra pushed up the armrests so Chris could get by and waited for him to take his seat.

Chris sat without a word. The chair was starting to wear on him. But since he had no shoes and he could hardly walk, he gritted his teeth and maintained silence.

With the help of the attendants, whose sympathetic glances Buck would have worked to his advantage like a master, but which only made Chris feel like he was under a giant magnifying glass, Ezra maneuvered the chair out of the plane and headed up the ramp.

Chris rubbed his neck and slowly eased his head from side to side.

Ezra chattered something about luggage and airline food, but Chris didn’t catch much more than “deplorable” and “highway robbery”. Another water bottle was shoved into his hand. He hadn’t even realized he was thirsty until he started to take off the cap. He wondered how Ezra had known.

Ezra surreptitiously eyed Chris as he drank the water, wondering how much was too much and should he stop him. As far as he knew Chris had had nothing to eat. He had had some coffee, some water, and some juice. Thankfully, everything had stayed down since leaving the hospital. He did not want to risk another episode like the one in the hospital room, especially in a public airport restroom. Yet, he also knew that Chris had to drink something or he would end up in Four Corners General for sure. And they’ll probably all blame me, he thought grumpily.

In the end he decided that Chris would know when to stop himself. He was certain that Chris had even less of a desire to repeat this morning’s performance than Ezra had to go through it again. As they arrived at the baggage carousel, he fingered the instructions in his pocket and remembered with a shock that he had not given Chris his medication. He glared at the back of his boss’s head, believing that the man had likely already figured that out and was just seeing how long he could get away without taking any.

Twenty minutes later they stood outside the door of an airport shuttle bus. The driver unbuckled his
belt to get up and lower the wheelchair access lift. Chris rolled his eyes. “Don’t bother,” he said curtly, got up, and climbed the three steps into the bus, rolling around the pole in his left hand and plopping himself in a seat that an attractive young woman promptly vacated for him.

“Thank you,” he said to her, unclenching his teeth, long enough to favor her with one of his fleeting smiles.

“You’re welcome,” she replied with a shrug and a smile, admiring his green eyes.

Chris’s face cracked into another smile as he glanced back at her before turning away, suddenly glad that Ezra was here and not Buck. This way he wouldn’t have to listen to anyone make embarrassing overtures on his behalf (“My buddy here’s lost his phone number, and he wants to know if he can have yours,”). Or cringe in further humiliation while his oldest friend listed his “selling points” (“He’s too modest to brag, but he’s the head of an elite team of law enforcement agents, totally available and owns a fantastic little horse ranch outside the city.”). Or worse yet, endure an inquisition as to why he had not taken advantage of her moment of weakness (“What the hell’s the matter with you? You coulda had her phone number in a heartbeat! All ya had to do was flash them pretty greens one more time and you coulda sealed the deal?”).

He felt a little guilty for feeling that way as he reflected on his oldest friend, a man who had stuck by him through times that Chris looked back on with shame. A man who knew Chris at his worst but steadfastly refused to focus on anything but his best. Yeah, he loved Buck like a brother, and he sure as hell didn’t deserve the friendship the big man so freely offered, but still he could honestly say that sometimes Buck Wilmington was not the best man for the job.

No one gave up a seat for Ezra, so he stood beside the empty chair and stared out into the parking lot, watching from the corner of his eye as the young woman attempted to engage Chris in conversation. She failed miserably, except for one small but genuine smile that showed Chris’s dimples and lit her up. For a moment Ezra felt sorry for her, another victim of Chris’s obliviousness. Then rational thought returned, and he remembered to be thankful that he was babysitting Chris and not Buck and therefore was spared from listening to endless, sickening, flirting and sympathy-garnering rhetoric parlayed into phone number exchanging, and date setting, which would inevitably be followed by self-congratulating and bragging later on at the Saloon. Sure Larabee was irascible, stubborn, hot headed, and cantankerous, but that special Buck Wilmington charm could drive a man to violence.

It was with no small relief that Ezra saw his Jag sitting safe and sound where he had left it nearly a week ago. He never left his car at the airport. He wondered what he had been thinking. Then he remembered and swallowed hard. He had been thinking only of his anger and his plans for retribution.

“You parked the Jag in airport parking?” Chris asked quietly, reaching the bottom of the bus stairs stiffly.

“Yes,” Ezra said tightly, motioning Chris to get into the chair. It might only be another couple of hundred feet to the car, but he’d rather it didn’t take all evening to get there. And he was anxious to make sure no idiot had dinged his car while he was away.

“What were you thinking?” Chris said with a slight chuckle at Ezra’s expense.

“None of your business,” Ezra snapped.

“Hey,” Chris said holding his hands up in surrender. “I was kidding.”
Ezra rubbed a hand across his face. “I’m aware of that Mr. Larabee,” he said with a sigh. “Forgive my display of temper. I think perhaps I am overtired.”

Chris lowered his head with a sigh. “Listen, Ezra. I appreciate your going out of your way like this. Just drop me at the ranch. We can talk tomorrow about what you want to do.”

Chris was surprised to hear the snort of derision. “You’re not going to the ranch, Mr. Larabee.” Surely you don’t think I am that easily fooled. “I have plenty of room at my house, a nicely appointed guest room, and a little bell you can ring should you require anything.”

“You don’t have to put yourself out,” Chris said. The chair halted and he waited while Ezra inspected his car for dings, dents, or perhaps just dust marring the perfect finish. He cocked his head to one side.

Ezra could feel him thinking from ten feet away.

“I know you hate this,” Chris said bluntly, the little smirk on his lips daring Ezra to deny it.

Ezra glared back at him. What I hate, Mr. Larabee, is you in that chair. “You don’t get out of this that easily,” he said, putting the luggage in the trunk and wheeling Chris to the back door where he could sit with his feet up across the back. “You’re coming back to my house. You are taking your medicine, which is now late. You are going to eat something. And you are going to bed early.”

“I can do all of that at my own house,” Chris said pointedly, climbing into the car.

Certainly you can, Ezra thought, but you won’t. “Yes, you could,” Ezra replied. “But my house is closer to the office if you still plan to make that meeting on time.” And much more convenient to the hospital, too.

Chris’s eyes practically danced with mischief. He opened his mouth and Ezra put up a warning finger.

“I suggest, Mr. Larabee, that you do not take this opportunity to remark on my morning punctuality. I know a longer way home with a lot of potholes.”

Chris’s smirk broadened into a grin. He hid it in his collar. Sometimes Ezra was way too easy a target.

He sobered again as he realized he still had to convince Ezra to come back to the team. There was one bright spot. If he could get Ezra to come to that meeting tomorrow, then the rest of the team could have a crack atconvincing him to stay. Chris was certain they could succeed if he couldn’t.

Ezra felt Chris’s silence in the back seat. He sat with his head bowed into his collar and his arms wrapped around his middle. Ezra was driving slowly and carefully from the parking lot. Still he knew that the few bumps and twists had to be hell on those bruises and ribs. He headed for the highway. There would be more traffic, but there would be fewer twists and fewer potholes.

* * *

They had barely made it in the front door when Ezra’s phone rang. He fished it out of his pocket. Buck.

“Standish,” he said, going into the kitchen.
“Howdy, Ez,” the familiar voice said.

Ezra sighed. Ez. Ra. Ezra, Mr. Wilmington. Must we go through this again? “Greetings Mr. Wilmington. Are you all safely returned to Denver?”

“Safe and sound, Ez. How’s Chris?”

“Resting,” Ezra said. He grimaced and peered around the corner. The light was on in the guest bathroom down the hall. He didn’t hear anything out of the ordinary.

“Any changes?” Buck asked.

“No,” Ezra replied. “No changes since the doctor saw him this morning. Nothing to write home about anyway.” Traveled across state lines. Beat up a reprobate at the Starbuck’s stand. Nothing out of the ordinary.

Buck grunted noncommittally. “How’s he feeling?”

“Better, I think,” Ezra said, wishing Buck would hurry up and get off the phone before some incongruent noise put Buck’s formidable investigative instincts on the alert.

“You need anything?” Buck asked. For the first time Ezra noticed he sounded tired.

“Thank you, but I have everything I need,” Ezra replied. Except milk and fresh eggs, he noted, perusing the inside of his refrigerator.

There was a silence.

When Buck’s voice came back on it was quiet, contemplative. “I want to thank you for staying behind,” Buck said. “Especially after I told you what Travis said.”

Ezra did not have a chance to reply.

“I promise that whatever I can do to keep your job, I will do. You’re part of the team, Ezra. You acted for the good of the team. You won’t be hung out to dry.”

Ezra found it hard to talk over the lump in his throat. “Thank you, Mr. Wilmington,” he said softly. “Your assurance means… well, it means a lot.” Although you might change your mind come tomorrow morning.

There was an awkward pause before Buck changed the subject. “How long do you think you’ll be down there?”

“Oh, not long,” Ezra said lightly.

“Good to hear,” Buck said. “How about Chris?”

Ezra snorted. “You know Mr. Larabee,” he replied. “He’ll be back before you know it.”

Buck laughed affectionately. “Probably before it’s good for him.”

“Probably,” Ezra laughed back. He peered around the corner again. The light was now on in the bedroom. He poured a glass of water and emptied some pills into his hand.

“Listen, Buck,” Ezra said hurriedly. “I’m heading up the hall to see him now.” All the way up the hall to the bedroom. “Should I call you back later?”
“You don’t need to,” Buck said. “I know you’ve got everything under control.”

“Indeed, Mr. Wilmington,” Ezra replied. One of us has things under control, but I’m not sure that it is I, he thought as he hung up.

He found Chris seated on the edge of the bed in the guest room, his knees drawn up until his feet rested on the edge of the box spring, his head in his hands. The team leader had gotten as far as removing his shirt, and from the door, Ezra got a good full look at the purple and green blotches running up his left side.

“Pills, Mr. Larabee,” Ezra said from the doorway.

Chris looked up somewhat blearily. “Which pills?” he asked.

Ezra looked down at the multicolored collection in his hand and sighed. “How about antibiotics?”

“Guess I can’t skip that one,” Chris said ruefully, plucking the indicated pill from Ezra’s palm and taking the glass of water.

“If it were me,” Ezra said smoothly. “I’d want the analgesic.”

“Can’t think straight on painkillers,” Chris said, shaking his head.

“You’re going to need a good night’s sleep,” Ezra said in his most convincing voice.

“I’m going to need to be clear headed in the morning,” Chris argued back.

Ezra shrugged and closed his palm again. He could try again next round. “Are you hungry?” he asked, changing his tactics.

“Why? Are you going to grind up the pills and hide them in my food?” Chris snapped.

That’s a thought! “No,” Ezra said dryly. “Not unless you give me a reason to. I merely noted that it has been nearly nine hours since breakfast, assuming you had breakfast. And you skipped lunch.”

I skipped breakfast, too, and what did that get me? Chris mused with aggravation. To tell the truth, he was hungry, but he was more afraid of losing it all again. And now his head was pounding. One more bout of dry heaves and he’d have to take the pain pills for sure.

Ezra looked at him closely. “What do you think you could eat?”

Chris looked doubtfully back at him.

Ezra sighed, impatient. “I am an excellent cook. And having worked with the members of Team Seven for more than three years, now, I am well-versed in many versions of the fine cuisine known as hangover food.”

Chris laughed. Hangover food? Then this has to be the worst bender I have ever come off of.

“What’ll it be, Mr. Larabee?” Ezra said with mock seriousness. “Toast burnt to charcoal a la Josiah Sanchez? Burnt bacon a la Vin Tanner? Greasy burgers and onion rings a la Buck Wilmington? A very healthy ayurvedic cup of hot water and honey a la Nathan Jackson? Or my personal favorite: fried ham, egg, and cheese on a hard roll.”

Chris grimaced at every single suggestion.
“Or…” Ezra prompted letting the question hang as he realized he didn’t know Chris’s choice of hangover food.

“I don’t eat hangover food, Ezra,” Chris said with a sardonic smile. “I smoke a few cigarettes until my stomach settles. Then I drink some Vin Tanner style coffee and get my ass in to work.”

Ezra made a face. “I think you need to eat something,” he replied firmly. “What do you think you can keep down?”

A distant memory floated back to Chris and Ezra watched his face take on a far away look. A second or two passed before Chris blinked and turned back to Ezra with the barest of smiles. “You got potato chips?”

“Potato chips?” Ezra asked. It was not what he was expecting.

Chris shrugged. “It’s the salt, I guess.”

Ezra shrugged back. “Potato chips it is,” he said, turning on his heel and heading back to the kitchen. Back in the kitchen, he dialed his cell phone.

“Wilmington.”

“It’s Ezra,” he said almost in a whisper.

“What happened?” Buck said alarmed.

“Nothing happened!” Ezra said hastily. “I just have a question.”

“Jesus, Ezra,” Buck snapped, but he didn’t stay aggravated long. “What’s your question?”

“Mr. Larabee seems to be having trouble keeping his meals down,” he began, only to be cut off by Buck’s snort.

“No surprise there, Ez. Happens every time.” Buck paused. “Sometimes I think he’s right.”

“Be that as it may,” Ezra said, clearing his throat, “I was wondering what I might get for him that the hospital would not provide that might, shall we say, prove more digestible.”

Buck sighed. “Ask him what he wants and then get it for him. It ain’t the first time he’s been here. He knows what’ll stay down.”

“I did that,” Ezra said perplexed. “He asked for potato chips.”

“Figures,” Buck said with a quiet laugh. “Must be the salt.”
“Anything else?” Ezra asked impatiently.

Buck laughed. “Yeah, but don’t tell the staff. Strong hot coffee and a big slab of dark chocolate. The darker the better.”

“You must be kidding,” Ezra replied.

“Hell no,” Buck laughed. “The first year he and Sarah were married, he came down with the stomach flu from hell. She was at her wits end. Finally, he called me at work and begged me, I mean begged me, to go down to the store and buy him the biggest slab of Hershey’s special dark they had. I bought five. I thought she was going to kill me. He ate nothing but chocolate and coffee for three days. Nothing else would stay down. She swore up and down that I saved his life. He said the whole thing would have gone by a lot faster if she had just listened to him in the first place.”

“Very interesting to know,” Ezra said with feigned politeness. Why it was that the majority of his teammates couldn’t answer a simple question without attaching half a mile of parables or reminiscences, he would never know. “Dark chocolate and strong coffee. Anything else?”

“Nope,” Buck said. “That should keep him alive until they release him.”

If you only knew, Ezra thought. “Thank you. And I shall endeavor not to disturb you any more tonight.”

“Anytime, Ez,” Buck replied. “Tell old hard-head we’re thinking about him.”

“I’m sure he’ll be gratified to hear it.”

He hung up again. Dark chocolate? Then he remembered where he had a large stash hidden away. The expensive kind. A gift from his mother. That would probably do nicely.

When Ezra brought in the tray, Chris had looked at him with a sort of shock. Realization slowly dawned.

“You called Buck,” he said with a knowing smile.

“I did,” Ezra admitted. “But rest assured he still believes you to be at the hospital. He sends his regards.”

“I’ll bet,” Chris said, with a grin of his own.

It was like giving a car gasoline. No sooner had the caffeine and sugar had time to hit Chris’s system, than Ezra could practically see the wheels start turning slowly in Chris’s head, rapidly picking up speed. Ezra watched the green eyes narrow, the lips purse, the whole process a familiar scene that never failed to fascinate and frighten him at the same time.

“You’ll need to wake me by seven,” Chris said out of the blue.

Here we go, Ezra thought with a grimace. “Seven?” he asked with a sudden shudder.

Chris looked thoughtful, as if he hadn’t heard. “I’ll have to borrow the Jag,” he said.

“Over my dead body,” Ezra blurted out before he could stop himself. “There is no way you can drive in your condition.”

It was all Chris could do to continue to look like he was thinking carefully. “Can we call a cab, then?”
Ezra had a sudden, vivid, and totally irrational vision of Chris shuffling through the front doors of the federal building, leaving a garish trail of bloody footprints in his wake, then passing out in the elevator before he got to the 11th floor and security taking him for a derelict and evicting him from the building. “I’ll drive you,” Ezra said, patiently.

“You don’t need to do that,” Chris said, with a dismissive wave of his hand. “You’ve done a lot already.”

“Mr. Larabee,” he snapped. “I am not putting you in a cab at eight o’clock in the morning. We will go to the office together. And you will use the wheelchair.”

Chris’s eyes raised in surprise. “If that’s how you want it,” he replied.

He stared at Chris. And realized he’d been played. This was how Chris wanted it.

“Eat your dinner,” Ezra snapped. He turned on his heel and left the room.

When he peeked into the silent room forty-five minutes later, he was relieved to see that some of the coffee, a good-sized handful of potato chips, and several squares of chocolate had actually made it into Chris’s stomach—and apparently stayed put. Chris was sound asleep, half-curled onto his right side and stomach, sheet, comforter, and extra blanket, pulled up to his neck, and—as Buck had predicted—his head sandwiched between two pillows.

Ezra retrieved the tray and turned off the light. He paused a moment in the doorway and listened to the sound of deep breathing. Then he pulled the door almost closed. He took the tray to the kitchen, and as he set it down, fatigue settled like lead filling his bones. Suddenly his own bed sounded very inviting.

He left the tray and barely managed to drag himself into pajamas before falling asleep, deeply, gratefully, atop his still immaculately made up bed.

* * *

The men who filed into the conference room were quiet but not exactly subdued. They took their seats, arranged in a line, facing the dark wooden conference table. Six directors before them. AD Travis at their left, at the table, but not exactly with the directors. It did not escape Buck’s notice. He wondered if Travis had already been raked over the coals or whether that depended on him.

The members of Team Seven had held a long meeting at the ranch the day before. It lasted well into the afternoon. They had argued until Buck had his way. He was the leader. He had decided to pursue Chris’s killers. He had called the shots. He would stand in front and take the heat. He had ordered the others to tell the truth. He had ordered them to save their own careers if they could. The fire in his eyes as they sat down told them he still meant it.

Travis looked them over one by one. Wilmington, returning his level gaze, uncharacteristically grim, but resolute. Prepared. Tanner beside him, still hard-eyed, unrepentant. He’d go down fighting.

Sanchez, impassive, almost serene. At peace with his actions and his motivations. Jackson next, head up, the look of a man who was ready to accept his fate. And finally Dunne, who looked a little scared at first, whose head went down only very briefly as he entered, but he picked it back up again and adopted and sought to maintain the demeanor of the men at his side. Standish, missing.

Travis’s mouth settled into a grim straight line and he stared hard at the empty chair and then at Buck. He had given Wilmington a plane ticket for Standish. He had made himself clear. Where was the undercover agent then? Was he flouting authority? Had he gone through with his resignation?
Even now that Chris was alive, didn’t that make a difference? His thoughts were interrupted as the directors called the meeting to order.

*Meeting?* Travis thought soberly. More like an inquisition, if the look in the eyes of the six assembled directors was anything to go by. They had practically fought tooth and nail to decide who was going to be on this board. They had different reasons. And different agendas. None of it made Travis comfortable. This would be an examination of his own leadership as much as an examination of the men before him. All their careers were at stake. He was aware of that. He had spent the night pondering whether he had made a mistake in giving Larabee his head. But then his own bosses had agreed to it. Until now. Now they were mad as hell and seemed to have forgotten their own decisions.

Travis sighed, silently, and released the thought from his mind. Memos and documents would be for his own inquisition. For now, he was expected to sit beside the directors, a witness to the prosecution. He was not expected to contribute unless asked. He wondered what they were going to do when he finally did lose his temper. He knew it would only be a matter of time.

As the most senior of the directors, several levels above Travis, slate eyed Jefferson Cranston, a man whose imprint in a man’s mind gave him an air of gigantic height, took the lead. He glowered darkly at the agents before him and intoned an introduction of the directors present. They shuffled their papers into order and each glowered at the men in turn as his name echoed onto the expectant air of the conference room.

Cranston asked each agent to state his name and his official role on the team. One by one, they spoke and returned to silence, their glances never wavering from the directors before them. Cranston stared down at them, his expression stony and unreadable. “Thank you,” he said, in a way that made it clear he was not thanking anyone. He let an authoritative silence fall, as the directors gazed back at the agents, their eyes hard. Then he began.

“This board of inquiry has been called to obtain a complete accounting of ATF RMET Team Seven’s activities, official and unofficial, following the events of…”

That was a far as he got.

The giant oak conference room door banged against the opposite wall with a dull clank that startled everyone in the room. Travis gave the men of Team Seven credit when they did not turn around or even break focus, even as the heads of the directors snapped up and a strange silence fell onto the room.

That didn’t last long either.

“I assume my invitation was misplaced,” the voice said, low, even, and quiet. Even so it carried clearly across the room to the directors’ table. Travis watched Buck and Vin exchange a flash of a glance, but he couldn’t read it. Nathan and Josiah flinched. But only Dunne’s head jerked toward the door. But he snapped quickly back around to face forward, hiding any surprise he must have felt.

Travis suppressed a smile as he saw three of the directors’ postures shrink back. He saw Cranston take a breath, provoked, uncertain.

Standing crookedly in the doorway, eyes narrowed and the force of his glare undiminished, his anger palpably crackling into the conference room stood Chris Larabee, resurrected, and looking the part, from the black suit that hung from his gaunt frame to his bandaged knuckles and the bruises on his face. Travis couldn’t help but wonder briefly, what Cranston’s secretary, guardian of this conference room had said and thought when he laid eyes on the man. Probably nothing. He probably didn’t...
have a chance. Or more likely, he probably didn’t feel it was worth the risk.

Cranston cleared his throat.

Larabee took advantage of the moment Cranston took to regroup his thoughts. He came into the room, and Travis was startled at the even purposeful stride, as he came around the chairs behind Wilmington. Travis couldn’t see the look Chris gave Buck, but it was the first time he saw Buck’s resolve break. The tall, lanky agent opened his mouth. Then shut it. Chris’s eyes shifted down the row and rested palpably on each man. Their eyes locked on his. J.D. Dunne turned bright red but did not look away.

Chris turned back to Buck, took Wilmington and Tanner in with a single glance and inclined his head very slightly toward the door. Without another word, Dunne, Sanchez, and Jackson rose from their chairs and moved toward the door. Buck flicked his glance once at the table. Chris’s eyes narrowed. Wilmington and Tanner stood up. They passed a message, the three of them, without saying a word. Then Tanner and Wilmington went out the way Sanchez, Jackson, and Dunne had gone.

Travis watched in fascination. He had forgotten this. This control. This understanding. This magic. He had forgotten something else, too. He remembered it with admiration as Chris calmly picked up Buck’s chair in one bandaged hand. He set it forward a few more feet, moving it away from the other five chairs and closer in to the conference table. Then the Team Leader sat down, calmly crossed one leg over the other and folded his hands in his lap. He gave a brief nod to Travis and regarded the six directors coolly, waiting for them to continue, as they backpedaled, uncertain, unprepared for this new development. In a simple move of a chair, Larabee had changed the dynamic of the meeting. It was no longer quite certain who was in charge.

In the outer office, beyond the conference room, J.D. Dunne sagged against a wall, his relief written all over his face and in every line of his body. Nathan plopped himself into a chair and tried not to show the “I told you so,” expression that threatened to leak onto his face. Sanchez seated himself opposite the coffee table from Nathan, still looking impassive, but for the tiny secret smile that rested on his lips. Buck and Vin spotted Ezra the moment they left the conference room and made a beeline for him.

Ezra saw them coming and knew instantly that he should not have stuck around.

“I told you to stay with him,” Buck growled, furious. “What the hell were you thinking bringing him back here?”

Suddenly, inexplicably, words failed the notoriously glib Southerner. He only stared helplessly, as he watched the blood rise into Buck’s face and knew that he was about to be punched. Unjustly. Unreasonably. Unfairly. As if he alone could have had the power and fortitude to keep Chris Larabee in Texas when he was determined to come back here.

It was Vin Tanner who came to his rescue. “I reckon it wasn’t Ezra who was calling the shots,” Vin said, staying Buck’s rising arm with the mere tone of his voice.

Buck turned and glared at Vin.

Tanner shrugged. It was clear that he was trying to suppress a smile.

Buck’s eyes narrowed, but the fury began to dissipate.

Ezra found his voice. “Mr. Larabee was determined, to say the least, to return here,” he said, holding
up his palms in supplication.

“You lied to me on the phone,” Buck growled, not willing to let the anger ebb completely.

“Um, yes,” Ezra said. “An unfortunate requirement.” He talked faster. “You are aware of how persuasive Mr. Larabee can be when he has made up his mind. I felt it better to accompany him than to stand aside.”

“How about stopping him?” Buck growled. “Did you consider that?”

This time it was Sanchez that answered. “Surely you recall how difficult that can be,” Josiah said, without even glancing back.

“After all,” Nathan added, philosophically, “two bullet holes, infections, a recently punctured lung, diaphragmatic contusion, fever, confused medications, multiple bruises and lacerations, and the lingering effects of two weeks of sedation were not enough to spare Agent Pirelli from being partially impaled in a glass pharmacy cabinet.”

J.D. looked up at that, as if he hadn’t heard the list before. Perhaps he hadn’t. Not like that. A look of utter admiration that irked Buck to the core dawned on the young agent’s face.

“Kinda makes you feel sorry for the directors, doesn’t it?” Sanchez replied to no one in particular.

Vin snorted. Then J.D. laughed nervously, and at the sound of it, Buck couldn’t keep the smile from cracking through his anger and spreading across his face. Nathan dropped his exhausted head into his hands and laughed, trying hard to cover the noise, Josiah’s deep chuckle sounded across the room. Ezra’s and Vin’s, and then finally Buck’s laughter joined in.

Buck suddenly motioned them all to silence and jerked his head toward the doors. They stuffed their laughter into their hands. Choked it down, red-faced. Then they crept toward the doors, straining to listen in.

Cranston’s secretary watched them. The six of them. They were crazy, Team Seven. He knew that now. He had no intention of trying to stop them from doing anything they wanted to do. He had work that needed his attention, so he very purposefully collected his papers and headed off to the copy room. He hoped they would all be gone by the time he finished his errands.

* * *

Inside the conference room, Travis watched with fascination, having to remind himself several times to focus. This would have a bearing on his career after all.

“Agent Larabee,” Cranston began patiently. “Although there will certainly be another inquiry, at which you will have the opportunity to speak, we felt it could wait until you had more fully recovered.”

Larabee’s eyes narrowed. “Considerate,” he said slowly. “Shall we postpone this meeting until then?”

Cranston looked carefully at his fellow directors then back at Chris.

“This is an inquiry into the actions of your team, not your own actions,” he said evenly.
One corner of Chris’s lip twitched upward, minutely. Travis flicked his gaze along the table. The directors had not seemed to notice, he realized. These men did not know Larabee. Few had ever dealt with him directly. They did not know how to read the signs. A morbid and completely unprofessional fascination suddenly took hold inside the AD. It was all he could do not to begin to smirk, as he watched Chris’s head tilt slowly to one side.

“The actions of my team are subject to my orders and my authority,” Chris said evenly.

“In this case…” Cranston spoke up.

“Whether I am leading the operation or not,” Chris continued over him, ignoring the interruption completely. He leveled his gaze at Cranston and held it there.

Cranston shot an irritated look at the other directors.

Ramirez stepped up.

“Agent Larabee,” he began. Chris’s hard green gaze settled on him. Ramirez licked his lips. He continued. “Clearly it would be farcical to hold you accountable for the actions of your team during your—er—absence.”

Chris’s eyes stayed locked on Ramirez, unblinking. “I have been accountable for the actions of my team since its inception,” Chris said, his voice flat. “My team is accountable to me. I am accountable to AD Travis, and he is accountable to you. If there is to be an inquiry into the actions of my team, I will conduct it and await your disciplinary recommendations.”

There it is. He’s thrown down the gauntlet. Travis thought, with a slight shake of his head. The directors looked at each other in consternation. Except for LaForce. He turned red to the roots of his hair, perhaps the only one to recognize the challenge for what it was.

“Perhaps that’s the problem,” he snapped, leaning forward and glaring at Chris. “It’s time for those rules to change.”

A smile snaked across Chris’s lips.

Despite himself, Travis felt a cold pleasure creep up his spine.

Director LaForce continued. Either he did not see the smile or his fury had made him reckless. “From now on, Agent Larabee,” he growled in a voice that brooked no argument, “your team will be accountable to us. Along with AD Travis, we will expect direct access to your men in matters of policy and discipline. If you want to continue your leadership of this team, you will consent to our oversight.”

Travis looked down at the table. LaForce couldn’t possibly believe Larabee was going to roll over that easy.

Only Cranston and a director at the far end of the line seemed to pause to think as this pronouncement dropped. The others nodded their heads in firm agreement. They began to speak, to lay out details.

Chris Larabee held up his hand, and Travis watched in admiration, as the directors stopped speaking, in spite of themselves.

“We continue our arrangement as before,” Chris said evenly.
Travis resisted the urge to shake his head. Not even a hint of cooperation from his senior agent.

LaForce’s face turned an even darker shade of red. “Or what?” he returned, knowing even as he said it that he had just been suckered into letting Larabee call the shots.

Chris shrugged. Smiled unpleasantly. “I’m sure I can find employment elsewhere.”

The words hit Travis like a blow to the chest.

Ramirez opened his mouth to call Larabee’s bluff. A sudden silence reigned. They all realized in the instant. He was not bluffing.

Travis wasn’t sure what he had expected. But he hadn’t anticipated that Chris would try to bring this to a head right here and now. No sooner had the thought occurred to him than he realized he should have known better. Chris was willing to die for his agents. He would consider his career as nothing next to the survival of his team.

The silence continued as Chris simply looked back at the directors and waited.

“A moment please,” Cranston said finally. Part of being a good administrator and politician was knowing when to retreat and regroup. They had no battle plan for this. They had not had time to consider the fallout, which Cranston was experienced enough to realize was potentially the dramatic, very messy, and very public loss of at least one whole ATF team, under circumstances that were likely to play very well to public sympathies.

They had lost control of the meeting. But they didn’t have to hand it over gift-wrapped. Or let it turn into a train wreck. He conferred briefly with his fellow directors, quietly, while Larabee waited, one leg still crossed over the other, fingers interlaced calmly in his lap.

After a few minutes, Cranston cleared his throat and turned back to Chris, “Perhaps this is not the best time to begin these proceedings,” he said, but there was a definite warning in his voice.

Chris’s lips twitched into a familiar smirk.

Travis didn’t know whether to grimace at the Team Seven leader’s audacity or to let himself enjoy the very large point that Chris had just won. He was saved from having to do either, as Cranston continued as if he had not noticed the silent challenge on the agent’s face.

“We will let you know when it is necessary to reconvene,” Cranston said. “I assume AD Travis will know how to reach you during your convalescent leave?”

Travis cleared his throat. “Yes” he said quickly, doing his best not to throw a glance or, Heaven forbid, a grin at Chris. “Yes I have his contact numbers.”

“You may go,” Cranston said, jerking his chin imperiously in the direction of the doors.

Chris nodded, once to Cranston. And then once to Travis. Then he got up and walked unhurriedly back out of the conference room the way he came in.

The six agents melted back from the door as he came out again. He glanced at five of them. Annoyed. Then his eyes fell on Ezra.

He stopped.

Ezra looked back at him confused. Then suddenly jerked in remembrance. “Of course;” he blurted
out and hurried out into the hall, shaking his head. He had forgotten. In the moment, Chris’s act had convinced him, too. He returned with the chair, unfolded it, and waited while Chris seated himself as if it were some sort of command console on a cheap science fiction space ship, irritation written in every inch of tension in his neck and shoulders.

“Where to, Mr. Larabee?” Ezra asked with mock servility.

Chris’s reply was surly. “My office,” he said. “Better use it while I still have one.”

Ezra gave Chris a mock salute and turned the chair smoothly on the industrial carpeting. They moved off toward the elevator bank, five other agents trailing behind them.

Nathan knew that his “I told you so” was written all over his face now. Josiah grinned at him, but Nathan did nothing to hide his expression.

J.D. started up some kind of banter with Buck, but the big agent didn’t bite. The look he exchanged with Tanner was grim.

Chris was relieved that the outer office was empty when the elevator arrived. He had not anticipated his co-workers’ reaction to his appearance until the grouchy security guard downstairs had given his chair an enthusiastic thump and wasted precious seconds simply repeating “Well don’t that beat all? Yes, sir, don’t that beat all!” The last thing Chris wanted to endure was any more attention from any of his colleagues and co-workers. The whole damn thing was awkward and embarrassing. For everyone, he was sure. He was dead. Now he’s not. Couldn’t everyone just accept that and move on?

Sensing his discomfort, Ezra wheeled him speedily down to the bullpen. J.D. sprang ahead to hold the door open.

They stopped short as they entered. They had not stopped there on their way in. None of them had been there since the day they left. Left Henderson typing in this office. Left for revenge. Left to dump their careers down the toilet in search of a balance for the pain, a way to plug the hole. Stupid, they realized now. There was no way to plug the hole. No way save for the man in the wheelchair before them.

Ezra did not pause. He wheeled Chris straight inside and up to the couch. Chris raised his eyes in mock question. Ezra nodded firmly at the couch. Chris grinned. It had been a long morning. And as the anger dissipated, so did the adrenaline. Fatigue and pain settled back on him, irritating like a swarm of stinging flies. And he slid onto the couch. He hissed as he popped off the shoes Ezra had procured. He shucked the jacket and tie, remembering at the last second that Ezra had purchased them and so they were probably expensive. He laid both over the back of the couch, unbuttoned the first two buttons of the dress shirt and lay back with his head propped on the rolled arm that served as a pillow.

Ezra suddenly appeared at his elbow with a blanket. His blanket. He glanced around the room and at the five agents who crowded the doorway, watching him. “Where’s my stuff?” he asked, yawning suddenly.

They looked at each other, a strange look, that started off as stubborn and angry, then moved to guilty and finally settled on conspiratorial.

“Oh, it’s here somewhere,” Vin said, one side of his mouth quirking up, teasingly. A taunt. Aimed at his teammates.
Chris let his eyes drift closed. Still seeing them on his closed eyelids. Still hearing the strange dynamic of his team, bristling, argumentative, challenging each other, stretching and wearing at the bonds, testing always testing, but growing tighter all the time.

Buck saw the contented smile stretch briefly across Chris’s face. Saw it turn into a smirk.

“While you’re looking for it,” Chris said softly, casually, eyes still closed. “See if you can find my door.”

They laughed as they moved away, each one silently wondering how much their team leader already knew about what had taken place in his absence.

* * *

By the time Chris woke up, the bookshelves on the wall at his feet again sagged with his reference books. Among them sat a wooden-framed picture of Team Seven and a single antique cowboy spur. His worn U.S. Navy mug mat sat on the right side of his desk, in front of a small silver picture frame that held his favorite picture of the family he now held only in his heart. Where he could look at them every day and memorize the faces he had known so well. He smiled again and turned his brain toward his next move. An hour later, he realized he had fallen asleep instead.

It was quiet in the bullpen, so quiet that at first, he had thought it was late and everyone had gone home. But as he made his way painfully to his doorway, he saw them. They were working. Diligently. He leaned on the doorframe to ease off one foot at a time and wondered what on earth they could be working on.

Vin was the first to notice him standing there. “Feel better, Cowboy?” he asked, casually. He didn’t look up.

“Better,” Chris said.

“Travis stopped by,” Buck said. He didn’t look up either, and Chris could not read anything in his tone. “He’d like to see you, when you are available.”

Chris didn’t answer.

Chris scrubbed a hand over his face. Why didn’t someone just wake him up? He stared at his agents curiously and tried to decipher the strange atmosphere. They had seemed so normal, so like themselves when he had fallen asleep. He couldn’t put his finger on the curiously unpleasant tinge in the air. Had the directors made some sort of decision? Was that it? He guessed he had better go see Travis. He took a step away from the doorjamb toward the bullpen door. Buck’s voice stopped him.

“I don’t imagine you want to walk too much on those feet.”

Chris stopped. At least Buck was looking at him now.

“He said he’d come down when you’re ready.”

“Oh,” Chris said, feeling vaguely foggy. He turned and went back into his office. Only this time, he chose his desk chair. He sat there for a moment and collected his thoughts before he picked up the phone and dialed Travis. He got Travis’s assistant. He gave her his message. Then he turned on his computer and began to check to see if his files were still there. He looked up as Nathan’s familiar form filled his doorway.
“Did you take something?” the medic asked.

There was no point lying, Chris knew. Nathan would figure it out. “Could use some aspirin,” he admitted.

Nathan pursed his lips. He knew Larabee was in pain, but still, he couldn’t help but be mildly disappointed that he wouldn’t get to launch into the lecture he had prepared.

“What meds are you on?” he asked.

Chris shrugged. “Ezra’s got ‘em. I haven’t really looked.”

The stern medic launched into a different but equally prepared lecture on the importance of knowing what medications one is taking and when and with what. Then he noticed Chris was looking at him. Patient. Waiting for him to stop talking and just go get the damn aspirin.

_Same as always_, Nathan thought to himself, but he didn’t let himself smile. Instead, the medic muttered something unkind as he turned away to find Ezra, the medications, and a nice safe painkiller that Chris would be willing to take.

_At least that’s normal_, Chris mused, as he watched his team medic walk away muttering in aggravation.

When Travis arrived, Chris was feeling nearly like himself.

“Come in,” Chris greeted the former judge. “I’d invite you to close the door,” he said with a smart-ass grin, “but apparently it’s out being repaired.”

Travis grinned in spite of himself. He seated himself in one of the chairs across from Chris and looked his agent over. After this morning’s performance, and seeing the man now at his desk, it would be easy to forget that he was hurt. Easy except for the weight he had lost. Except that Travis had swung by and caught Chris asleep on the couch. Asleep, unanimated by this morning’s anger, his face devoid of the crackle of his presence. Asleep, Travis again saw the pallor, the bruising, the dark circles under his eyes, the hollows in his cheeks.

“We’ve made a decision,” Travis said finally, keeping his voice professionally low to compensate for the lack of a door.

“We?” Chris cracked with a sardonic raise of one eyebrow.

“We,” Travis emphasized.

Chris’s face turned serious. “Go ahead.”

“First, I am ordering you to take at least the next two weeks off on medical leave. I don’t want to see you here. I don’t want to hear that you have been working on anything at home. Is that clear?”

Chris nodded. At least that meant he wasn’t fired. Now what about the rest of it?

“Second, when you return to work, expect an inquiry into your actions during your absence. Specifically, I will want to know how your vest, badge, and gun came to be found on a dead militant.”

Chris smiled slightly. He caught the intimation. Travis would be conducting his inquiry.

Travis continued, “I will also want to know the details of your assault on Agent Pirelli.”
Chris looked at the AD thoughtfully.

Travis shrugged. “Forewarned is forearmed,” he said. He didn’t really expect AD Rivers to pull anything funny. After all, she knew that her agents had trod on some mighty thin ice. It was only Chris Larabee’s silence that would keep that ice from cracking beneath Richter and Pirelli’s jackbooted feet. But he still wanted to be prepared.

Chris nodded again.

“Third, there will be an inquiry into the actions of your Team during your absence.”

Chris raised an eyebrow. This time the AD could not suppress his smile. “You many conduct it after your return. In the meantime, the directors strongly recommend that you suspend the team for a period as punishment for going AWOL.”

The smile spread to Chris’s face. “Did they ‘recommend’ how long?” he asked, a slight emphasis on the word ‘recommend’.

“Be careful, Agent Larabee,” Travis teased. “Gloating is never an attractive quality.”

Chris’s grin widened.

“I recommended two weeks,” Travis said. “That should allow you to all punish each other.”

Larabee laughed. And Travis laughed with him, if only at the pleasure of hearing the sound again, so rare before, but after being almost extinguished, it sounded almost beautiful to the AD’s ears.

“Do I run the risk of gloating if I ask what made up their minds?” Chris asked.

Travis grinned broadly. “In the short version, LaForce suggested that they fire you for gross insubordination. Costas said that would play badly with the rest of the agents. Ramirez answered that as directors, they could impose whatever rules they wanted. Costas reminded everyone that if they did that, you would quit, to which Ramirez replied that they should let you, since that would avoid the problem of the reaction among the other agents. Then Hofstader said that if you quit or we fired you we’d just have to find someone to replace you and then we’d be right back where we started.”

Chris grinned. He could hear Hofstader saying just that. Of course it would be liberally sprinkled with creatively coarse adjectives. Hofstader was a tough former agent himself. Real old school. Rough around the edges. Chris liked him.

Travis continued. “So Cranston decided that if you wanted to handle it yourself so badly, we all ought to let you. For now.”

Chris grinned knowingly. For now, he thought. Saving face? Or betting I’ll change my mind? It didn’t matter, though. He meant what he said. He was accountable for the actions of the team. He would still mean it a day, a month, a year from now.

Travis reached into the inside breast pocket of his jacket and pulled out a folded piece of paper. “Now about this,” he said slowly. “I took it down from the cafeteria bulletin board. Obviously it needs to be addressed.”

Chris took the paper and unfolded it and stared at the 18-point, bold-face type. It took him a moment to get over his initial astonishment, but by the time he finished digesting the tone and import of the
letter, and Standish’s choice of public venue, his astonishment had become aggravation. Of all the idiotic moves, he thought with familiar exasperation. What the hell were you thinking? he thought angrily, glaring past Travis to Ezra Standish’s desk. If Ezra felt the glare from twenty-eight feet away, he gave no sign.

“Has it been accepted?” Chris asked quietly. He needed to know what kind of fight it would be to get Ezra back. Assuming he could convince Ezra to come back.

“Accepted by whom?” Travis retorted. “Certainly not by me. I told him that his resignation needed to be submitted to and signed off on by his immediate superior. I took this off the bulletin board on Tuesday. The directors authorized Ezra’s plane ticket along with everyone else’s, so I would guess that word never reached them.”

Chris paused in his thoughts and his mind took a new tack. “The directors included a plane ticket for Ezra?” he asked.

“Yes,” Travis nodded.

“And he was supposed to be here with the others?”

Travis nodded again.

Chris shook his head. Damn stubborn fool, he thought.

“I’ll talk to him,” Chris said, refolding the resignation and placing it in his shirt pocket.

Travis nodded and smiled. “Good enough,” he said, climbing to his feet. “Now get out of the office. And take this bunch of ruffians with you.”

Chris grinned. He moved slowly after Travis. He eyed the distance to the conference room, squared his shoulders and set out across the floor, his grin fading.

“Conference room,” he snapped as he passed them. He detoured into the break room. And realized he had no coffee cup. Who the hell had taken his cup? He swore and searched for a Styrofoam one. Found it. Filled it. And entered the conference room to find everyone in their regular chairs.

He glared at all of them. Still angry. But not sure why. Was it because they risked their careers for no good reason or because they tried to keep him out of it? He wasn’t sure. He announced that they would be suspended two weeks without pay, beginning immediately. His glare softened then. He said he would be at the ranch and could probably use a helping hand.

Buck looked around at his teammates. Their paychecks had already been suspended while they were in Texas. Another two weeks without pay wasn’t going to be that easy for any of them.

He looked back up at Chris. And decided he could live with it just fine. The crime had been more than worth the punishment.
Chris Larabee’s eyes opened on the unnatural darkness. Beneath the sound of his own breathing, his own heartbeat, he heard the undercurrent of noise and scowled. He pulled his head out from where he had buried it under the pillows and squinted in the daylight coming through despite the lowered shades. He lay and listened to the noises from downstairs, louder now. He jerked his arm down from where it had been flung over the pillows, holding them in place over top of his head. It had fallen soundly asleep, as Chris himself had been mostly unable to. He lay listening, picking out the individual voices even though he could not hear the words, as the tingling sensation announced the return of full blood flow.

Three days running. Three days of their suspension. Three days of almost constant bickering among themselves. Three days of hovering. Since he himself didn’t seem to be able to do much more than sleep—an annoyingly large percentage of the time—he had taken to burying his head under his pillows to drown them out. Nathan had said something this morning about smothering himself sleeping that way. He had kept his mouth shut, although his immediate thought was that he would never be so lucky.

He held his breath as he rolled over onto his back, the pain in his ribs stabbing at him but not so badly if he didn’t forget and try to inhale too deeply. His other arm, the one that was awake, the one with the hole in it, ached. This whole healing thing was taking entirely too long for his liking.

Two of the voices below grew louder. He heard someone tell both of them to keep it down, and he grimaced to himself. He preferred they keep it louder because if they knew he was awake and thinking about getting up—or God forbid—attempting to take a shower or walk down his own stairs in his own house, or any of a thousand other perfectly normal activities, today’s designated babysitter would be at his side in an instant. Worse yet, today’s designated babysitter was Nathan. And Nathan was harder to shake than a tick in a hound dog’s ear. Chris rolled his eyes and thought, Great. Now I’m startin’ to sound like Buck.

He scowled even harder as he remembered that he had been the one to say he could probably use a hand at the ranch. He was being truthful. He should have known better. He knew they would have been here, invitation or no invitation, but he sure as hell didn’t expect them to be here day and night, night and day. He had tried, subtly even, to inquire whether they didn’t have their own personal business to attend to. Nathan had a fiancée for God’s sake. J.D. had a girlfriend. And Buck hadn’t had a date since—well, since they had told him Chris was dead. Chris ignored the stab of guilt just like he ignored all the rest of the pain—and continued his thought. You’d think Buck would be out there making up for lost time. Josiah and Vin both stubbornly maintained that they didn’t have anything pressing to attend to.

And Ezra. Well, hell, Ezra. The one with whom he did have pressing business. With whom he did have to speak. Ezra was just plain avoiding him. He had been here, certainly. But never when Chris was awake. And had spoken precious little to the others. But he had left telltale signs. The thought made Chris grind his teeth together. His undercover agent was slipping away and this damn healing and sleeping was preventing him from gaining an opportunity to stop it.

The anger drove him to sit up. He reached for the well-worn gray sweatshirt that hung on the foot of the bed. Ignoring the pain in his ribs as he stretched for it, he slid it on over his t-shirt and felt its warmth. He had heard the weatherman say it was a good 75 degrees again today. Why was he so damn cold all the time?

The bickering voices rose louder again. Another voice joined the argument now. The voice that had
told them to keep it down before, Nathan’s voice, now told them to take it outside. Buck’s voice shot back quite clearly that Chris wouldn’t hear a damn thing with the pillows over his head. Nathan’s voice rose up again as he was immediately engulfed into the argument. Chris smiled as his ears tracked them, moving from the living room down the front hall into the kitchen. Now was the time.

It took him a full five minutes, but he made it. He came down the stairs, moving as fast as he could. He carried his old running shoes in his hand, sliding silently on stocking feet down the rear hall, past the den, which had become his office, past the laundry, through the mudroom and to the back door. He pulled into the shadows by the boot bench to put on his shoes. Then he held his breath as he opened the door. The hinge had developed a little squeak recently. Luck was with him, and it was covered by the sudden clatter of pans falling onto the kitchen floor, which was followed immediately by a howl of angry protest and a lot of swearing. Chris grinned and hoped guiltily that someone had just dumped Nathan’s healthy nutritional broth onto the floor, sparing him from having to eat it for lunch again.

He closed the door behind him and sidled along the house, out of sight of the windows. Close enough to the corner that he could duck around it if someone came out the door. Then he leaned back and closed his eyes, feeling the sunlight warm his face, feeling the fresh air seep slowly into his lungs, breathing as deeply as he dared, hearing a distant bird, a lowing cow from a farther pasture and the sound of the breeze rattling the new leaves in the trees beyond the yard.

Most of all he heard the silence. Let it surround him. Felt it ease into him and wrap around him like a blanket. Careful not to break the spell, he pushed away from the white siding and made his way around the corner toward the front of the house. Toward the barn.

He remembered once, when Adam had just turned five, he had scolded the boy for some minor transgression. If he had expected the boy to be regretful, this time he was wrong. Adam’s small face darkened like a storm cloud. His auburn brows came together in the center of his nose between his green eyes, and the boy gave his father a glare that must have come with his Larabee genes. It was such a perfect vision of himself that Chris had laughed in spite of himself. He couldn’t help it. The boy fled.

Chris found him later in the hayloft, watching a spider spin a web under one of the windows. His anger was gone, but the tear tracks on his dusty cheeks showed Chris how the time had been spent. Chris had said nothing, just sat down cross-legged beside him, and slung one arm over the boy’s small shoulders, pulling him closer. Adam didn’t say anything either, just climbed into his father’s lap and pulled both of the man’s big arms down across his chest. They stayed that way for a long time, Adam nestled in Chris’s lap, wrapped in Chris’s arms, Chris’s chin resting on Adam’s head, the baby fine hair tickling his nose, the dust of the hayloft settling around them, hearts beating, breathing, just being, and watching that spider spin.

Chris stopped at the memory. Breathed again. Swallowed hard, glad of the physical pain to distract him. He wondered if they’d look for him in the hayloft. He knew where there was a spider—and a web. But it would be so empty watching it alone.

Instead he headed for the horse stalls. He could give Pony an extra carrot. A treat. A reward for not scolding him or nagging him or looking at him worriedly when he thought he wouldn’t be seen. He remembered why he liked horses.

He was so deep in thought that it surprised him to look up and see Vin. The Texan sniper was halfway down the stalls and sweeping. Tanner hadn’t seen him. He pulled back. But it was too late. Tanner turned, gave him a searching look, and went back to sweeping up loose hay.

Chris sighed and ambled into the row of stalls. They were empty. No doubt Vin and Buck had
turned the horses into the pasture. He should have thought of that earlier—and found somewhere else to hide. He sat down on the three legged stool he kept by the tool and tack room and shoved his long legs out in front of him.

Vin and his broom both leaned up against a nearby stall. Vin grinned at him crookedly. Sympathetic and mocking all at the same time.

Chris’s answering smile was rueful but defiant.

Neither man said a word.

Vin had come for the silence, too.

* * *

Chris had been scolded roundly for his unaccompanied trip to the barn. He brushed it off. Vin had been there. Vin had walked back with him. No damage done. No harm. No foul.

The following day it was the shower and his attempt to do some housework. When he woke that afternoon the kitchen was mysteriously spotless. He headed for the laundry room. Nathan reamed him out as he bent to lift a pile of darks. He dropped the laundry. Spots actually danced in front of his eyes before he stood up, but hell, Nathan didn’t need to know that.

After dinner that evening (his second at the table, sitting upright in his own chair and eating fairly normal food), he told them all he was a big boy. He was not at death’s door. He was not stupid. He knew what he could do and couldn’t do. He would not drown taking a shower or sitting in his hot tub off the side porch. He would not try to drive himself to work. He would not do barn chores. He would take his antibiotics on schedule, change his bandages regularly, and he would eat whatever he felt like eating whenever he damn well pleased. Thanks for your help, but you have to go now and live your own lives.

Silence and angry looks met his pronouncement, which to his own ears sounded rather more like a plea. At that moment, Raine had phoned for Nathan. Her voice was strained. The kitchen faucet had sprung a leak, and she wanted him home—now—to fix it. The “I told you so” never left his lips but was clearly heard by everyone in the room. The uproar was sudden and decisive. Like a large family of overgrown children. By the end of it, they were all standing, yelling at each other. Yelling at him. Nathan slammed the front door on his way out. Two glasses slid off a pile of clean dishes in the drainer and smashed on the kitchen floor. J.D. yelled at Buck for stacking the glasses that way, kicking off another round of accusations, blame, and pointless nitpicking.

Chris slouched down into his chair. You guys are going to kill me, he thought. He leaned his head into his palms and breathed hard, hoping the carbon dioxide would calm his pounding pulse. The sweat broke out across his forehead. He gritted his teeth and held on. He had to. If he lost his dinner now, they’d never leave.

Silence made him look up. They were all staring at him. Tense. Anxious. And suddenly he couldn’t stand it anymore. He swore, stood up, picked up his plate, carried it into the kitchen, put everything in the dishwasher and stalked toward the front door, stepping over the shattered glasses still lying on the floor.

He pulled the door open to see Ezra’s startled face on the doorstep, hand poised to ring the doorbell.

“Mr. Larabee,” he drawled, covering his surprise. He noticed the dark scowl. “It appears that you are feeling better.”
Chris’s eyes narrowed. Here Ezra was, finally, and he was awake. And pissed as all hell. Now was not the time to try to convince Ezra to stay.

“Ezra,” Chris growled and stormed out into the darkening evening, a flash of lightning silently lighting up the distant hills, as he stalked across the driveway and toward the pasture.

Ezra watched, transfixed by the length of the stride. So different from a mere five days ago. He turned back to the house, astonished, in time to see Buck fill up the doorway, angry, swearing, grabbing his jacket. Vin appeared behind him like an apparition and grabbed his arm.

“Let him go,” Tanner said.

“Like he needs pneumonia,” Buck growled grabbing another raincoat from the hall closet and shoving Tanner away from him and into the opposite wall with a hard thump.

“Get out of the way Ezra,” Buck snapped, pushing the undercover agent roughly to the side.

“Buck,” J.D.’s voice called from the dining room. “Dammit, will you listen for once?” He started for the door.

Josiah reached out and pulled J.D. back. Buck stalked up the driveway in the direction Chris had gone, rapidly growing flashes intermittently lighting up the gathering gloom as the two men headed across the wide yard. An ominous distant rumbling rolled along the hills.

“Well,” Ezra said calmly, regaining his poker face. “Mr. Larabee is walking well.”

“Shutup,” Vin growled, shoving past Ezra and out to the barn.

Ezra sighed. Despite the fact that it had taken considerable resolve to arrive on the doorstep ready to do battle, this did not seem an auspicious evening for discussing his resignation. Apparently Lady Luck was not done punishing him yet. He stepped inside the house, only to find J.D. kicking the back of a couch and swearing. Accenting each assertion with a new blow to the upholstery.

Josiah was calmly clearing the table of the remains of dinner, nodding his head and offering his moral support at each declaration.

“God damn stubborn…”

“True.”

“Blind stupid…”

“Also true”

“Pigheaded…”

“Yes indeed.”

“Can’t tell him anything.”

“Nope.”

“Idiot!” J.D. yelled in frustration, throwing a pillow across the room.

Ezra sidled closer to the profiler. “Precisely which of our teammates might he be talking about?” he inquired.
“Take your pick,” Josiah replied with a shrug. He balanced an enormous stack of dishes in his two hands and headed for the kitchen.

Ezra eyed the remains of dinner and was glad he had eaten at home. He eyed J.D., still in mid-tirade, and followed Josiah into the kitchen.

The profiler set the enormous stack of dishes on the counter, nearly losing a few in the process. Ezra eyed the shattered glasses on the floor.

“Anything happen while I was away?” the southerner asked tentatively.

Josiah shook his head and frowned thoughtfully. “Nope. Nothing unusual,” he said finally.

Ezra rolled his eyes and thought about just getting back into his car and driving away again.

“Will you listen to me you god damn stupid fool?” Buck roared. The wind had picked up, shaking new leaves down from the tree limbs at the edge of the yard. The first big raindrops began to splatter around them.

Larabee stopped, and threw his head back at the sky for a moment before turning to face his oldest friend.

“Go back to the house, Buck,” he said, raising his voice to be heard over the wind.

Lightning flashed again, lighting the area white around them. Several seconds passed before the thunder rolled, echoing across the hills beyond the ranch. It was getting closer.

“Go back to the house?” Buck said in disbelief, drawing closer, his head forward against the wind.

The next flash showed Chris’ s scowl under the darkening sky. The rain was falling more quickly now, the drops faster and thicker, announcing itself as a roar. They heard it coming toward them across the trees, overtaking them. The skies opened up and poured the water down upon them. Cold. Hard. Making it hard to see.

Neither man paid any mind.

“Gonna stay out here? Gonna catch pneumonia on top of it all?” Buck shouted, showing a savage scowl of his own.

Chris’s lips curled up in a snarl. He glared hotly for a minute. Then he got a hold of himself and turned away before he said something he’d regret.

He hadn’t gone two steps, when a hand on his shoulder whirled him around, throwing him off balance. He stumbled to catch himself, landing hard on the ball of one foot. A stinging pain lanced across the sole of his foot. But he was distracted as Buck reached out, twisted a hand into his collar and yanked him forward.

“Don’t you dare walk away from me!” Buck snarled.

“Let go of me, Buck,” Chris snapped, slipping on the grass as he tried to catch himself. He gave Buck a shove, trying to release himself from the grip in his collar.

Despite the downpour and the dying light, Chris saw the blue eyes blaze.

a damn bit of difference. You couldn’t care less. Well, the hell with you, Larabee! Here’s your jacket. I’m done.”

He threw the soaking wet jacket at Chris with full force. Chris ducked, but not before the zipper snapped him just outside of his right eye.

“God damn it!” Chris snapped, pressing his fingertips against the stinging spot beside his eye. He saw blood before the rain washed it down his arm. “What the hell is your problem!” he snapped.

“My problem?” Buck roared over the rain, water pouring off his hair and running in rivulets down his jacket and his pants. “You’re my fucking problem, asshole!”

Chris stared at him. Glared at him. But a small part of him had to wonder what the hell he was talking about? He had not seen Buck this angry in a long time. And certainly not at him. He knew he had to tread carefully. That meant keep his temper. God, how he was bad at keeping his temper. Especially where Buck was concerned. He failed this time, too.

“Then go back into the goddamn house and leave me the hell alone,” he shouted back.

He saw Buck’s face contort and knew he was an idiot for sure.

If his feet hadn’t slipped in the soaking grass, if he had remembered that he wasn’t in top form, if he hadn’t misjudged his own weight so badly, he would have gotten away clean. He ducked the left jab to his head grabbing it as it went by, and pulling Buck forward with his own momentum to stumble harmlessly aside and away from him. At least that was what it would have looked like, had it worked. Instead, Buck’s momentum pulled Chris off balance. His feet slipped out from under him and Buck plowed right over top of him. They went down in a tangle of arms and legs into the mud and water. Chris’s head slammed back against the ground. It took him a moment to distinguish the darkness of the sky coming into focus out of the blackness of the tunnel that had closed out his vision for just a second.

“Jesus!” Buck exclaimed, pushing himself onto his hands and knees, scrabbling to get off.

_No wonder I can’t breathe_, Chris thought fuzzily, feeling the weight leave his chest and water running down his face. He felt like he had been kneed in the stomach. He might have been. He couldn’t quite remember.

Hands in his collar pulled him up to sitting.

_Here we go again_, Chris thought and started to curl up, knowing he wasn’t going to dodge the blow this time.


Chris stared at him for a second, trying to comprehend the alarm he saw on his friend’s face.

“You all right?” the soaking blond croaked out finally, finding his breath, finding something of his voice.

“Am I what?” Buck returned, his voice rising in disbelief.

“Are you all right?” Chris asked a little more slowly a little more clearly. What the hell was wrong with Buck? It was a simple enough question.
Buck shook his head. Said nothing. Either to say no. Or in disbelief. Chris wasn’t sure. But he looked him over in the lightning as the big agent stood up, and decided he looked okay. Then he pulled himself painfully out of the puddle of mud he was sitting in and grabbed Buck’s proffered hand. On his feet, he peered more closely into his friend’s face. Satisfied, he nodded.

“Jesus,” Chris said, shoving his streaming hair back out of his eyes. “That look on your face scared me half to death.”

Buck’s face twisted into a strange expression. And without warning Chris found himself engulfed by two impossibly long arms, hard enough to push the air out of him.

“I ought to shoot you,” Buck growled, his voice rough, pushing Chris away again.

Chris shrugged the arms off, amazed at the weight of his soaking clothes.

“Can I get into dry clothes first?” he asked, trying not to sound like he had lost his wind, but the cough betrayed him.

Buck did not laugh at the joke. Instead, one large Buck Wilmington hand snaked around the back of Chris’s neck and propelled him firmly toward the house.

Chris rolled his eyes, but kept silent and let Buck push him back across the yard. After all, a little rain wasn’t going to hurt him. He’d spent enough damn time in it to know.

His thought was silenced and his evening got suddenly worse when he saw Nathan’s car parked in the driveway. God dammit, he thought bitterly. Can’t I even catch a little break?

He was back because he had forgotten something. He took one look at Chris and Buck coming back through the door, sopping, muddy, at least one of them bleeding, and threw his hands in the air in frustration. “What the hell is wrong with you people?”

“Don’t you have a faucet to fix?” Chris growled.

Nathan narrowed his eyes. “Looks like I have to fix your fool head.”

Too late, he had forgotten the blood trickling slowly down the side of his face. He had thought the rain would wash the evidence away.

“What happened?” Nathan demanded.

Chris and Buck very obviously did not exchange a glance or say a single word. They kept their mouths shut. Did not give anything away. They did not have to. Their blabbermouth teammates were apparently all too ready and willing to tell Nathan everything they had seen from the sliding glass doors to the porch. The accused had no chance to say anything before Chris was whisked soaking wet upstairs and Buck, still dripping on the hardwood, suddenly found himself surrounded by the executors of the inquisition.

Seated on the bathtub in the master bath, in warm, dry sweats and a t-shirt, with new bandages on his arm and knuckles, Chris held an antiseptic-soaked gauze pad against the cut on the side of his head and strained to hear the voices in the living room below, rising and falling, back and forth, all at once. His efforts were impeded by Nathan, who kept asking him questions.

“Nathan,” he said finally, pulling the pad from his head and tossing it into the wastebasket, “Nothing happened. I don’t have pneumonia. I don’t have hypothermia, and I didn’t break anything open.”
“That’s not the point!” Nathan snapped.

Chris cocked an eyebrow at the medic. “It’s not?” he asked.

Nathan glowered at him. “All right. Yeah. It is the point—but did you have to make him mad enough to hit you?”

Chris shrugged. “It’s a gift,” he said with a grin. “Besides,” he pointed out, “he missed.”

“He fell on you!” Nathan protested. “Coulda sent those ribs right back through your lung!”

“Nathan,” Chris interrupted before Nathan could work up a full head of steam. “They’ve been healing for four weeks now. And Buck ain’t that heavy.”

Nathan eyed him doubtfully.

“Now if it were Josiah…” Chris cracked.

Nathan snorted. “You got a death wish?” he growled. “Cause if you’re gonna get Josiah mad enough to hit you, I’m quitting.”

Chris laughed, ran a towel over his hair and pulled on a nice warm sweatshirt.

“You sure you feel all right?” Nathan asked, serious again.

Chris sighed. He supposed he at least owed the medic his honesty, whether he wanted to tell the truth or not. “I’m sore,” he said. “And tired. And sick of being sore and tired. And I’m sick of people hovering over me and treating me like I’m made of glass. I’m not going to do anything stupid. Please just let me get on with it.”

“Not do anything stupid?” Nathan said tartly. “What was this?” He threw the sopping wet clothes into the bathtub and Chris threw his towel down on the puddle they had left on the tile floor.

“That was me, fresh air, and a misunderstanding between myself and Buck,” Chris replied pointedly.

“It was pouring!” Nathan snapped.

“Not when I went out,” Chris snapped back.

“He tried to hit you!”

“Nathan…” Chris said through his teeth. “Haven’t we already talked about this?”

Nathan halted. Chris was right. He was hovering. Chris might not be one to take all his meds, get extra sleep, or take his time in healing, but he wasn’t stupid. And Nathan knew for sure that Chris had no plans to continue feeling like this. But still he couldn’t stop thinking about the storage room, the blood on the floor, the bootprint shaped bruises, the medical reports, and worse, the two weeks Chris had spent alone. Strapped down and pincushioned with machines and tubes and wires. And not one of them had been there beside him. Not one.

Chris was looking at him. Head to one side. Whatever he was thinking he kept to himself. His lips quirked up. “Are we done? I gotta go save Buck.”

“Fine,” Nathan snapped. Smart ass. He refused to smile. There was nothing funny about this. He turned to put the antiseptic bottle back under the sink. Then Chris was gone.
“You had to hit him. You couldn’t just walk away?”

“You couldn’t just leave it alone. You had to go after him.”

“What were you thinking?”

“Lay a hand on him again, and I’ll break your fucking neck.” This last was Vin. His eyes were blazing.

He and J.D. were right up in Buck’s face, double-teaming him. Wilmington stood uncomfortably next to the stairs, a puddle gathering at his feet, trying hard to control his temper, while rain water dropped steadily from his hair, running down his neck, dripping off his pantlegs, and the bottom of his slicker.

Josiah stood over all three of them as if he were a referee. Ezra was in Chris’s recliner, feet up, one hand holding his right temple. He was the first one to see Chris come down the stairs.

The others didn’t notice him until he spoke, his voice low, serious.

“Leave him alone,” Chris said.

Vin and J.D. looked up, both still hot.

Chris looked at Buck. “Go get changed,” he said, tilting his head toward the upstairs and escape. Buck moved around behind him and went up the stairs, Chris’s eyes challenging any of his teammates to try to follow him.

Josiah shot Chris a grateful look.

Vin gave Chris a look that could have melted lead and turned on his heel. He slammed the door to the den so hard it made Chris wince.

J.D. shook his head in disbelief. “He hit you!” he finally stuttered.

“He didn’t hit me,” Chris said evenly.

“Not for lack of trying,” Ezra muttered from the chair.

Chris ignored the undercover agent and maintained his fix on J.D. “Leave him be,” he said firmly. Clearly. An order.

“He hit you! For no good reason!” J.D. sputtered again.

Chris nearly grinned at the outburst. Caught himself at the last second. “J.D.,” he said patiently. “It’s not like I’ve never hit Buck for no reason.”

J.D. halted. He didn’t know how to answer.

Chris continued. “Buck and I have been beating the tar out of each other almost as long as you’ve been alive. Reason or no reason,” he said. “Just stay out of it.”

“Isn’t that touching?” Ezra mumbled from the chair. He looked away as Chris looked up at him. He could feel Chris’s gaze from across the room and against his will turned back to face him.

_You and I have something we need to discuss_, the green gaze said. Almost as clearly as if the team leader had spoken the words aloud.
I should have left when I had the chance, Ezra chided himself. He still wondered why he hadn’t. He had very good reasons. One of which was the spectacle he had just witnessed through the porch door. They had all just about leapt through the glass when they saw Buck go down on top of Chris. They stopped breathing until Chris got up again. Ezra didn’t even think his heart settled back down into its proper appointed position inside his chest until now when Chris came down the stairs. The truth was, he just didn’t know whether he could endure this again.

With the clear-eyed sobriety his mother had impressed upon him from early on, he realized that his resignation was an easy exit. An open door. And it had already been handed in. Why then, couldn’t he just cut the strings? Tell them all that it had been interesting and professionally productive, but he was moving on. He had done it before. Why was it so damn hard now?

Ezra lifted his head from his hand and looked at Chris guardedly. Shields in place. “Shouldn’t someone go check on Mr. Tanner?” he inquired. A poor ruse, by which he simply hoped to gather time to escape.

Larabee didn’t bite, of course. “I think that will hold until Vin’s cooled off some,” Chris said with a grim smile. “I go in there now, Vin’s liable to take my head off.”

“Mr. Larabee,” Ezra began, with a tired sigh. He paused, his brain flying through his options for telling Chris something, anything, to hold him off. The truth was out, of course. What would he say?

In my utter stupidity, I have managed to run out on you, yet again, Mr. Larabee. And, no, I can’t think of a single good reason for you to fight the powers that be to get me back—aside from my inherent charm, of course.

He grimaced as he imagined how that would play. Besides it might be true. Maybe Chris wouldn’t see a reason to fight the brass either. Not after the letter AND invading Bautiste’s home.

More words popped into his head. I’ll come back if you can guarantee I’ll never have to live through another disaster like this.

He shuddered inside. Too close to the bone. Too much given away. And there were no such guarantees.

At last he considered the simple, ‘I don’t believe I am ready to discuss my career just yet. I still need time to consider my options.’ Followed by a quick exit.

That would work.

Ezra watched the blond head tilt sideways, expectantly, fix him with that familiar mind-reading gaze. But he didn’t have the urge to try to beat it today. Didn’t want his thoughts read. Didn’t want to share his fear, his stupidity. He felt naked, exposed.

Just say it, Ezra, he told himself. Say your lines. It’s not that hard.

He cleared his throat, “The truth is, I don’t believe I am ready to discuss my career just yet. I still need some time to consider my options.”

He was aware as he rose and headed toward the door how harsh it sounded as it left his lips. It had played better in his head. But that was not to be helped.

“Ezra,” Chris said softly behind him. “Travis gave me the letter.”

It was all he could do not to stop dead in his tracks. He forced himself to keep going. Chris had read
the letter. Then what, pray tell, did he think he could do to mitigate the obvious insubordination, intended insult, and let’s not forget the not-so-subtle accusation that the brass had actually fabricated accusations against him in the past? What good would it do the team or Chris Larabee to throw himself back in front of the proverbial firing squad anyway? And how on earth could Ezra let him throw his own career to the wind to protect them again? He had some personal integrity, after all.

At the continued silence from his talkative undercover agent, Chris exhaled. A sound that Ezra was very familiar with. It was the sound of Chris Larabee controlling his formidable temper. Ezra was nearly to the door when he heard the footfall right behind him. Surprised at the speed in which he had covered the distance.

The hand on his shoulder turned him around. He expected to face the infamous Larabee glare. And he steeled himself to not look away. But the look he got was different. Intense. It shot right through him. He realized he’d prefer the glare.

“Ezra,” Chris said quietly, but with a force that caused Ezra to back up one step. “I can’t fix this if you won’t let me.”

Ezra’s eyes lit on the brand new cut on Chris’s temple. Thoughts of the letter fled from him. The letter was not the problem.

Chris saw the sea-green eyes of his undercover agent fill with anger. Saw the brows come down in a scowl.

“How are you going to fix this?” Ezra hissed, incredulous. He waved his hand behind him toward the door and the yard beyond. “Please don’t patronize me by telling me you can make it all better. Maybe you could, but you won’t.”

Chris flinched at the words, but he didn’t show it. What the hell was Ezra talking about? The resignation was an easy fix. He just needed Ezra to rescind it.

He pursed his lips. Was there some other problem he didn’t know about? “Unless you tell me the problem,” he said calmly. “I can’t do anything about it. You’ve tied my hands.”

Chris’s continued calm had its usual effect. Somewhere in the pit of Ezra’s stomach, he felt a fuse ignite. Felt it begin to burn. Didn’t know whether he could control it this time.

Ezra stared at Chris, from the new cut on his temple to the bruises to the fading pink lines where parts of his face had been stitched back together. To the bandages on his knuckles, one showing blood where he had popped a stitch. Again. Ezra could still envision the stitches in his team leader’s arm. It all replayed in his mind’s eye with an attention to detail that he had trained and cultivated from early childhood. The infected bullet holes. The livid bruising. The harsh breathing and the smell of the fever. Buck, shaking with fear, dragging Chris through shattered glass, banging his head against the metal cabinet. Calling him back. The scene switched to an imagining of tubes and wires and straps holding Chris down unconscious for nearly two weeks. Could again hear the sorrow in Vin’s voice as he mumbled an apology in the darkened hospital room. An apology for not being there, an apology for leaving him behind.

Ezra’s stomach churned. Fire rushed up from his belly, consuming him. He felt the roots of his hair catch flame. His eyes were ablaze. He lost his control.

“Tell you the problem?” he nearly exploded. A voice in the back of his head told him to regain control. Get his wits about him like his Mother had taught him. He ignored the voice. “I shouldn’t have to tell you the problem. You created the problem. You are the problem.”
Next thing he knew he was shouting. He didn’t care. “You did this to us!”

Chris stared at him in astonishment.


“You don’t understand,” Ezra said softly. Hollow. He squinted at Chris again. Then shook his head. He repeated his words with firm, regretful certainty. “And you never will understand.”

It wasn’t so much Ezra’s words that stopped Chris from formulating a response as the strident tone, the distress behind them. But there was no time to ponder it. Standish had pulled open the door and disappeared into the storm. The wind nearly wrenched the door out of Chris’s hand. He wanted to go after the undercover agent. Pin him down. Order him to stop. But he didn’t. He couldn’t. Ezra’s words were still ringing in his ears. You did this... You are the problem.

The Jaguar’s engine purred to life and roared into reverse. Turning. Fleeing. Away from him. Away from the team.

He swore viciously. Some of it aimed at himself. Some of it aimed at Standish. He had no delusions. He had known that he had played a large part in Ezra’s resignation. He had simply hoped that the team would keep Ezra here long enough to figure out how to patch up the holes. He had failed at that strategy, too. And now that Ezra was gone, he didn’t know if he could get the stubborn, temperamental, slippery undercover agent back.

Behind him he heard the den door close again. Vin. Witness to it all. Maybe he’d walk next. Maybe they all should walk.

Chris closed his eyes, suddenly off balance, suddenly aware of the cut on the side of his head, his aching ribs, his stinging feet, the hollow pain in his arm. Suddenly aware of all of it. Angry. Again at that familiar crossroads where he had no one to blame but himself.

* * *

Josiah came back from checking on Buck and found his team leader at the kitchen table, a cup of coffee untouched before him, his head in his hands, the bottle of prescription painkillers in the center of the table. The profiler poured himself a cup of the steaming brew, pulled out a chair and slid silently into it, regarding his team leader thoughtfully.

A long moment passed before Chris raised his head.

“Nathan go?” Josiah asked.

“Yup,” Chris grimaced fingering the bottle in front of him. The medic had slapped the painkillers onto the table in front of him. Had tried to initiate a conversation and found his team leader hostile. With an angry scowl of his own he said something about needing to attend to his own problems instead of all the stubborn fools in the world.

“Ezra, too,” Chris said tightly, his grimace deepening.

“I heard,” Josiah said lightly.

Chris nodded. Said nothing.

“Vin still in the den?” Josiah asked.
Chris shrugged. He thought so. But there was a back door after all. He wouldn’t blame the sharpshooter for using it as an escape route.

“I left J.D. upstairs with Buck,” Josiah said to the unasked question.

Chris nodded. “They okay?”

“They’re okay,” Josiah answered.

In actuality, he had found Buck in the guest bathroom staring at his hands. In a voice so soft Josiah could hardly hear him, he recited a litany of what might have happened out in the yard. Josiah had to interrupt him to remind him that it didn’t happen. That everyone was fine. Then J.D. entered, and Josiah watched Buck swallow everything he was about to admit, pulling the wounds closed, to be the mentor, the invincible big brother, the seasoned agent that nothing rattles, everything he thought J.D. would need him to be. Josiah left, grateful that J.D. knew Buck too well to fall for that.

Josiah admitted none of this. He knew better than to add fuel to the fire. “Thinking of taking those?” he asked instead, nodding at the bottle.

“Thinking about it,” Chris said quietly.

“For the pain or as punishment?” Josiah asked. His voice held no recrimination, but still he saw the anger flash across Chris’s eyes if only for a moment. It was followed immediately by a different expression. Something old and unpleasant and familiar. And silence.

Josiah sighed. He waited as the silence deepened, and he knew that it would be up to him to carry this conversation. “I’m asking if you’re okay,” he asked finally.

Chris smiled a bitter smile. Who was Josiah trying to kid? He was a profiler. He could read the signs. He wouldn’t need to ask. But if he wanted Chris to play, he could sure as hell make the effort. Maybe he would manage not to piss off everyone tonight. “In what way?” he asked resignedly.

“Any way you care to talk about,” the profiler replied easily, taking a sip of coffee. It was strong and dark. The way he liked it.

He watched the look of regret cross Chris’s face. The team leader took a deep breath.

“I know this hasn’t been easy on anyone.” He hesitated. “And I haven’t exactly been easy to deal with either.” He stopped. Stuck.

Josiah pressed his lips together in thought. “You think you’re the reason everyone’s at each other’s throats?” he asked, plunging right in.

Chris didn’t reply, but Josiah could read the answer in his face. “You think we’re all angry at you?”

Josiah cut him off before he could say anything else. “If you are about to confess that this debacle is all your fault,” the profiler said sternly, “I think there are a few things you need to understand.”

Chris glared at him, surprise warring with his anger.
“First, we might well all be dead if you hadn’t redeployed us back at that warehouse.”

He saw Chris blanch, read his shift in his chair as a prelude to retreat.

Josiah hurried to his next point. “The second is that you’re right. We have a right to be angry.” He leaned forward to get Chris’s attention. “In fact it’s perfectly normal. I’d be more worried if we weren’t all at each other’s throats right now.”

Chris continued to look at him, uncomprehending.

Josiah shook his head in disbelief. Some people needed to be beaten over the head before they could see the obvious. And sometimes Chris Larabee was one of those people. “Don’t you recognize it? This anger?” he asked softly. “It’s part of the grieving process.”

Chris jerked backward in his chair as if Josiah had hit him. “Grief?” he choked. “Grief about what? In case you hadn’t noticed, nobody died.” He knew he was being sarcastic, but he couldn’t stop himself.

Fortunately, Josiah had a thick skin. The big man shook his grizzled salt and pepper head. He reached across the table and placed a hand on Chris’s arm. Holding him down. “Just because what you were grieving is removed, doesn’t mean you can stop the process in its tracks. It takes time.”

Chris stared at him, comprehension dawning slowly, then in a rush. “Shit,” he spat vehemently. Standish’s words in his head. You did this to us. He tried to pull away, but Sanchez tightened his hold. Unable to retreat, he avoided the profiler’s eyes.

“Don’t you go blaming yourself, Brother,” Josiah said softly, firmly.

Chris looked back up at him incredulously. “Who the hell else am I supposed to blame?” Chris snapped.

Josiah shrugged. “Richter, the militia, God, the President. Whoever you have to.” He poked a finger at Chris’s chest. “Just not you.”

Chris stared at him bewildered.

“You saved us,” he said more forcefully.

Chris scowled. “I didn’t save you,” he snapped. “I did my goddamn job.”

“At the warehouse, sure,” Josiah said, smiling slightly at Chris’s confusion. He would have disagreed, but chose to stick the road he began on. “But that’s not what I meant.”

Chris glared at him. Josiah read the anger and confusion. “Make sense, preacher man, I’m a little low on patience,” the team leader growled.

“You saved us by surviving,” Josiah replied. “By coming back.”

Chris managed to pull his arm back, but only because Josiah was afraid he’d pull out the stitches if he held too hard. He could see Chris trying to digest the words. Then he watched his friend and leader reject them, push them away. Saw the green eyes flick toward the door.

Josiah moved his hand to Chris’s shoulder, firmly, pinning him down. “Don’t you know by now?” Josiah asked, softly, intently, his tone carrying the weight of his words. “You built this team. You’re
the lynchpin that keeps it together.”

“Bullshit,” Chris responded automatically, heatedly. If that was true, if Josiah was right, if his team depended on him to keep it together, to keep running, then his entire leadership strategy had failed. Miserably. No wonder the team was falling apart.

He swore again then jerked roughly out from under Josiah’s arm, sliding his chair back, upending it as he gained his feet. He threw one last peculiar burning glare at the profiler and he was gone.

Josiah did not follow. “Ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall set you free,” he quoted into the empty kitchen, although the person who needed to hear it most was well out of earshot.

* * *

It was late by the time Ezra made the decision to turn his car toward home. He had driven it aimlessly, angrily, breaking speed limits until he had to pull over off the highway to calm his shaking hands. His head was whirling and inside it, many voices clamored to give him advice, voices that sounded suspiciously like a mixture of his mother, his teammates and even one or two of his many stepfathers. He valiantly ignored them all. When he turned in his driveway, though, one of them got a lot harder to ignore, since it had parked its beat up, paint-peeling, soaking wet, eyesore of a jeep in his driveway. Worse yet, the owner of the voice was sitting on his doorstep, heedless of the downpour, and giving him the evil eye as he turned in.

Ezra considered not getting out of his car at all, but realized that wasn’t really an option. He sighed, turned off the ignition, and vowed to keep his dignity through at least one conversation this evening.

“Mr. Tanner,” he drawled, pulling up the collar of his coat.

“Ez,” Vin returned.

Ezra stopped in front of the soaking sharpshooter. “You are aware that it is raining?”

Vin’s lips turned up in a snide smile. “I noticed. Are you gonna let me in?”

Ezra looked down at him thoughtfully. “That depends. Did Mr. Larabee send you?”

Vin snorted. “Hell no,” he said. “He tuckered himself out hollerin’ at Nathan and Josiah after you went stomping out into the rain like a damn fool.”

Ezra raised his eyebrows at his sodden teammate and then his jeep, the one that had no top. The one he couldn’t drive all winter because it filled up with snow. The one with a puddle ankle-deep forming behind the driver’s door.

Ezra put his key in his lock. “Just how long have you been lurking on my doorstep?”

Vin looked at his watch. “Couple hours,” he said calmly.

“And yet no one called the police?” Ezra muttered, keying off his security system, and motioning to Vin to stay on the doormat.

“Who says they didn’t?” Vin grinned, toeing off his wet boots. He pulled his badge from his pocket and waved it at the undercover agent. “I just flashed ’em my Get Outta Jail Free card.”

Ezra rolled his eyes. “So much for this being a safe neighborhood.”

He disappeared into the dark interior and came back a moment later with a stack of towels. He thrust
two into Vin’s arms and spread the rest on the floor.
““I guess you ain’t gonna invite me to set a spell?” Vin asked, smirking.
“Not on my furniture,” Ezra replied. He went into the kitchen to make tea.
Vin stripped off his soaking jacket, pulled off his socks, and leaned back against the wall.
“Tea, Mr. Tanner?” Ezra asked with feigned politeness.
“Got anythin’ stronger?” Vin asked.
Ezra rolled his eyes. “Shall we dispense with the small talk and come to the point?” Ezra said. “Why are you here?”
Vin grinned to himself. “Thought you’d never ask.”
He pushed off the wall, and moved into the kitchen, following the trail of towels on the floor. “I came to tell you to stop bein’ a damn fool and just come back.”
Ezra stared at him. “I beg your pardon.”
“So yer mad. But you got no call to blame Larabee because you wrote some damn letter of resignation. It ain’t his fault.”
Ezra narrowed his eyes. “Does everyone know about my letter?” he asked.
Vin shrugged. “Don’t know. But when ya don’t talk so much, you hear a lot more.”
Ezra understood the dig. He gave Vin a poison glare, but did not rise to the bait. “It’s not about the letter,” he said. “And what I am angry about is between Mr. Larabee and me.”
Vin shrugged, but he never took his eyes of Ezra’s face. He weighed his next words carefully. “What do ya want from him Ez? Cause I don’t think he can give it to you.”
Ezra blanched but recovered quickly. “I don’t know what you’re talking about,” he said, suddenly giving more attention to the proper brewing of his tea.
“Maybe you don’t.” Vin said quietly. “But I do.”
He was still staring at Ezra. Ezra glared back. “Really?” he drawled slowly, dangerously. “Since you have apparently acquired supernatural talents, please enlighten this poor ignorant fool.”
Vin regarded him silently. “I will if you want me to, or you can just stop bein’ an ignorant fool and admit it to yourself, so you can stop actin’ like an idiot.”
“Idiot?” Ezra snapped, putting down his spoon. “In case it escaped your notice, I am not the one who spent two hours sitting in the rain.”
“A little rain ain’t gonna hurt me,” Vin replied. “It wasn’t gonna hurt Chris either, an’ if Buck hadn’t lost his head, Chris mighta just turned around and come back when it started rainin’.”
Ezra stared at him. “Whether Mr. Larabee has the sense to come in out of the rain or not is not of my concern,” he said coldly.
“Sure it ain’t, Ez.” Vin said lightly, indifferently. “That’s why it’s got ya all riled up.” He turned
suddenly toward the door. But he paused and looked back.

Ezra felt the blue-eyed gaze go right through him.

“I’m angry, too,” Vin said. “But at least I got the sense to know what I’m angry at.”

Ezra’s eyes narrowed. The blue eyes stared, challenging, unrelenting. Ezra moved out from behind the kitchen counter and Vin tensed. But he turned all the way back around to face his teammate, wondering whether Ezra was angry enough to resort to violence.

Ezra’s first instinct was to deny it. To say, he wasn’t angry, but he knew how ludicrous that was. He was angry. He was angrier than he could remember being in a very long time. He paused. That wasn’t strictly true. He had been this angry. Just four weeks ago. It had just been followed by a long period of being numb and trying to stay that way. He stared at Vin. His throat was dry.

The blue eyes softened. “Hell, Ezra, I just thought you should know you ain’t alone.”

Ezra unclenched his fists and turned back to the counter to retrieve his tea. He recovered his voice and his unflappable face. “Alone in what, Mr. Tanner?”

Vin smirked. “We gotta do this the hard way then?” he asked.

Ezra took a long sip of his nice, hot tea before he replied calmly. “We don’t have to do this at all. Whatever this is.”

Vin’s smirk grew wider, and Ezra had the sudden urge to wipe it off his face.

“You were right, you know,” Vin said.

“Well mark it on the calendar and call the President,” Ezra said snidely. “Vin Tanner has declared that Ezra P. Standish was right.”

Vin ignored him and continued. “He doesn’t understand. And he probably ain’t ever gonna understand.”

Ezra moved off into the living room. Away from the conversation. Vin followed to the edge of the carpet.

“Ya can’t blame him fer what he’s just too blind to see. An’ if yer lookin’ for a guarantee that he ain’t never gonna do it again, yer just foolin’ yerself.”

“Mr. Tanner,” Ezra said with a sigh. “I really don’t think that…”

Vin advanced onto the carpet, ignoring the southerner completely, coming toward him, still talking. “He ain’t never gonna put himself before us. He ain’t never gonna stand by and let somethin’ happen to his team if he can prevent it.”

Ezra talked louder. “Mr. Tanner…”

Vin kept coming. “He’s still gonna take chances, while he’s reaming the rest of us out for takin’ chances.”

“Vin,” Ezra said even more loudly.

The Texan was relentless. He didn’t stop until he was standing at the couch, facing Ezra, from two feet away. “He’s still gonna think that getting’ himself hurt or killed is a small price to pay for
keepin’ the team alive and together. An’ he’s probably still gonna think that when that happens we’ll all just go on with our lives like nothin’ happened.”

“Stop!” The word echoed in the corners of the living room, as the tea sloshed over the undercover agent’s hand onto the carpet. The burnt hand went to his eyes. “Stop,” he rasped.

“You wanted the truth,” Vin replied.

Ezra dragged the hand down his face. It came to rest over his mouth, and he regarded Vin slowly. The blue eyes were grave, serious. But they held something else. Something Ezra wanted and couldn’t get to.

“And you accept that?” he asked finally.

Vin shrugged. “I don’t know if accept is the right word. But I came to realize somethin’.”

“What was that?” Ezra asked, a note of sarcasm edging defensively into his voice.

A corner of Vin’s lip quirked up into a half smile. “I realized I can’t change anyone but me.”

The other corner quirked up suddenly, too. “Besides, that’s what makes him who he is. Don’t know if I’d work for him if he were different.”

Ezra stared at him.

Vin shrugged again, embarrassed. “Don’t think he’d be the friend he is.”

Ezra felt his own face turn red at Vin’s admission. Yet he didn’t know why. It wasn’t like there was anyone on the team who didn’t know that Tanner would give his right arm, both kidneys and his liver to Chris Larabee if the man asked him for them. Even Buck knew it, though he sometimes pretended not to notice. Ezra felt suddenly like he was walking where he did not belong. Still Vin had opened the door.

Ezra sat down on a couch. “That might work for you,” he said slowly. “But I can’t do this again.”

What happens next time? Ezra thought. Next time when it’s you, Vin, or Buck, or, God forbid, J.D.? When it’s Josiah or Nathan? I can’t do this. I can’t.

Vin watched the expression in the sea-green eyes grow slowly bleaker. He looked down at his feet and noticed the wet carpet. Perhaps he had made a mistake in coming here. Perhaps Ezra knew his own limitations.

The undercover agent didn’t talk about it, but Vin was a shrewd judge of people. Growing up on the streets he had learned the hard way. He had realized right off that Ezra hadn’t had too many friends in this life. He was scared of what attachments might cost him.

Vin shook his head sadly. “Look, no one can promise it won’t happen again just this way. Or even that next time it won’t be for real. But like Nathan once said, ‘Just ‘cause you lose someone, does it mean you’re sorry you ever had ‘em?’”

Ezra rolled his eyes toward the ceiling, and the corners of his mouth turned down. “Mr. Jackson ought to know that quoting Mr. Larabee is a dangerous habit,” he replied.

“Only if he hears you, Ez,” Vin said.

He turned on his heel. “I’ll let myself out,” he said. “Sorry about the mess.”
Long after the door closed, long after the jeep and its holey exhaust system roared away, long after the sharpshooter’s words stopped rolling around in the undercover agent’s head, long after blessed silence had fallen both in the house and inside his head, Ezra Standish stayed sitting on the sofa, motionless, tea forgotten, staring at the wall.

* * *

“I just don’t think we should have left him,” J.D. said, a new variation of the same thing he had said five times on the ride home.

Buck gave an exasperated sigh, as he hung up his wet coat. “For the last time, J.D., we talked about this. If I thought there was something to worry about, I’d have stayed. Vin’ll be back there in a couple of hours. Nothing is going to happen to him.”

“You don’t know that Buck,” J.D. retorted.

Buck stopped what he was doing and turned to face his roommate, giving him a long look.

“Quit lookin’ at me like that,” J.D. snapped. “I just said I didn’t think it was a good idea.”

Buck squinted at him harder. He pursed his lips, looking like a cat trying to hide a mouse in its mouth. “This thing’s really got you rattled,” he said matter of factly.

“I’m not rattled,” J.D. retorted, picking the remote out from behind a cushion and dropping onto the sagging couch. He clicked on the T.V.

Buck came around the couch after him and turned the T.V. off again.

J.D. sighed in exasperation.

Buck regarded him for a moment before quietly asking, “Did ya buy the whole Larabee myth?”

J.D. looked away. Buck ought to know he wasn’t in any mood to be taunted.

Buck dropped into his chair. The one that had finally been moved away from the window and back into its place between the couches.

“Which parts did he ruin for ya?” Buck asked. “The part where you think he can repel bullets with his thick skull and tough hide, or the part where he can leap tall buildings in a single bound?”

“Shut up, Buck,” J.D. said resentfully. “I’m not in the mood.”

“I’m serious, kid,” Buck said, a small sad smile flickering across his face. “Hell, it’s easy enough to want to believe it.”

“I’m not stupid,” J.D. shot back.

“Never said you were,” Buck said evenly. He continued unperturbed. “What about the part about being a cold-hearted, arrogant, self-serving, vigilante bastard?”

J.D.’s eyes blazed cold fury as he opened his mouth to reply.

Buck cut him off with a casual wave of his hand. “So you didn’t buy that one. What makes you think the other parts were true then?”

J.D. stared at him.
Buck sighed.

“He ain’t a superhero, kid,” Buck said tiredly. “He’s just a man.”

Conflicting emotions ran across the youth’s face.

Buck continued with a small smile. “Granted he’s one of the six best men I know. And hell if I don’t half believe the part about him being just too damn stubborn and ornery to kill.”

He smiled and eyed J.D. “When he took you on, you hit gold. On your first time out, too. Someday you’ll realize that. I’ve been around the block enough times to know there’s no one I’d rather have at the helm or at my back. But don’t make him out to be more than he is.”

J.D. stared at his feet, his lips tight, turned down at the corners.

Buck reached out and patted his leg. “I’ve known him more than half my life, kid,” he said with a knowing grin. “I’ve seen his best and his worst. And I know him almost better than I know myself. If you let yourself believe the myth, you might miss out on the man. And that would be a damn shame.”

“I got it already,” J.D. said irritably. “I heard you. He’s just a man. Don’t make him out to be a hero.”

Buck snorted. “Don’t you listen boy?” he said, shaking his head. “He don’t need you to make him a hero. He’s a goddamn hero, all right. I said he ain’t no superhero.”

J.D. stared at Buck in disbelief. “What?” he asked, completely uncomprehending.

Buck laughed and got to his feet. “Boy, you have a lot to learn.”

He laughed all the way to the stairs before J.D.’s voice stopped him.

“You shouldn’t have tried to hit him,” J.D. said.

“I know,” Buck said resignedly.

“Why did you?” J.D. asked.

Buck smiled. “Sometimes I do that when he scares the hell out of me.” He looked down at the floor. “Old habit, I guess.”

“Yeah, that’s what Chris tried to tell me.” J.D. shook his head. “Sounds pretty stupid to me.”

Buck’s gaze was far away, and he smiled as he answered. “Yup.” He turned his focus back on J.D. “Wanna see something?”

J.D. shrugged and moved toward the stairs.

He followed Buck to his room and waited patiently, hands in his pocket while the big agent dug in the back of the top shelf of his closet.

“Sarah thought it was pretty stupid, too. One time when we were in the DPD, Chris and me came back from a bust that went really bad. We were mad at each other. Mad at the bad guys. Mad at everyone and everything. We didn’t even get out of the locker room before we started whaling the tar out of each other. The captain had to come and break us up. Chris and me both got stitches and Sarah had to pick us up at the hospital. Man, she was steamed!” He shook his head and grinned at
"So she decided to teach us a lesson."

He paused to reach a little farther back on the shelf. J.D. saw the satisfied smile on his face. Then he pulled down a flat cardboard box. He carried it to the bed and sat down. J.D. came over and sat down beside him.

"Anyway," Buck continued. "She made us stand in the hall while she took photos of our black eyes and our stitches. If we were so damn proud of them, she said, then we ought not to mind putting them on display for the whole world. Later on, after she calmed down, she asked us what the fight had been about." He smiled, remembering it like yesterday, as he told J.D. the punchline. Both men had pointed at the other and replied in unison, "He almost got himself shot."

"She made us a photo album," Buck said, slowly taking the cover off the box. "Course it didn’t work out like she hoped. We were supposed to be embarrassed. But we liked it too much. And in the end, we just kept adding to it."

He pulled a small photo album from the box, ran a hand over the cover and handed it to J.D. It was designed to be a wedding album. And there was a space in the front cover for a photo of the happy couple. Instead, a neat, handprinted title adorned the cover: "Punch Me in the Face and Tell Me You Love Me: Understanding Larabee/Wilmington Fist Dialect".

Buck watched J.D. laugh as he opened the pages, a younger Chris Larabee and Buck Wilmington, smirking back at him, unrepentant through stitches and black eyes, wearing slings and bandages, walking on crutches. Wrestling each other into headlocks. Boxing. And sparring in karate tournaments.

"It wasn’t all from fights," Buck explained. "When he found out Sarah was pregnant, Chris decided we ought to set a better example." He sighed sadly. "Guess we don’t have anyone to set an example for anymore."

The last page bore a picture of the two of them pretending to choke the living daylights out of each other. J.D. smiled and closed the album.

Buck put it back into the box, placing a small, brown teddy bear, whose fur had worn bare in spots on top of it.

"Adam’s," Buck said quietly. "I gave it to him when he was born. He took it everywhere. Wore the fur right off."

J.D. nodded and watched Buck replace the cover carefully. He wanted to ask Buck how come he had these. Why they were in the back of his closet instead of at the ranch. But he didn’t want to intrude.

Buck seemed to read his mind, as always. "When he kicked me out of his life, I took ‘em," he said. "I wanted something to keep the memories."

"Does he know you have them?" J.D. asked.

Buck smiled bitterly. "I doubt it," he replied, placing the box back on the shelf where it had been. "You gotta understand. After they died, he packed up a lot of stuff and put it out of sight. Like he couldn’t stand to lay eyes on it. But he couldn’t get rid of everything. So he moved out for a while. Lived in a run down little apartment. I guess he forgot I still had a key. So I went back and found these stuffed in a box in the hall closet."

"You figured he’d never notice," J.D. finished.
Buck grinned and scratched his head. “I left a note,” he said. “I figured if he ever came to his senses, he might want to know what happened to the album.”

“As for the bear,” Buck said quietly. “He had already offered it to me. I was just late in collecting it.”

J.D. rose from the bed and clapped Buck once on the shoulder. He smiled. “Thanks,” he said quietly, and left the room. He was halfway down the stairs when the barest beginnings of a question crept into his brain.

* * * 

It was late, very late, when the throbbing in his ribs and in his arm and in his head finally drove him to get up and find the painkillers. The house was dark and silent. They had gone. All of them. He wondered if he had finally pushed them so far they had to leave. At that moment, he wasn’t sure whether he felt guilty or relieved. He only knew he didn’t want to think about it. Knowing he’d be sorry in the morning, he emptied the prescribed dosage of pills into his hand, drank the prescribed amount of the prescribed liquid, and limped back up to bed. Maybe Buck had fallen on him harder than he thought. He gritted his teeth. Surely no one needed to know that. Least of all Buck.

He opened his eyes to see bright sunlight lighting up every corner of his room. His throat felt like sandpaper. But if he didn’t move right away, didn’t breathe too hard, just stayed frozen in that moment, he discovered nothing hurt enough to bother him. But it was too good to last. He lifted his head to look at the clock and the sudden intake of breath brought pain back into his ribs. He groaned, not so much because of the pain, but because of the realization that it was nearly 11 AM. He put his head back down. He stayed that way for several seconds before slowly, gingerly pushing the covers off, and pushing himself to a sitting position with the arm that didn’t hurt.

He scrubbed a hand through his hair and over the two days of stubble covering his chin and yawned. He felt leaden. Slow. Off balance. Out of focus. He remembered the painkillers and realized why. At least he hadn’t thrown up. He smiled ruefully at that. Sometimes you just had to take the good news no matter how small.

Then his eyes lit on the tray. It had been set carefully on the chair near the bed. He eyed it, amused. It contained a bowl of applesauce, a glass of milk, a glass of juice, a vanilla yogurt, some lime jello, one of Vin’s private stash of chocolate pudding cups, and a folded piece of paper. Chris stood carefully and took the three steps over to the chair.

He reached for the note and recognized Vin’s spidery uneven handwriting immediately.

**Hey Cowboy,**

Reckon you got your head out of the pillow long enough to figure out it’s daytime. Didn’t know what you’d want for breakfast. Take your pick. I’m around if you need me.

Chris shook his head and smiled. Even in writing, Vin was a smart-ass. It was probably just the painkillers messing with his head, but he didn’t know which touched him more, that Vin was offering one of his secret pudding stash or that he had actually written out the note.

Vin had a hell of a hard time writing and his handwriting showed it. Hampered by dyslexia his entire life, he had invented a hundred ways to hide his so-called weakness. The team knew about it, but precious few others did. As a result, he hardly ever wrote anything down. And handwritten notes from Vin Tanner were few and far between. It was a mark of trust that he wasn’t embarrassed to write one now.
Chris had managed to get into the hot tub on the back porch and was contemplating just falling asleep when he was aware that someone was standing over him. He cracked one eye open.

“Comfy?” Vin asked plopping down on one of the deck chairs.

Chris closed the eye again and let his head settle back against the edge of the tub. “It’s quiet,” he mumbled a moment later.

Vin grinned. “Yeah,” he said. “We all took a vote and figured you only need one babysitter. Buck and me’ll take care of the barn. But I figured for the first day, you’d like someone who didn’t talk all the time. Or dog your every step.”

Chris cracked open the other eye and grinned evilly. “So you’re gonna shut up an’ leave me alone?”

He was rewarded with a face full of water. Which only made him grin wider.

He closed both eyes and settled in to get real comfortable. He heard the screen door open and Vin was gone. The grin melted down to a smile that stuck there, as he thanked whatever fates had decided to go easy on him today, that Tanner had taken the first shift.

* * *

J.D. leaned on the doorbell trying to be as obnoxious as possible. Then perhaps someone would put down whatever power tool they were using and open the door. His impatience was rewarded after only a few more seconds, but the man who opened the door was not the person he had expected.

“Hi, Nathan,” he said, staring at the medic, whose face was liberally dusted with fine white plaster powder, except for a wide brown dust-free circle that marked where he had been wearing the dust mask that now hung around his neck. J.D. tried to peer around him and tried to hide his disappointment on seeing the medic. “Josiah here?”

Nathan opened the door a little wider to reveal the giant figure of Josiah Sanchez, standing behind a sawhorse holding a power saw and staring impatiently at the door. J.D. noticed that the sawhorse was standing between a heap of splintered furniture and the remains of at least one partially dismantled wall.

“J.D.” Josiah said by way of greeting. He wore a dust mask, too, it muffled his voice but did not disguise the fact that the profiler was not in a good mood.

J.D. shifted his feet nervously. And decided it was best not to comment on the mess. “Hi Josiah. I—um—wanted to talk to you about something. But it can wait, if this isn’t a good time.”

He eyed Nathan nervously. The medic had not said one word so far and clearly he was not in a good mood either.

Josiah shrugged and put down the sander. “Now’s as good a time as any,” he said.

Nathan rolled his eyes and replaced the mask over his nose and mouth. He walked across the debris-strewn living room. When he reached the wall that separated the living room from the kitchen, he bent down and picked up a sledgehammer. With a wide swing, he smashed another hole in a wall that he had clearly already begun working on. Evidently, he was enjoying the demolition.

Josiah grinned as he saw J.D.’s wide eyes.
“Every man needs his own kind of therapy,” he said easily. He looked around. “See anything you want to break?”

J.D. laughed. “No thanks, but if you need some help, I’m there.”

Sanchez clapped him across the shoulders. “Glad to hear it. Let’s talk about your problem first.” He steered J.D. around the piles and into the kitchen.


Josiah grinned. “Well then, if it’s not a problem, feel free to sit down and stay a while.” Sanchez folded his legs under him and settled his giant body onto the kitchen floor, leaning against a cabinet.

J.D. looked around. Confused. What had happened to Josiah’s chairs? He didn’t ask. He just stripped off his backpack and took a seat in front of an adjoining cabinet. He stared at Josiah for a moment, unsure where to begin, what to say, how to start something like this.

Josiah folded his hands calmly in his lap and waited.

Behind them, the sound of Nathan’s demolition filled the silence.

Finally, J.D. cleared his throat. “This is gonna sound kinda stupid, maybe, but Buck said some stuff last night that got me thinking.”

Josiah couldn’t help but grin. “Now J.D.,” he said in his best priestly voice. “Sometimes the things Brother Buck says…”

J.D. gave him a sour look, and Josiah could see that the young agent was not in a mood to be teased. “I’m sorry J.D.,” he said. “I didn’t mean to make light of your question. Please continue.”

J.D. saw the serious look settle back onto Josiah’s craggy features. He nodded his head to show he accepted the apology and began again. Unfortunately, it was no less awkward the second time around.

“He was talking about Chris,” J.D. said. “And about the way things were before…,” he squinted at Josiah. “You know… before…” He trailed off. Somehow Buck’s dislike of discussing what had happened to Chris’s family and Chris’s own avoidance of the subject was now preventing him from talking about it.

Josiah nodded, “Before Chris’s family was killed,” he prompted gently.

“Right,” J.D. said gratefully and hurried on. “Anyway, he said that I… well, that if I…,” he paused, stumbled.

The big profiler waited.

“Ah hell, Josiah,” he said frustrated. Turning red. How the hell do you say that your best friend just told you that you don’t really know a man you’ve worked for for three years, and you just figured out that he might be right? He stopped. This was a bad idea, coming here.

Josiah narrowed his eyes but his look was kindly. “J.D.,” he said patiently. “I can’t help you if you don’t tell me what you need.”

J.D.’s head lifted in surprise. “That’s what Chris said to Ezra,” he said, then turned another shade of red. At the sound of the argument, he and Buck had both flown to the top of the stairs. Every ear in
the house had been tuned to Chris and Ezra, although at that moment, neither man appeared to notice or care. Still, it had been between Chris and Ezra, and J.D. knew he had no business, leaning over the railing the way he did to get a clear view. And to discover that Ezra was thinking about leaving the team. He pushed the thought aside.

Josiah grinned. “Yes,” he said calmly. “During that rather loud and public discussion they had before Ezra drove off and left us to deal with the aftermath.”

J.D. shook his head sadly. “Is Ezra coming back?” he asked.

Josiah squinted at his young friend. “Is that what you came to ask me about?” he asked.

“No,” J.D. replied.

“Then let Chris worry about whether Ezra is coming back and let’s worry about what you want.”

J.D. shrugged, agreed, but couldn’t let it drop just yet. “Do you think he’ll come back?”

Josiah looked at the earnest expression on J.D.’s face, could see how hopeful he was, how much he wanted their strange, eclectic little unit to be right again. Jaded as the years had made him, Josiah couldn’t help but realize that he carried the same hope and the same need. It just couldn’t work its way through the layers of experience, betrayal, fatigue, and loss to make it onto his face. The profiler sighed. He managed a smile. “Well, if anyone can convince him to come back, it’s Chris.”

J.D. nearly smiled at that, felt his confidence returning. Then he remembered why he had come. He took a deep breath and forged ahead. After all, if he never asked the question, he’d never get his answer. Just like Josiah said.

This time he spat it right out. “Buck said something that made me think that maybe I don’t really know Chris. You know, as a person.” He didn’t feel any less stupid when the question hit the air. And he wished to hell that he could stop blushing.

Josiah grinned. But it wasn’t a patronizing smile. Or a sympathetic smile exactly. It was almost conspiratorial.

The profiler leaned his head back against the cabinet and looked up at the ceiling. There was another long moment filled with the sound of falling plaster before Josiah answered.

“J.D.,” he said finally, pursing his lips, in a way that made J.D. think that Josiah was going to launch into a lengthy parable that he wouldn’t really understand. It was almost all he could do not to squirm.

Josiah fixed him with a penetrating look. Several stories popped into his head. But J.D. had come looking for his advice, not the wisdom of tradition, so he avoided them and said simply. “Chris isn’t exactly the easiest person in the world to get to know.”

The simplicity of the statement surprised J.D. As did something else about it. Was it an admission?

Josiah continued. “It’s not exactly that our leader deliberately seeks to deceive,” he said. “It’s simply that he gives so little away and then others feel compelled to fill in the gaps.”

J.D. lowered his head. That was true. He had heard no end of nasty rumors, gossip, and innuendos since he began with Team Seven. He hadn’t believed any of them. Then again, he had heard a lot of other stories, too, the kind that would make you think that Chris Larabee was somehow more than only human. He hadn’t believed those either. Not exactly.
Now that he thought about it, a good number of those stories had come from Buck. And had been told—repeatedly—mostly in the Saloon, when the gregarious agent had had a drink or two. When Buck’s tongue was loosened by beer, he was given to exaggerating, especially where it would make him look good. However, since he and Chris had worked together for so many years, the exaggeration often extended to Larabee as well.

As for Chris, no matter what sort of whopper Buck told, Larabee seldom, if ever, bothered to correct his old friend. So long as there was nothing in the story he really didn’t want told, the team leader usually preferred to just slouch back in his chair, turning his glass around in his fingers, and smiling secretively down at the table.

Josiah leaned forward. “If you want to try to understand Chris Larabee, you have to stop listening to the words. Learn to hear what isn’t said.”

J.D. sighed. Not a parable perhaps, but still cryptic. He should have expected no less from Sanchez. “So ignore what other people say?”

Josiah grinned. “What most other people say,” he corrected.

The big profiler pulled his long legs closer in and leaned forward. “Learn to read the signs,” he advised. “The proof of man’s character is in his actions, not his words. In our leader’s case, there’s far more to hear in what he doesn’t say.”

“That reminds me,” Josiah said suddenly, sitting up. He pulled a small, dirty, folded piece of paper from his shirt pocket and groped up behind him on the counter for a pen. He found one. Then he unfolded the paper and smoothed it against his knee before writing down a few words. J.D. watched curiously.

“What’s that?” he asked finally, as Josiah folded it carefully back up and put it back in his shirt pocket.

Josiah smiled grimly. “It was going to be Chris’s eulogy,” he replied.

J.D. suddenly felt as if a fist had thunked him soundly in the chest. He grimaced. “But you don’t need that anymore, right?” he asked, aware that his voice sounded tinny. He knew it was ridiculous. But Buck and the rest of the team had an irritating habit of sheltering him. What if Chris was hurt that bad? What if he was sick? Would they hide something like that from him?

Josiah had been on the verge of making a joke, a bad one at that, that given Chris’s leadership style, it might be good to keep it handy, but the sudden change of expression on the young agent’s face made him swallow his words.

“No, J.D.,” he said calmly. “It’s not needed anymore. But I’d like to finish it.”

“Why’s that?” J.D. asked, making his voice normal, casual.

Josiah smiled again, one of those strange world-weary sad smiles he had. “Every man needs his own kind of therapy,” he repeated. He was still looking at J.D. but his focus was far off. “I’d like to remain mindful of what I almost lost. For those times I am tempted to forget.”

J.D. let those words sink in. They were still sinking when he found himself on Josiah’s doorstep again, facing a beautiful sunset. Then he was on the road again. His bike humming beneath him and the road curving beautifully away. It was a perfect evening for riding, and he turned his bike toward Casey’s, relishing the long ride ahead. Turning the words over in his head.
Vin didn’t see Chris again until late afternoon. The team leader was sitting on the deck, cleaning and inspecting his gun. It was his personal sidearm, but it was nearly identical to his officially-issued service revolver. The one that had been destroyed in the warehouse.

Vin put that thought aside and grinned as he plopped down onto the deck steps. He let out an involuntary sigh as he felt his muscles relax.

Chris eyed him and then returned his attention to the gun. “Working awful hard there, Pard,” he said quietly without looking up.

Vin shrugged and rubbed the back of his neck self-consciously. He didn’t deny it, but he didn’t miss the way Chris pressed his lips tightly together.

“Shoot,” Vin drawled. “I’ve worked a lot harder than this.”

Chris didn’t look up, but he shook his head slightly.

Vin sighed. “Of course I also spent two hours sittin’ in your recliner and drinkin’ your beer this afternoon.”

Chris’s expression did not change.

“Hey,” Vin said, finally, reaching up and slapping Chris hard on the knee. “I don’t mind a little hard work. You can’t do it. An’ I consider it helpin’ out a friend.”

Chris completed his cleaning and inspection of the gun. Only then did he look up. Vin read the expression in the green eyes.

The blue eyes glinted back in exasperation. “I ain’t doin’ it ‘cause I feel obligated,” he said, his drawl tinged with annoyance. “Quit bein’ such a damn hardhead and accept some help from your friends.”

Chris scowled. He began loading bullets into the magazine.

“Yer welcome, Larabee,” Vin said gruffly. He eyed the gun. “What’re you plannin’ on doin’ with that?” he asked casually.

When Chris looked up, the green eyes sparked. A dare. “Now that you mention it,” he said slowly. “There is something you could help me with.”

Vin snorted. “You gotta be kiddin’.” But he knew from the glint in his friend’s eye that he was not.

“Gotta requalify,” Chris said with a shrug. “Gotta practice.”

Vin squinted at him with one eye. “An’ if I hadn’t been sittin’ here, would you’ve tried to stack up the bales yourself?”

Chris laughed. “I may be a hardhead, but I ain’t stupid.” Truthfully, he had considered it, but wasn’t sure whether he could even lift one good size bale, let alone swing five or six out of the loft and stack them up by the wood pile.

Vin laughed and got up. “Better get movin’ then, ol’ man. I’ll probably have ‘em all stacked up by
the time you get your gimpy ass back out here with a target.”

Chris gave him a mock glare, but it was more of a smirk.

* * *

Vin tried watching the target practice.

At first Chris’s stance was off as he shifted his weight around trying to find a way to stand solidly on his sore feet. He tried using his left hand to support his right arm, but his left arm was unsteady. He shot left-handed for a few rounds. The gun was surprisingly heavy, and the healing muscles in his upper arm quivered as they protested its weight and especially the kick.

He turned to a sideways stance and held his right arm straight out to his side, sighting along his arm and began to fire round after round into the unoffending silhouette of a man tacked up onto the hay bale. He fired until the sweat began to pour off his forehead. Until the magazine was empty. He eyed the pattern. Better, but off center.

Then he put in a new magazine, put the gun purposefully into his left hand, gritted his teeth, extended his arm, levered his arm straight with his shoulder blades, jammed his sore feet down against the ground, held it steady, and fired again and again. The reverberations traveling down through every rib until he felt like they were humming with the vibration. Still he kept firing, and the pattern slowly crept closer and closer to the center.

He ignored the throbbing in his arm and in his feet and in his side as he reloaded. Then he put the gun back into his right hand, adopted the textbook stance and took aim. The world disappeared. The pain disappeared. He fired three rounds into the chest of the silhouette. And proceeded to empty the magazine.

The moment Larabee’s stubborn determination kicked in, Vin saw it. He saw Chris’s face pale. Saw the sweat break out across his forehead. Saw the arm quiver and the shoulder shake. Then he saw the set of his jaw. Saw him grit his teeth and pull everything back in line. Force the pain out of his way. Force his limbs to obey. Force them to hold steady. Force that pattern back to center. By the time Chris loaded the third magazine, Vin turned on his heel and went into the house.

He listened to the steady sound of gunfire as he found, opened, and heated up cans of soup. He glanced up as the last report died away and silence fell onto the yard. Forty-five minutes by the clock on the microwave oven. Thank God Nathan wasn’t here.

It was another ten before the front door opened and shut.

The moment Chris entered the kitchen, Vin knew something had changed. He was so damn tired his entire left arm trembled as he lifted it to open the refrigerator door. And Vin grinned as the blond stuck his head into his refrigerator and scanned the contents.

“Supper’s almost ready,” Vin said, hiding his smile. “Get yerself some crackers for the soup.”

Too late he remembered the crackers were in the top of the cupboard. Out of the corner of his eye he watched Chris reach for the box. Watched him jerk back in pain. Heard the soft irritated swear as he went to get the stepladder. Saw the whole stepladder rock as Chris climbed it unsteadily and came back down with the entire box. He set it on the counter. Picked up the stepladder, snapped it closed and carried it away. He returned, and without another word, he pulled out two bowls and two spoons and set them on the counter. Then he stood there and stared at the soup as it finally began to bubble.

“Microwave would’ve been faster,” he said after a moment.
“You in a hurry, Cowboy?”

“Just sayin’,” Chris replied with a shrug.

He ate the whole bowl of soup and a stack of crackers almost the size of Vin’s forearm. Vin said nothing as he cleaned up. He saved his grin for the empty kitchen. About damn time.

Vin’s grin as he was leaving told the just arriving Buck everything he needed to know. But the shredded target silhouette Vin handed to him as he went by said plenty more.

Buck found Chris in the recliner under an afghan reading a book. He waved a half gallon of chocolate marshmallow ice cream in front of the team leader’s face. “Brought dessert,” he said.

Chris grinned up at him. In the dying sunlight coming through the glass porch doors, Buck could hardly even see the bruises anymore.

“Good day?” he asked.

“So far,” Chris drawled, his grin taking on a mocking tilt.

Buck couldn’t help but grin back as he went in search of the ice cream scoop.

* * *

Buck stuck close. A lot closer than Vin had, that was certain. But Chris had to give his old friend credit. He was doing his very best not to hover or fuss and was actually managing surprisingly well.

Chris showed his appreciation by pausing at the front door, a letter in his hand. “Thought I’d try walking all the way out to the end of the driveway. Want to come along in case you need to carry me back?” he joked. But it was only half a joke. He had forgotten how long his driveway was until this morning.

Buck looked up from the breakfast dishes. “Sure thing, Pard. Should I drive the truck behind like in a marathon?” Buck cracked.

Chris sighed. “Bud, I don’t think it’s possible to drive a truck as slow as I’m movin’.”

“Give it time,” Buck said gently, opening the hall closet and handing Chris a jacket. They stepped onto the front porch. A slight breeze stirred the morning air, promising another pleasantly warm spring day.

From the corner of his eye, Buck watched Chris slide on the jacket. He did not comment. To look at him, the tall agentBuck thought a good stiff breeze might still blow Chris over. But he had been up, showered, shaved, and dressed in time for breakfast. Buck had ensured that when he announced last night that he was making his Artery Clogger Special: loads of bacon, with hash browns cooked in the grease and blueberry pancakes smothered in butter and syrup. There weren’t that many things that Buck could cook, but the few meals he did make, he made with justifiable pride.

Chris was right about the driveway. It was a long, slow stroll to the mailbox at the end, and the blond was winded by the time they returned to the house. He looked at Buck from under a raised eyebrow. “Think you’ll be up to another lap this afternoon when the mail comes in.”

Buck smirked at him. “I can make it, if you can.”

Later that day, Chris resumed practicing with his pistol.
He was still out there firing, when J.D. arrived on his motorcycle. He paused only long enough to
nod his head at J.D. Helmet under his arm, the young agent paused to watch. He looked
questioningly at Buck.

The tall agent waited until the silence between magazines to try to talk.

“Don’t think he’ll have any problems requalifying,” Buck said matter of factly. From looking at the
target, stamina would be the issue, not aim.

“Should he be doing that?” J.D. asked.

Buck shrugged.

J.D. sighed in exasperation.

Buck squeezed his shoulder. “Let him be, kid,” Buck said. His voice held a note of caution. “Best to
stay out of the way.”

J.D. scowled at him. “I wish people would stop telling me that. And I’m not a kid.”

Buck shrugged again, raising his eyebrows at his young friend. “I’m just givin’ you some advice,” he
said. “You can take it, or you can learn the hard way,” he said.

“You said you wanted help with a fence,” J.D. snapped, changing the subject. “I’m here. Where’s
the fence?”

Buck grinned. He hollered over to Chris, waving his arms to get the blond’s attention.

Chris put on the safety, stowed the gun in his shoulder holster, and took out his ear plugs.

“Goin’ up to the far pasture to mend the fence. I’m takin’ J.D. You got your phone?”

Chris gave Buck a thumb’s up. Then he put his ear plugs back in, took out the
gun and clicked off
the safety and started working on pulling the gun from its holster.

“Don’t shoot yourself while we’re out,” Buck muttered.

“Real funny, Buck,” J.D. retorted, with a scowl.

Buck rolled his eyes and handed J.D. a tool belt. They loaded some lumber and supplies onto the
small Cushman Chris used to haul hay and materials around the pastures, climbed on and took off for
the back pasture, still hearing the gunshots as background to the motor.

* * *

They struggled with the replacement boards, but working as a team it only took them a few hours to
replace the boards and make the other repairs needed so they could pasture the horses up here in the
morning. Then they sat in the shade and drank the water they brought with them.

Buck gave J.D. a sidelong glance. “We’re not off the hook, yet,” he said without introduction or
preamble.

J.D. looked at him comprehendingly.

“This little unpaid vacation is for going AWOL,” Buck explained. “Chris is still going to have to
launch an official inquiry when we get back.”
J.D. lowered his head. He had forgotten. How could someone forget something like that? Should he be working on a plan?

“Listen up,” Buck said seriously and J.D. lifted his head to look at him. “When Chris calls you in to discuss your role in what we did, you tell him the truth. You answer every question he asks. You tell him the whole truth. Anything less, and he’s gonna know, and you’re gonna be in even bigger trouble. You got me?”

J.D. stared at him.

“I plan on doing the same, so don’t hold back on my account, or you’ll be in trouble with me, too.” Buck said grimly.

J.D. looked away. He was silent for a long moment. His voice was quiet when he asked, “How bad is it going to be?”

“I don’t know,” Buck replied honestly. He paused. Hoped J.D. would understand what he was about to say. “We put Chris and Travis in a bad spot. We owe it to both of them to come clean. Regardless of the consequences.”

J.D.’s head shot up and he gave Buck a penetrating stare. It was written on the older agent’s face for J.D. to see. Buck knew what he had done. And he might well get fired for it. By the very friend he had done it for.

“Doesn’t seem fair,” the young agent muttered, plucking a dandelion head and flinging it away.

“We did what we did, kid,” Buck replied matter of factly. “Can’t change that. I’m willing to accept the consequences for what I did. Just wish I’d thought about the consequences for what you all were going to do.”

J.D.’s eyebrows came down in a fierce glare. “We knew what we were doing,” he said. “And I can take the consequences.”

Buck smiled sadly. “Even if Chris has to fire you?”

J.D. held his ground. “Even if,” he said firmly.

Buck’s smiled broadened. He clapped J.D. across the back. “Well, hell, we might all be looking for work together.”

J.D. plucked another dandelion head. “Yeah. One ATF team, slightly used, on offer to highest bidder.”

Buck laughed.

Then quiet fell again, as each man disappeared into his own thoughts.

J.D. gave Buck a sidelong glance. “You regret it?” he asked quietly.

“Nope,” Buck answered without hesitation. Then he winced. “That’s not to say I wouldn’t do a few things differently if I had to do it again.”

J.D. crushed the flower head in his hand. “I don’t even want to think about it happening again,” he bit out.

Buck reached out suddenly and ruffled his young friend’s hair affectionately. He eyed the sky and
the late afternoon light and got up with a slight groan.

J.D. hung his head a moment before he got up. “Doesn’t seem fair to make Chris do the inquiry,” he said.

Buck sighed, examining the grass at his feet. “That’s how Chris wants it. He does his own dirty work.” He looked up at J.D. “Better him than the brass anyway. He’ll do what he has to, but he won’t let them break you or destroy the reputation you’ve already earned. He’ll protect us as much as he can.” He sighed. “Knowing Chris, if push comes to shove, he’ll go down right beside us.”

J.D. climbed to his feet. He shook his head and Buck winced at the sadness he saw in his face. A promising career and it might already be over.

J.D.’s stomach hurt, as Buck’s words sunk in. He wondered why he hadn’t realized it before. “We did it for him, you know?” J.D. said quietly, his voice deep with regret. “And now he’s going to have to pay the bill.”

Buck grimaced. He should have known J.D.’s sadness wouldn’t be for the damage he had done to himself. It would be for his friends.

He squeezed the back of J.D.’s neck. “He knows why we did it. He just don’t think it was all that bright an idea.” He smiled ruefully. “He’s pissed, you know.”

J.D. stared at Buck. That couldn’t be right. Their volatile team leader had been impressively calm since they had found him. If you didn’t count the fight with Buck out in the yard. But even that had been inconsequential. You didn’t take an angry Chris Larabee lightly. J.D. had seen him dismantle an entire office once out of spite. And once after a bad bust, Chris had thrown another team leader to the dirt and threatened to break his head open. It would be hard not to notice if Chris were really pissed.

“It’s true,” Buck said with a grin, guessing J.D.’s thoughts. “He’s just got it on a low burn.”

“I guess we can’t blame him.” J.D. replied grimly. “We put him in this position,”

Buck shook his head. “No,” he corrected. “He’s pissed because we put ourselves in this position. For no good reason. According to Chris.”

J.D. stared at Buck and blurted out, “We thought those bastards killed him!” he blurted out. “That seemed like reason enough.”

The sad smile returned. “I know that, and you know that. Hell everyone in the whole ATF knows that. ‘Cept Chris. He don’t get that. Doesn’t see how he’d be worth it.”

“Well he’s wrong then,” J.D. retorted hotly.

“Yeah, he is,” Buck agreed, clapping J.D. on the shoulder. “He just don’t know it.”

J.D. was silent on the trip back to the house. Buck had changed the subject and was off on some tangent involving girls and hot cars or possibly hot girls and old cars. The young agent only listened with half an ear. That same half formed thought was turning itself end over end in his head again, though he still couldn’t quite grasp it. Reluctantly, he let it go and watched the red sun approaching the horizon, holding on as the tiny truck lurched over the hilly pasture back down the slope toward the neat buildings laid out below.

* * *
J.D. had gone and supper was over. The coffee was poured and the dishes were done. Then Chris eyed Buck seriously and said, “We have to talk.”

Buck nodded. “I know,” he said. He had known that Chris would want to find out what had happened before the inquiry became official. He would have bet a week’s pay—if he had been getting paid—that Chris had already started pumping the members of the team for information. He would want to know the details up front, so he could start figuring out what to do about it. He didn’t want to be surprised in the interview process. Anything he found out now would be off the record until it became known in the formal inquiry.

“Where do you want to do this?” Buck asked.

“I don’t know,” Chris said, narrowing his eyes. “Am I going to have to shoot you?”

Buck smiled ruefully but the dark blue eyes were serious. “Probably,” he replied.

Chris sighed. What little Buck had told him in Texas was enough to let him know that the team had gone off the deep end this time. Now he needed to know how far they had gone, and he needed to know before he had to make it official. He needed to figure out what to do about what he was going to hear during the formal inquiry, to mitigate the fallout.

Chris knew he was walking a thin ethical line. And he knew he would eventually have to ask himself, when it came time to step off that line, which direction would he step? Not that he planned to cover up what his team had done in his absence. He wasn’t even sure he could, but he had to admit to himself that the failings of his team were the result of his own failings in leadership. Whatever they had enacted in his absence was due to the failure of his own policies and practices to instill in his team a proper sense of where the lines were that could not be crossed.

He told himself that he shouldn’t have been surprised. His example had been far less than stellar. He had crossed many lines and bent and broken many rules in his own careers. Not that it was any justification, but his own transgressions had been largely in the service of a personal code of ethics. The code he lived by. The code that led him to serve his country in the first place. And the code that eventually led him to resign from a promising career serving his country in the SEALs and find a new career in law enforcement. He had sacrificed careers, years of his life, more than one relationship, his happiness, and when demanded, his own sweat and blood to that code. Now he found himself wondering: Would he be prepared to violate that code, to serve his team? And if he did choose to violate it, what would that leave him to rely on going forward?

He abandoned that train of thought. He and his future were not what was important here. The leader’s job is to serve the team. He had to figure out what was best for them. Even if they weren’t going to like it.

Buck eyed his old friend, his boss. He knew Chris would accept no less than the truth. And he knew that he would give him the full honest truth and trust Chris to decide what would be done about it. He also knew that he would not like the consequences. But he could live with that. He had been prepared to face any fallout to make some good come from Chris’s senseless, violent death.

But Chris was not dead, and that put events in a new light. In this new perspective, Buck had slowly come to realize a fact that bothered him far more than the rules, policies, and procedures he had violated or that he may have just ended his own career. What bothered him most was the realization that in leading the team in enacting a plan for revenge, he had discarded the leadership principles that Chris had set. He had completely disregarded his job as Chris’s second in command. He had failed his leader and the team. He was not sure what punishment could balance those scales.
Chris caught Buck’s eye, but his gaze lingered on the bruises across Buck’s face. He shook his head slowly. Richter had gotten in a lot of good punches. He had heard, when they thought he wasn’t listening, that Buck had cracked a few ribs in the fight. It didn’t seem to be slowing Buck down any, but then maybe that was just his Wilmington pride. At least he had had the sense to call in J.D. to help with the fence. Chris scowled. How the hell had he found out that fence needed repaired anyway? He caught himself and forced the scowl away.

“You taking any painkillers?” Chris asked.

Buck shifted uncomfortably in his chair. “Prescribed yes. Taking no.”

A wry smile quirked up the team leader’s lips. “So you wanna do this cold sober, or should we have a couple of drinks?”

Buck’s smile mirrored Chris’s. “I guess that depends if you’re going to shoot me or not. I wouldn’t want you to miss and hit something painful.”

Chris grinned. “I won’t miss,” he promised. He found two glasses, went to the liquor cabinet and poured two straight up doubles of good Tennessee whiskey. He handed one to Buck.

“Start at the beginning,” he said. “I want to know everything I need to know before I have to make this official.”

Buck took a big gulp, feeling the familiar comforting fire slide down his throat. He pushed his coffee aside, laid both hands on the scarred wooden tabletop, and began the story from the time the team arrived back in Denver and began turning their minds toward revenge.
Chapter 8

The doorbell had stopped ringing only to be replaced with an incessant pounding. Ezra Standish vowed that he would not answer the door. They could break it down if they had to. He would not even poke his head around the corner to see which of his teammates were standing there. Or perhaps this time it would be all of them. He told himself he didn’t care.

He sat in the hallway between the bedrooms because there were no windows there. And he could sit here and pretend he was not home, while his phone rang, and his answering machine picked up, and his teammates dropped by to talk to him—just as he had been doing for days, since he had last seen Vin, on the night that Buck and Chris had fought. The night they thought they would be hauling Chris back to the hospital again. The night Ezra had finally realized what the others had apparently known all along, that their leader was not simply being stubborn and pigheaded. He was both of those things, to be sure. But on top of it, he truly did not understand—or did not choose to understand—what they had gone through while he was gone. Or worse yet when they had finally found him, bleeding, out of his head, and looking like he might just leave them after all.

_Gone_, Ezra mused on the word. A pleasant euphemism. _Like gone to the corner store to buy some milk._ Or “I’ll only be gone for a few minutes, Ezra dear, just to have a few words with the headmaster. You unpack.” Gone was inappropriate here. Gone was different. Indefinite. Temporary. The right word here was dead. Dead. Deceased. Departed. Perished. Forever.

He shook his head to clear it and concentrated on the cardboard packing box between his knees. He had dragged it there so it could not be seen from the windows either. He was valiantly ignoring the pounding but having more trouble ignoring the thoughts running through his head.

_Departing_, Ezra thought again. _Or in your case, Mr. Standish, running away._

He scowled at the box and then at the framed photographs piled up on the floor beside his leg, waiting to be wrapped in bubble wrap and exiled back to the cardboard cell it seemed that they had only just left.

Now the doorbell was ringing and someone was pounding. Perhaps there were two. Or more likely it was just their ambidextrous sharpshooter. Another one who was just too damn stubborn to know when to quit.

_Quit. Quitter. I quit._

He swore to himself, mostly to break the cycle in his head. He glanced up into the darkened living room in annoyance. Why couldn’t they just leave him the hell alone? It wasn’t like they could make his decision for him. It wasn’t like they could even help him make up his mind. He needed space. Space and time. To think. To plan. To pack.

_Ezra, you’re a coward_, his own voice told him in his head. _You’re a coward and if you run away, everyone will know._

I’m not running, he thought vehemently. _I’m cutting my losses._ There, that sounded good. Sensible. Clear headed. Reasonable.

He swore again and got up. He went into the master bathroom and started taking down the tiny framed watercolors he had purchased in Paris long ago. He tried to think about Paris, but that nagging voice wouldn’t leave him alone.
No one can make this decision for you.

His glance caught the picture on his bedside table. His mother. He always kept her picture there. Except when she came to visit, of course. No need to invite a lecture about the inherent danger of developing attachments.

Ezra, dear, said his mother’s voice from memory, smooth and cool as fine linens, sweet with the honey of her southern accent. You know better than to get attached. Attachments cloud your reason. We are business people, sugar. We must keep our heads always.

This she had said, as the car pulled out of the long driveway, leaving behind his third stepfather. The first one he had hoped to stay with. Never again had he dared entertain such hopes.

You’re afraid. So you’re leaving them. The thought ambushed him. He reacted angrily.

“Better I leave them, than they leave me!” He snapped. The echo in the tiled room told him that he had spoken the words out loud. He cringed. Afraid for a moment that whoever was at his door had heard him. Indeed, the ringing and pounding had ceased. Was he listening outside? Ezra held his breath for a long moment. There was silence. Then he heard a car door, and the roar of an engine leaving his driveway. He could not be certain which teammate’s car he heard. He relaxed against the doorframe, sliding down it with his hands over his face.

He fought to find his cold, calculating reason, his cultured cool, his famed detachment. Instead he found more memory.

In the back of the framed picture, he had hidden the piece of paper that very stepfather had pressed into his hand, as they shook their goodbyes like men. A phone number and a hastily written note: You always know where you can find me. Although he had never called, the door was left open. While so many others had slammed shut.

He sighed, thinking of it. And knew he stood before another such door now. It was his decision whether to shut it or keep it open. He could not decide. And he could not ask for help. They all had their own agendas. And he needed to know what he should do for himself.

Willfully, stubbornly, he fought to silence all the voices competing in his head. He knew now. He needed to find the quiet, steady voice inside himself. The one that he had spent so many years training himself to ignore. He needed to hear from that source that he had carefully walled off brick by brick, decision by decision. As he had so many times in his past, he stood at a crossroads, where he could trust himself alone. If only he could hear his own true voice.

* * *

It took a long time to tell the tale. That was because Buck spared no details. He kept his promise to himself that he would give Chris the truth, and he was completely candid about what had been done on his orders and what had been done by others on their own initiative with his consent and approval.

He watched the corners of Chris’s mouth become tight and grim, until his old friend stopped looking him in the eye and concentrated on the table top between them. Chris asked few questions, and he took no notes. There would be no records until the formal inquiry. Nevertheless, Buck knew that Chris would remember the details Buck had given him well enough to check the facts as the rest of the team gave their own unofficial statements.

When Buck had finished, when he had told about his fight with Richter, which he had intended to
carry out alone, without an audience, when silence had fallen between them, the gregarious, boisterous agent waited wordlessly for Chris to speak. The blond remained utterly still for so long that Buck began to entertain the idea that he should probably call in someone to relieve him early and head out now.

When Chris finally did look up, the smoldering glare told Buck that that would have been a good idea. He steeled himself to endure whatever Chris was about to say, or perhaps do.

Chris glared at him silently for another long second, while Buck watched the wheels turn in his old friend’s head. Normally, the way he could actually see Chris thinking amused him to no end. Not tonight. Tonight, he wasn’t sure he wanted to know the team leader’s thoughts. Worse yet, he knew from the pinching at the corner of Chris’s eyes that Larabee was trying to put aside his fury long enough to form a coherent rational sentence. Buck waited through the silence preceding what he knew was going to be one hell of a storm.

In the absence of words Chris’s hand tightened on his whiskey glass until his knuckles turned white. Buck was afraid for a moment that the glass would shatter in his friend’s hand. That shouldn’t have been his worst fear he realized, as a second later, the glass whizzed by his left ear to explode against the wall above the sink, showering both of them with shards of glass. Buck ducked, even as he knew it was already too late.

Chris was on his feet. “God damn it, Buck!” he hissed. “What the hell were you thinking?”

Buck opened his mouth. But Chris cut him off, shouting. “You could have gotten yourself killed. You could have gotten Ezra, or Nathan, or any one of them killed. What the hell were you thinking?”

Buck stared up at him. Recalled that he expected this. Remembered that he deserved it. Did his best not to get pulled into a rage-fueled shouting match with his oldest friend.

“You were in charge of the team! Didn’t that mean anything to you?” Chris grabbed Buck’s glass and smashed that against the wall, too, this time splashing them both with the remaining whiskey as well as the shards of glass. The tendons stood out on Chris’s neck. Buck stared, felt the blood drain from his face. Chris’s temper was legendary, but Buck could not recall when he had last seen Chris so close to losing it completely. Worse yet, Larabee was apparently waiting for some kind of response.

Buck kept his voice calm. “Yes,” he said softly. “It meant something to me.”

“Then tell me how the hell you could lead them off on a totally unethical, illegal mission. How the fuck could you put J.D. or any of the rest of them in that kind of danger?”

The team leader’s fists clenched and unclenched, and Buck could practically predict the number of seconds he had before those fingers were wrapped in his collar and he was thrown up against the wall like the glasses of whiskey.

“I wasn’t thinking about them, Chris,” Buck said, wiping the sweat off his lip. His eyes jerked away from the hot green glare.

“It was your job to think about them!” Chris exploded, sweeping a chair out from between them with his left foot. “You were the fucking team leader,” he shouted. “What the hell else could you have been thinking about?”

Buck flinched. He pushed back his chair, made ready to dodge, or flee, or at least attempt to defend
himself. And while his mind was planning out several plans of escape he heard the words leave his lips. “I guess I was thinking about you.”

He glanced up, almost as surprised to hear the words as Chris apparently was. The blond had been about to speak. Instead he choked. As a dark red flush shot up his neck. The glare intensified. His fingers twitched again.

“I was dead, Buck,” Chris said, his voice quieter but somehow even more intense. “I was fucking dead. What the hell were you going to do for me?”

Buck went cold. He licked his lips. “I…” The words failed him. The thought itself failed him. He had no idea what he could say.

He felt his insides turn over. Pinned in his chair as the team leader stepped toward him, bending to look him right in the face. Look right through him. What the leader saw damned him all right. Chris shook his head, his fury cold.

Buck found his voice, as realization exploded in his head. He croaked out the words before they choked him. “You knew you weren’t coming out,” he spat. Meet you in ten, my ass. It had been a lie, from a man who knew he was about to die.

Chris’s eyes hardened. “I knew it was a distinct probability.”

The team leader saw Buck’s eyes get hard.

“I gave you a job to do,” Chris said through his teeth, cutting off Buck’s train of thought. “I expected you to look out for them. To take care of them. Not take them down with you. I trusted you.”

Now he knew. He cursed his own blindness. Travis knew it, too. Must have seen it even if Chris didn’t. Otherwise, they wouldn’t have tried to bring in a new team leader.

Buck blanched. He flinched and looked away. Guilty as charged, he thought. He knew it. He’d seen it coming. He steeled himself as the possible consequences rolled through his mind. Consequences he should have considered back at that god damn warehouse, or any time after that, if he had had his head screwed on straight.

Chris straightened up suddenly. And he muttered a string of swear words that Buck couldn’t quite catch. Then he turned on his heel, yanked open the sliding glass door and slid out onto the deck, anger written in every short staccato motion.

Buck waited in the kitchen until he could stand it no longer. Quietly, he made his way to the glass door.

Chris was pacing the deck, his hands locked tight behind him. His head was down and his jaw was clenched. The pearly moonlight washing down onto the deck only made him look like a pale, vengeful ghost, his body all sharp angles in the shadows.

Buck waited. He didn’t know if he should speak.

“Chris,” he began tentatively, after several more seconds.

“Not now, Buck,” Chris growled.

Buck took a deep breath and stepped out onto the deck. “I know what I did,” he said evenly.

Chris halted in mid step, jerked upright. His back toward Buck.
“I accept the consequences, whatever you decide.”

Chris whirled on his heel and faced his old friend, the moon lighting up his face like a specter of retribution. “That’s mighty responsible of ya, Buck,” he spat sarcastically. “Maybe you shoulda fuckin’ thought of that and reined the team in before everything went to hell.” Chris actually flinched at his own words.

They stared at each other for a long moment.

Buck found a way around the lump in his throat. “Well, this time, I am thinking straight,” he said, forcing his voice to be steady. “And I don’t have to take the team down with me. I can resign.”

Chris’s face twisted and his eyes narrowed. He struggled to find a reply. It was not what Buck expected.

Chris’s hand shot out so quickly that Buck didn’t even see it until his collar was clenched in Chris’s fist. “So now you’re going to give up on me?” Chris seethed.

Buck stared. Confused.

Both hands were now in his collar. Chris yanked him close enough that Buck could smell the whiskey on his breath. He couldn’t tear his gaze from the green eyes that seemed to bore through to the back of his skull. “Listen up,” Chris breathed. “And listen good. I’m in charge of this god damn team. You try to resign and I’ll rip your god damn head off. You got me?”

Off balance, the world starting to spin as the blood rushed suddenly to his head, Buck only nodded.

The hands twisted a little tighter, and Buck wondered if they would cut off his air supply soon. “Good,” Chris said. His voice got quiet, deadly. “You’re not going down for this, you hear? You’re too fucking good an agent to lose this way. You already fucked up once. You had your chance to save the team. You try some self-sacrifice bullshit to save the rest of them, I swear to God I will come after you. Whatever happens now, you follow my lead.”

Buck nodded again. His mouth was dry. He struggled to understand. Didn’t like the way it added up.

As the fingers loosened from his collar, he pulled the material away from his throat. “Chris, I don’t know what you’re planning, but I can’t let you…”

He had spoken way too soon, he realized, with only faint surprise, as with astounding speed, given his condition, Chris pulled the taller agent’s feet out from underneath him and slammed him down against the deck planks. Buck found himself looking up past the knee that was planted in his chest. Pinned. Literally this time.

“You’ll do what I fucking order you to do,” Chris snapped.

Buck realized there was no ultimatum, no threat, no alternative consequence. It was simply an order.

“Yes, sir,” he answered, the response coming unbidden, automatically, from some long buried military training. And even as he said it, he felt the power, the consequences, the control rush out of his hands. As simple as that. All his decisions were made. Guilt and relief suddenly threatened to overwhelm him.

Chris stared at Buck searchingly until he saw it. The change in expression. The retreat. The submission. The promise. He waited a moment more for the resolve to solidify. For Buck to realize
this was the way it was going to be. And when he was certain of it, he removed his knee and stood up.

They stayed that way for another moment, Chris standing over him, until Buck found his limbs again, and rolled himself up to a sitting position. Chris moved just far enough to let him up.

On the heels of his warring guilt and relief, the fear suddenly gripped Buck that he may have sacrificed something else to his desire for vengeance, something worth far more to him than his career would ever be. He looked up at his old friend, his boss. He wanted to make a joke. Wanted to say something that would let him know if they were okay. But it was too early. The alpha wolf had put him in his place. His job now was to go off and lick his wounds. He would find out later how his place in the pack had altered.

Chris turned away. And Buck went inside.

After the glass door slid closed, Chris forced himself off the deck and out into the shadows. Cold inside. His fury subsided, dimmed. Replaced by a grinding in the pit of his stomach, a familiar feeling singularly connected to a dozen confrontations with Buck since Sarah and Adam. He cursed violently. Realizing he might just have blown it forever. God damn idiot, he thought bitterly. After everything. After all the shit I’ve pulled… You ought to know better by now, Buck. You should have cut loose when you had the chance.

* * *

Buck answered the door when the bell rang. Nathan was on the front porch. With Raine.

“Nathan,” Buck said quickly, turning hurriedly back into the kitchen where he had been sweeping up broken glass.

Nathan exchanged a puzzled, worried look with Raine. She hung up her jacket, while Nathan followed Buck into the kitchen.

Buck turned away from him, busying himself with a little hand broom and dustpan from under the sink.

“You okay?” Nathan asked finally. “You look a little pale.”

“Fine,” Buck said flatly, emptying the dustpan into the garbage. He walked to the living room where he had set his duffel bag. “Chris is outside. Should be coming in any minute.”

Nathan shot another puzzled look at Raine. They could see that everything was not all right. He left her standing perplexed by the door, and followed his teammate into the living room.

He paused in the doorway. Buck stood in front of his bags, his back to the hallway and the kitchen doorway. His hands were on his hips, but his head was thrown back to the ceiling. He stayed that way for a long moment. Like he was trying to collect himself.

Nathan frowned worriedly. “Can I help?” he asked finally.

A bitter laugh was the reply. Then Buck’s tone softened. “No,” he said finally. “Thanks for asking.”

He picked up his bags and took a deep breath. His voice and his expression were perfectly neutral, normal, conversational as he updated Nathan on meds and meals.

“He’s probably gonna ask you about what we did in Texas,” Buck said before he slipped out the
door. “Just tell him the truth. The more he knows now, the easier it’ll go when it’s official.”

Nathan nearly swore before he remembered Raine was standing in the hall, too. She had already given him an earful about their “activities” in Texas. He could tell by the grim set of her mouth that she was trying hard to hold back another earful. Perhaps he had been wrong to bring her along tonight. He had merely thought that Chris would enjoy the change in company.

Before Nathan could finish his train of thought, Buck had gone. The door to his truck slammed and he pulled out of the driveway.

In the living room, the sliding glass door slid quietly open and then shut. Chris stood leaning back against the glass. He looked pale. Pinched. The tops of his cheekbones tinged with an unnatural pink.

Raine looked from Chris to the driveway and back. Then she glared hotly at Nathan. “This is what comes of revenge,” she said, so quietly only Nathan heard.

He flushed.

She pushed past him and stood in the doorway between the kitchen and the living room. She cocked her head to one side and gave Chris a look that Nathan had been missing for the better part of a week now. And when the team leader looked back up at her, for just a moment, Nathan saw it. Raw. Open. Bleak. Then Chris caught a glimpse of Nathan and his expression closed down.

The blond pushed away from the door, running a hand back through his hair. Then he let it fall forward into his face anyway, as he moved toward the stairs. Nathan’s practiced eye noticed the team leader was moving slowly. He could tell by Raine’s appraising glance that she saw it, too.

“Chris,” Raine said, reaching out to touch his arm as he passed her. He stopped. But didn’t lift his head. He pulled his arm away but gently. Then lifted his head to meet her eyes.

“It’s not a good time to talk, Raine,” he said quietly.

“Let’s not talk, then,” she said with a shrug. “Are you headed upstairs?”


Raine smiled. She leaned forward and nearly whispered. “When I’m good and mad, I take a nice hot bath before I go to bed.” She grinned. “I tell you it’s saved Nathan’s life more than once.”

Chris shot her a look that would have made her laugh if he hadn’t looked so lost. Nathan rolled his eyes and turned back into the kitchen.

Raine did laugh then. The laugh that sounded like silver bells to Nathan. That seemed to have wings. The one that eased his burdens from his shoulders at the end of the day. He looked for something in the kitchen to occupy his mind and noticed the sticky splat mark on the wall above the sink. There was glass in the sink, too. He touched the mark and smelled his fingers. Whiskey. He scowled.

He heard Chris and Raine go up the stairs. Anger boiled up inside him. He was surprised at its vehemence. Surprised to find it tinged with jealousy. Then again, why should he be surprised? He had hardly heard a civil word from Raine all week, let alone a kind one. There had been precious little laughter. He had brought her here hoping to cheer Chris up a bit. Now he realized what he really wanted was for her to cheer him up. Him. Her fiancé. But she was mad at him. She wasn’t mad at Chris.
Well she should be, he thought angrily. Neither he nor Buck had any business drinking. Both were supposed to be taking painkillers. No doubt they weren’t. Chris was supposed to be on antibiotics. He damn well better be taking those, Nathan thought as his scowl deepened.

He slammed a cupboard door looking for a glass as he heard the water running upstairs. God damn stubborn fools. Hope they beat some sense into each other. Wondered if, in fact, that was what had happened. He should have known better than to leave those two alone. He swore.

Then he realized she was standing in the doorway.

His face turned red.

Her head was cocked to the side, and she was looking at him with a sympathy that put a lump in his throat. He stiffened. It wasn’t sympathy he wanted. She dissolved the lump and his resistance by simply opening her arms and stepping forward, sliding them around his waist. He buried his face in her sweet-smelling hair. They stood that way for a long time.

“I love you,” she said finally. “I’m mad at you, but I love you.”

He nodded his head against her hair. “I know,” he said. “I’m sorry.” Sorry about so many things. So many things I can’t seem to fix.

She ran one hand up his back to his neck, gently stroking the tense, knotted muscles there.

“I know you are,” she said finally, pushing back to look him in the eye. She smiled sadly.

Nathan breathed in a shuddering breath.

“He’s going to be okay,” she said after a moment, squeezing his arms. She did not offer false hope. She was a doctor and, at Vin’s request as next of kin, she had reviewed the reports from Texas. Yes, Chris had left the hospital too soon, but he was doing just fine.

“I know,” Nathan said, pulling away from her, becoming the cool ATF agent again, the medic, so collected, so in control.

She sighed, feeling her anger begin to return. Wondered that he thought he could still hide from her. When she had heard his heart break over the phone, when he called her from the airport in Texas to tell her they were coming home—without Chris. When she had held him that night. And all the nights he had spent checking on the others, his friends, his crazy chosen family. And kept the faith while he went off to some secret mission in Texas. As if she wouldn’t figure it out. Revenge has a price, she knew. A price exacted on the one who took it. Nathan was figuring that out.

She resigned herself to it. They were not at home tonight. She would not argue with him in another man’s house. They poured two ice teas, and sat down in the living room to watch TV, each one keeping a trained ear out for sounds from upstairs.

* * *

It was the steady throbbing in his temples that told him that he had overdone it yesterday. Or maybe the day before. Or more than likely both days. Even the sensory deprivation of the pillow over his head did little to still it. He gritted his teeth and took a deep breath, feeling sore down to his toenails. Memory of the previous night returned along with a wave of accompanying anger. He yanked the pillow off his head, feeling the light lance through his eyelids like white hot needles. He jerked himself up to a sitting position and let the pain flood through him. Glad of it. Happy to be distracted from the memory of his “conversation” with Buck. He swore silently and repeatedly, then stood up.
The room spun. He grabbed the bedpost. Felt his stomach lurch and willed the nausea away. He stayed that way until his eyes got used to the daylight and he felt steady again.

He brushed his teeth, washed the sweat off his face, dressed, and headed downstairs to find Nathan and Raine in the kitchen talking quietly. They both looked up at his appearance in the doorway and he knew he was being evaluated. He grimaced and muttered out a greeting as he turned away on the pretense of looking in the refrigerator, although he was quite certain he could not stomach anything yet. No one asked him how he was feeling, he noted sardonically. No doubt the answer to that question was written all over his face.

When Chris’s back was turned, Nathan and Raine exchanged a pointed glance. Nathan rolled his eyes and squeezed her hand, letting her know he’d handle it.

Nathan pushed back from the table and wandered to the refrigerator, leaning on the door. Chris scowled at him. Nathan reached for the coffee pot and held it in front of Chris.

“Coffee?” he asked.

Chris took the pot by the handle with a grunt of thanks. He flipped a cup over out of the dish drainer and filled it.

Nathan narrowed his eyes. “How much whiskey did you drink last night?” the medic asked, anger just under the surface of his tone.

Chris would have laughed if he weren’t afraid of the nausea he was currently holding at bay. “Not nearly enough,” he replied, his voice scratchy.

Nathan drew in a breath. About to launch into a lecture on the dangers of mixing alcohol and medications, when he caught the shake of Raine’s head. He stopped. Surprised. Nevertheless, he closed his mouth again.

She patted the chair beside her. “Come sit down,” she said cheerfully, finishing her piece of toast.

Nathan nearly laughed as his boss regarded his fiancée with suspicion.

“I’m not going to ask you any questions,” Raine said, a hint of iron in her voice. “I just don’t want to see you keel over on the floor.”

Chris narrowed his eyes, but a smirk turned up one corner of his mouth. He carried his coffee cup to the table and slid into a chair.

She regarded him with a sardonic smile. “I’d ask you if you wanted to take something for the pain, but I know you won’t.”

Nathan turned away to hide his own smile. People loved Raine for her sweet kindness, but only a precious few knew just how tough she was.

Chris watched Nathan turn away. Then while his formidable medic’s back was turned, the team leader grinned his best smart-ass grin back at Raine.

She narrowed her eyes back at him and shook her head. “Boy,” she said, her voice betraying the barest hint of her mother’s southern style. “You’d best not be thinking those words I think you’re thinking ‘cause I think my baby sister could take you out right now.”

The smart-ass grin sparked up into both of the blond’s green eyes. Try and stop me, he seemed to be
saying.

She turned back to her own coffee, struggling to keep off the smile that threatened to crack her stern face.

He bent his head down, curling both hands around the cup, but the cup stayed on the table.

She resisted the urge to put her hand against his forehead. Instead she looked at her watch.

“I’m going in to the hospital today,” she said, directing her words to Chris. “Since you’re awake, do you want to ride in with me or with Nathan?”

A shadow of annoyance crossed his face. His follow up visit. Scheduled in collusion with Dr. Kahar. The annoyance was suddenly replaced by something that looked suspiciously to Nathan like an idea. Then it was gone, disappeared behind the team leader’s habitual poker face. Nathan glanced at Raine. She hadn’t seemed to notice.

“I’ll go with you,” Chris replied to Raine, taking a sip of his coffee, letting the bitter liquid calm his queasy stomach. He flicked a look back at Nathan. “I’m sure Nate will appreciate the break.”

Nathan snorted. You’re just trying to ditch me, Larabee, he thought sending a dirty look at the back of Chris’s head, and knowing Chris knew exactly what he was thinking and didn’t bother to deny it.

Raine glanced up at Nathan as Chris took another sip of the coffee, assuring him with a glance that she would get him to the hospital for his follow up visit and see him safely deposited with the doctor.

We’ll see, Nathan thought sourly. She didn’t know how slippery the boys of Team Seven could be—partly because around Raine, they tended to mind their manners. Perhaps the trend would continue. He could hope.

“All right, then,” he said as agreeably as he could manage. “I’ll run a few errands and I’ll pick you up at the hospital.”

He waited for Chris to give some sign that he had heard. It came in the form of a head nod. That was about all the acknowledgement he could expect.

For a moment, he considered bribing his leader into behaving. That’s what Buck would do, he reasoned. Then again, Buck could get away with it.

His forced smile faded as he thought back to last night. Evidently there were some things that even Buck couldn’t get away with.

He pushed the thought from his mind and emptied his coffee cup into the sink. “You two had better get going,” he said glancing at the microwave clock.

Raine followed his gaze and handed him her empty cup. She kissed Nathan once on the way to get her purse and once again on her way back. She waited by the front door.

Chris knew she was waiting for him. He got up slowly. His head was still pounding, but his stomach was steadier.

Raine handed Chris the keys and he headed out to her car without comment.

“I want to know what the doctor says,” Nathan said.

Raine frowned at him. “You know I can’t tell you that. Even if his doctor did tell me.”
“Whose side are you on?” Nathan retorted grumpily.

She resisted the urge to make a dig about knowing where her ethical boundaries were. Instead she kissed him again and gave him an estimate of what time she thought Chris would be finished.

She didn’t miss the worried look Nathan shot at his boss, as they watched him climb slowly into the passenger seat. Or the odd way Nathan glowered at the stacked bales of straw by the woodpile. She didn’t spend any time wondering about that, though. Instead she turned her car up the driveway, pulled onto the road, turned her favorite jazz station on low and left Chris to his poker-faced silence.

* * *

He waited in one of those uncomfortable plastic waiting room chairs, thumbing idly through a news magazine, aware that his left knee was jiggling up and down. He saw the feet stop in front of his chair and sighed as he recognized the battered cowboy boots.

He said nothing.

The cowboy boots walked two steps to the right, and their owner slid into a neighboring chair.

“Well good morning to you, too,” the Texas drawl said cheerfully.

Still no response.

“I’m feeling just fine this morning. Little tired from my workout and my barn chores, now that you mention it, but generally good. Thanks for asking,” Tanner continued.

Still silence. He waited for a response.

Chris looked up at him with a smirk. “I’d’ve said hello, but I didn’t want to interrupt your conversation.”

“Shut up,” Vin said.

Chris laughed and turned back to the magazine that he was barely even pretending to read.

Vin took advantage of the moment to check his friend over. Chris hadn’t let on, but based on the slight squint and the crooked posture, Vin was willing to bet that the blond was in some pain this morning.

“Ain’t ya gonna ask why I’m here?” Vin asked.


Vin grinned.

“You all trust me so much, you send my next of kin along to find out what the doctor says,” Chris said matter of factly.

“Only ‘cause we care, Chris,” Vin replied calmly, picking up a car magazine.

*It’s that caring that’ll get you in trouble, cowboy,* Chris thought silently.

When they finally did call his name, Chris followed the nurse to a room down the corridor. Vin strolled to the nearby desk, identified himself as family, and asked to be called when the exam was over. He wanted to be there when they discussed follow up treatments.
Forty-five minutes later, Vin arrived at the indicated room, to see Chris pulling on his flannel shirt. He caught a quick glimpse of the discolorations along his side and the puckered circle of the healing bullet wound.

The doctor glanced up as Tanner came in.

“Mr. Tanner,” she said, with a smile. “Glad you could join us. Have a seat.”

He grinned back, pleased to see that they had given Chris to someone who had dealt with the team before.

“As I was about to say,” the doctor continued. “Things are healing surprisingly nicely. The infections are clearing up. Your ribs are mending. Your lung sounds good. You’ll have a few scars you can talk about, but no permanent effects. We could start a short regimen of physical therapy for your arm, or I can give you a set of exercises to do on your own.” She eyed her patient seriously. “You’re a lucky man,” she said. “According to Doctor Kahar, he would have liked to have kept you a few more days. There could have been some serious complications.”

“But there haven’t been,” Chris replied evenly.

“No,” she agreed reluctantly. “There haven’t.”

He looked her straight in the eye. “I want to know what I can do to start getting back into condition.”

She exhaled. “Mr. Larabee…”

“Agent Larabee,” he reminded her.

She met the stubborn green-eyed gaze and knew if she didn’t prescribe some kind of plan, he would make up his own. And according to what little she had gotten out of him in answer to her questions, he had probably started overdoing it already.

“Why don’t you start with walking to the end of your driveway and back,” she said.

He grinned.

She couldn’t help but smile. “You’ve started that already, haven’t you?”

He admitted nothing, but the grin widened.

“Bet your driveway’s a half a mile long, too,” she said ruefully.

“Just seems like it,” Chris replied, meeting her halfway.

She shook her head. “All right,” she agreed. “I’ll give you some exercises to get your lungs back in shape. Follow the plan carefully. Don’t overdo it, and come back in if you feel any of the symptoms listed on the card I’m going to give you. Don’t expect this to happen overnight. You can expect to be on light desk duties for quite a while.”

He nodded. Giving every impression that he intended to obey her rules.

“I also want you to gain back that weight that you lost,” she said seriously. “You won’t be able to get back into proper physical condition unless you put it back on.”

She wrote some notes down in his file. Then she told him to wait until she came back with a printed list of exercise instructions and a card listing various signs and symptoms to watch out for. She
handed both to him with the admonition to obey the instructions and to put the card somewhere where he could find it easily.

Her gaze encompassed both Vin and Chris, as she asked them if they had any more questions.

Both men shook their heads. She wrote out another prescription to extend his antibiotics and his painkillers—the ones Chris neglected to mention that he wasn’t taking—and sent them on their way.

“You overdo it, Cowboy?” Vin asked, as they meandered slowly into the waiting room.

“Got a lot farther to go, Pard,” Chris countered.

“It’ll come, Chris. You just gotta give it time,” the sharpshooter returned.

Chris’s mouth tightened grimly. Time. Another unknown variable to solve for. How much time would they give him to do his inquiry? How much time before they demanded the results? How many hours could he manage to pull off in a day? How many hours till Travis threw him out? Worse yet, what if he needed to lead a raid? Or operate undercover? To cover for one or more agents who might be absent for numerous unpleasant or perhaps even permanent reasons. His head began to pound again. And for the second time today, he was grateful for the distraction.

He was aware that Vin was staring at him. So he lifted his head, forced his hands to look casual jammed inside his pockets and assumed his characteristic lazy-looking walk to the elevators. Pleasantly surprised to notice that his feet hardly hurt at all anymore.

It was a ruse, and Vin knew it. But it didn’t mean he didn’t appreciate the attempt. It was somehow reassuring to see Chris walk like Chris again.

Nathan was already waiting with the car by the time they got the prescription filled. Vin waved as they drove off. Then he hopped onto his Harley and headed out to Josiah’s. The big profiler had promised some physical therapy of his own in the form of renovating the living room, which had apparently suffered some sort of retribution at the hands of the former preacher. Vin had readily agreed to the prospect of some hard work. He had already taken care of the horses at the ranch at least until the evening. The rest of the day stretched long before him. And if he didn’t find something to do besides worry about Chris and bang on Ezra’s door, he thought he might go out of his head.

* * *

Chris waited only until they got in his front door before he told Nathan they needed to talk.

Nathan sighed. “I know,” he said grimly, following Chris into the kitchen. “Buck said you’d be after some information about what happened after…” The words stuck suddenly. He stopped.

Chris ignored the words left unsaid. He replied, “I assume Buck told you that it would be best if you told me everything now. I don’t want any surprises when I conduct the inquiry.”

Nathan looked up at him, conflicting expressions crossing his face. Indignation won out. “I’ve never lied to you,” he said coldly, searching his leader’s face. “Nor would I hide important information. If you don’t know that, then…”

“That’s not what I meant,” Chris cut him off.

“Then what did you mean?” Nathan demanded.

Chris sighed. He pulled out a kitchen chair and sat down, hoping that if he put himself on a lower
level than Nathan that it might defuse the confrontation. “It just seems that the members of this team have decided that now it’s time to protect each other. No matter the cost.”

“Wonder where they get that from,” Nathan retorted sarcastically.

“Well it would have been better to think about that back when I was dead, wouldn’t it?” Chris snapped back.

Nathan stared at him. His jaw snapped shut and he sat down hard in a neighboring chair.

Chris closed his eyes, one hand moving unconsciously to rub his forehead. This was not going well. When he opened his eyes again, Nathan was staring at the wall. Silence reigned for several seconds.

“If I didn’t think you’d tell me the truth, I wouldn’t bother asking,” Chris said quietly.

A tiny sad smile lifted the corners of Nathan’s mouth. “If I didn’t think you’d believe me, I wouldn’t be working for you,” he replied.

“Fair enough,” Chris said, a flicker of a smile crossing his lips.

He waited a moment. But Nathan didn’t speak.

“I need to know what happened down in Texas,” Chris urged gently.

Nathan’s sad smile turned down at the corners. He exhaled, trying to keep his voice even. “What happened in Texas, Chris, is that we lost a good friend, a teammate, and a leader. And after that we went a little bit crazy.”

Chris sighed.

Nathan looked at him out of the corner of his eye. “I suppose you want specifics.”

“It would help.”

Nathan leaned back in his chair and fixed his gaze on the opposite wall. “I guess it started when they handed us the envelope,” he said slowly.

Chris leaned back in his chair. It took him a minute to figure out what envelope Nathan was talking about. Then it hit him. His badge and his gun.

Nathan went on, his voice far away, tinged with sorrow. “It just seemed so damn little. Senseless, pointless, stupid. And then coming home empty handed.” He paused and shook his head, his lips pulling into a thin, hard line. “I guess we wanted to somehow make it balance. Give it meaning. Next thing we knew we were plotting out a mission.”

He shrugged self-consciously. “Didn’t get to thinking about right and wrong until I was up a telephone pole waiting for the signal to cut the wire. Guess that’s when I finally had space in my head to think.”

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Chris stand up. Turn away.

He waited for whatever came next.

Chris moved away toward the sink. “Jesus, Nathan,” he said finally, turning to face the medic. He stopped. “So when did it dawn on the rest of the team that they might have crossed a line?”
Nathan laughed a short, sharp bitter laugh. “You’ll have to ask them, but I think Vin mentioned that it was while he was up a tree sighting down his rifle at a little old man that Buck and I were strong arming information out of.”

Chris swore and jerked around to face the wall. Thoughts crashing together. He fought to untangle them.

Nathan looked down at the tile floor. He lifted his head again to see Chris staring at him, so intensely that Nathan looked away again. Chris returned to the chair beside him. Nathan could feel the stare. Knew Chris was waiting. He didn’t want to look up, but he couldn’t help himself.

Chris pinned him with the gaze. “This isn’t worth your career,” he said, the words shooting right through Nathan all the more sharply because the voice was so soft. “It sure as hell wasn’t worth your life. Or anyone else’s.”

Nathan jerked. He felt the heat rise in his face. “Easy enough for you to say. You weren’t there,” he snapped. His anger carried him to his feet. “You didn’t have to throw Vin down on the blacktop and hold him there while the building burned.”

“You didn’t have to pin J.D. back against the van. You didn’t have to run around to everyone’s house at all hours of the day and night to see if they were all right. Or watch Ezra shut us out and Vin clam up completely.” He barely paused for breath, as his voice got louder. “You didn’t have to be the voice of reason when all you really wanted to do was walk into that god damn warehouse, grab those motherfuckers by the throat and make them give you your goddamn team leader back,” he shouted, the last words echoing in the tiled kitchen.

They stared at each other.

Nathan closed his eyes and took a long shuddering breath.

Chris dropped his head. His shoulders sagged.

“I’m sorry.”

The words were so quiet, Nathan almost didn’t hear them.

Nathan fell back into his chair, breathing heavily. The seconds filled with silence and the sound of Nathan getting himself together. “I guess that was a little harsh,” the medic said hesitantly, when his breathing was normal again.

A short, sharp laugh broke from the blond. “You said I could trust you to tell me the truth.”

“Can’t seem to help myself,” Nathan replied ruefully, his voice laced with regret.

Chris looked up. A depth of pain, of guilt, whirled in his green eyes. Nathan couldn’t recall ever seeing them so unguarded before. He put a hand on Chris’s knee. “Sorry you asked yet?” Nathan asked only half-joking.

“Oh yeah,” the team leader answered with a slight growl, as the pain gave way for a patent Chris Larabee sardonic gleam. The guilt remained. “Sorry I didn’t ask you before I lit into Buck.”

Nathan gave the knee a gentle pat. He didn’t ask what had happened last night. He simply told the truth. “Losing you all but killed him.”
Chris shook his head, refusing to believe it. “Buck’s a lot tougher than that,” he replied. *Tougher than me, anyway.* “He might be sorry, but he’d get over it all right.”

One side of Nathan’s mouth tilted up sadly, but he didn’t reply. He only thought the words he had already said. *You weren’t there, Chris. You wouldn’t know.*

* * *

They circled each other uncomfortably for the rest of the evening, after Nathan had given the few details that Buck had left out. Not that there was much awkward conversation. Chris had spent a good couple of hours on the deck staring out at the pasture beyond his house, lost in some train of thought. Nathan had the good sense not to attempt to pry it out of him.

After spilling his guts so easily in the kitchen, Nathan didn’t feel like exposing any more raw nerves tonight—his or anyone else’s. So he kept it light. Held his tongue. He knew Chris had been overdoing it. A quick look at the straw bales stacked outside told him that, at the very least, target practice had already begun. A word with Vin at the barn after dinner told him that it was progressing quite quickly, too. When he returned to the house, Chris was back on the deck, huddled in a blanket, staring toward the sunset, but not seeing it. Nathan perused the list of exercises the doctor gave Chris. He read the list of symptoms to watch out for. And at the appointed time, he handed Chris his meds, but this time, he didn’t hang around waiting to see if Chris took them.

Lost in thought, Chris barely registered that Nathan had come out and gone back inside. It was another 20 minutes before he remembered to swallow the pills, their colored coatings grown sticky in his palm. The sun disappeared. The stars came out along with the crickets, the fireflies, and the mosquitoes. He stayed until the damp chill started to seep right through him. He was stiff when he got up.

When he slipped back in through the glass doors, he was surprised to find Josiah sprawled across his sofa. He was reading.

Over the top of his book, the profiler watched Chris glance around the first floor of the house.

“Nathan headed home,” Josiah said finally in answer to the unasked question.

Chris frowned again, trying to assess Nathan’s state of mind from Josiah’s tone of voice. He could not. “How was he?” Chris inquired, hiding his annoyance at being forced to ask.

Josiah shrugged. “Status quo, I think,” he replied.

“Doesn’t tell me much,” Chris retorted, aggravation leaking into his tone.

“I told you,” Josiah said calmly, returning to his book. “These things take time.”

Chris glowered at him. “That’s what I keep hearing,” he said darkly. “Maybe I should try that on the brass?”

Josiah shrugged. But refused to be goaded into an argument. Nathan had filled him in, and he was not surprised to discover that Chris had ricocheted straight from guilt back to anger. He only hoped the team leader did not want to start asking questions while he was still angry. The profiler knew already that none of the answers would please the younger man.

The TV went on. A moment later, Chris emerged from the kitchen with a bag of chips and a glass of soda. He slid into his recliner and under the blanket.
Josiah smiled to himself, chiding himself gently for not giving Chris enough credit. The team leader knew better than to try to conduct an inquiry while he was angry. Plus, by now he must have some inkling of the roles that each team member played in their unsanctioned mission. The one Josiah had christened Divine Retribution before he got Ezra outfitted as a priest and sent him to take a gangster’s confession. In the last week Josiah had considered his transgressions quite closely. And discovered he was a lot less upset about breaking man’s laws than about violating the sacred trust he had shouldered as a priest. Just because one is no longer a priest does not mean one should disregard what one knows.

He eyed Chris over top of the book and wondered how Chris would react if he told him that. Yes, I’m aware of the legal ramifications of my own actions and that of the team. No, I don’t regret it. Not that part of it, anyway.

“You gonna eat all those chips yourself?” Josiah asked.

Chris folded up the top of the bag and tossed them at the profiler, without so much as turning his head. The bag hit Josiah squarely in the chest.

“Thanks,” the profiler replied.

He received only a muffled grunt in return.

Josiah had always been conscious of his limitations. As a teenager, he had freely admitted that he was a terrible babysitter. He realized that had not changed, as he was jolted from his reading by a clock striking eleven. He snapped the book closed, feeling an unaccountable relief flood through him when he realized Chris was still in his recliner. A documentary was droning on the TV, but Chris was no longer watching. He was fast asleep.

Josiah smiled gently, rising to pull the remote control from the limp fingers. He turned down the volume. And stood looking down at his team leader, watching him breathe, wondering whether he should wake him up and send him to bed or just leave him. He knew what Nathan would say. But no one knew like Josiah did, how comfortable a man’s favorite chair could be.

* * *

Josiah bolted from the guest room shower at the sound of gunshots. He was all the way to the door, when he remembered the target practice. Muttering, he yanked his towel from the rack, wrapped it haphazardly around his hips and tracked wet footprints up the hardwood hall to the guest room window. Below, he could see the thin figure of Chris Larabee, dressed in sweats, lining up a series of shots into the silhouette pattern of a man. He watched as Chris moved backward a distance, set himself, and fired a tight pattern into the black shadow head. Then another tight pattern into the center of the chest. Chris activated the safety on his gun, and placed it back in the holster. Josiah released the breath he didn’t know he’d been holding.

Chris pulled the paper off the bales and examined it closely.

Well, hell, He grinned to himself. I ain’t no Vin Tanner, but that’s more than good enough to get me requalled.

His eyes traveled up the driveway to the road beyond. “Now for the conditioning.,” he said aloud with a wide, devilish smile and a glance back toward the house. He just hoped he could get his guns stowed away and his CD player on before Josiah made it downstairs.

Josiah intercepted Chris coming back from the den. “Going somewhere, Brother?” he asked
suspiciously.

He got a wide smart-ass grin in return, as Chris beheld the big profiler, still wet, and looking like he had crawled into his clothes in the dark. Trying to stare him down. “Mornin’, Josiah,” Chris said as if nothing were out of place.

Josiah narrowed his eyes, taking in the sweatshirt, the long shorts, and the well broken-in running shoes.

Chris laughed. The sound split the hallway silence and nearly made Josiah grin. He would have if he hadn’t been so determined to try to redeem his reputation as a babysitter.

Chris cocked his head over to one side, smirking, and eyeing the disheveled profiler from head to toe. “Thought I’d take a stroll,” he said casually. “Long as you’re dressed, you might as well come along.”

Josiah looked at him suspiciously. “Are you allowed to take this ‘stroll’?” he asked.

Chris held up a piece of paper that Josiah had seen on the fridge last night. “Doctor approved,” Chris replied, the smirk growing wider.

Josiah plucked the paper from his fingertips and scanned it. He looked back at Chris. “Long as you’re inviting me, I imagine I’ll go.” He pinned Chris with a blue-eyed warning glance. “To make sure you stick to the rules.”

Chris laughed. Josiah wasn’t sure whether that was good or bad, but he pulled on his battered sneakers and followed his team leader out the front door, suddenly aware that he was still wet, wearing whatever clothes he had found first, and had yet to have his first cup of coffee.

The workout left Chris gasping. Squatting down into a calf stretch, sweat running down both sides of his face in rivers, he fought to catch his breath.

Josiah forced himself to stand still. To not help. Just glad that it was over. All told, he was not sure whether he was more shocked at how much Chris was able to do in comparison to last week or at how little he could do in comparison to the athlete Josiah knew him to be.

Chris looked up at the profiler with a wry grin. “Pathetic wasn’t it?” he panted.

Josiah opened his mouth but Chris cut him off. “You say ‘it takes time,’ Preacher man,” he said between gulps of air. “An’ I’ll show you I ain’t too tired to deck you.”

Josiah grinned back at him. Chris might just have one good enough punch left in him. “Actually,” Josiah said, “I was going to suggest we have some breakfast.”

Chris pushed himself back up to his feet and wiped his face on his sleeve. He nodded. “Now you’re thinking.”

Josiah clapped a hand on the younger man’s shoulder and pushed him toward the house.

* * *

They pushed the breakfast dishes aside and regarded each other for a moment.

“Is it time?” Josiah asked, reluctant to let go of the moment of calm and good cheer.

Chris winced. “I gotta know, Josiah,” he said.
Josiah nodded. “I know Brother,” he said. “No surprises.”

Chris nearly smiled at that. Clearly they had been spreading the word. At least he knew his team was still talking to each other. And, to Chris’s immense relief, they had apparently decided that he was not the enemy.

Josiah’s telling didn’t take long, and most of the important parts Chris had already heard. When the profiler had finished speaking, Chris leaned back in his chair and regarded him thoughtfully.

“You really outfitted Ezra as a priest and sent him out to hear Bautiste’s confession?” he asked with something like disbelief. For a moment Josiah was reminded of J.D.

“Taught him everything he knows,” Josiah replied.

Chris’s lips turned up. “Proud of that?” he asked wryly.

Josiah shrugged. “Not proud exactly, but I do good work.”

At that the team leader actually did laugh. “You up to hearing a confession?” Chris asked suddenly, leaning forward across the table.

Josiah looked at him seriously. “All right, but I can no longer grant absolution.”

That patent Chris Larabee smile stretched across his too-thin face. “I think I’m way past absolution,” Chris said lightly. He dropped his voice to a more conspiratorial tone and grinned as he said, “Wish I’d seen Ezra as a priest.”

Josiah burst out laughing. “That can probably be arranged,” he replied. “J.D. had the house security cameras looped, but he had a spy program that sent images back to his laptop. You can probably print an image from there.”

A shadow suddenly crossed Chris’s face. God damn it! They took pictures, Larabee thought, forgetting all about Josiah, wondering if J.D. had had enough sense to destroy the evidence.

Josiah looked at him curiously. “Anything else you want to know?” he asked looking at his leader intently.

Chris returned the gaze, considering. “I think that’s it for now,” he said tightly.

Josiah nodded, rose from the table and began collecting the breakfast dishes.

From the corner of his eye, he could see that Chris was thinking. Thinking hard. Much like Nathan had reported last night when Josiah arrived. He wondered if anyone had a clue, which way Chris was planning to jump on this one.

“This could get ugly, brother,” Josiah said quietly.

Chris looked up at him, his expression closed. “Already is, brother,” he returned, a ghost of that cold, cocky Larabee smile resting on his lips.

“You got a plan?” Josiah asked.

The smile grew wider and colder. “Workin’ on one.”

Josiah narrowed his eyes. “Plannin’ on sharin’ it?” he asked.
“Nope,” Chris replied, rising from the table and moving toward the door. Slower now, Josiah noted, watching him mount the steps and disappear onto the second floor landing.

The ex-preacher sighed and returned to the dishes.

When he had cleaned up everything in sight, he wandered into the living room and returned to his book, listening with one ear to the shower running upstairs.

* * *

The phone on the other end rang three times before the stilted emotionless electronic voice came on again. Ezra didn’t know why he should be surprised. It was the fourth time he had called in fifteen minutes. What else could he expect?

He hung up the phone again, leaving no message. He stared at the piece of paper in his hand, crumpling it in frustration. After all, how could he even know the number was still good? His arm was in mid arc to toss it into the kitchen garbage when he stopped himself.

_You always know where you can find me_, it assured. He had kept it since he was 11 years old. He could hold onto it until he knew for sure. He waited five minutes and tried again.

He was about to hang up when a breathless voice answered on the fourth ring.

“Hello,” said the woman’s voice cheerfully, and even in that one word, Ezra could hear a sweet southern accent that made him feel homesick for the scent of magnolias lingering heavy in the air and Spanish Moss drooping from the limbs of ancient oaks.

He cleared his throat, which was suddenly dry. “Good afternoon. My name is Ezra Standish. I was hoping to speak to John Thorpe.”

“How did you get this number?” the woman asked, her polite curiosity a thin veneer over her suspicion.

“It’s not a sales call,” Ezra said hurriedly. “I knew Mr. Thorpe a rather long time ago.”

“What did you say your name was?” she asked, still wary but less suspicious.

“Standish,” Ezra replied. “Ezra Standish.” He paused, not knowing if it would help his case or not, he added, “Maude’s son.”

There was a brief silence before the voice drawled out, kindly this time. “Just hold on a moment and I’ll fetch him.”

Ezra nearly sagged with relief. He found a chair and sat down. He waited while the seconds stretched out.

He had almost made up his mind that the phone call was a stupid idea and that he should hang up, when a mellow southern baritone voice came on the line.

“Ezra?” the voice asked. “Is it really you?”

He paused. Awkward. Realized he should have hung up when he had the chance. But he sucked up his courage and continued onward. “It is, indeed,” he replied with forced cheerfulness.

There was a soft laugh on the other end. “Well, I’ll be,” the voice said with a genuine warmth that surprised and humbled the jaded undercover agent. “Tell me about yourself, boy,” the voice said
suddenly. “Where are you? What are you doing?”

The voice paused as if an idea had come upon it, changed tone. “How are you?” it asked.

Several hundred miles away, Ezra heard the concern in the tone and wondered how it could be that a man he had not seen since he was eleven, with whom he had lived for less than a year, who was no real relation, and who owed him nothing, could have known so quickly the reason for his call. *Am I that transparent?* he mused. *Some undercover agent I am.*

He tried to sound nonchalant. Tried to find his smooth banter. But he couldn’t. Not in the face of that voice. “Well,” he hesitated, his throat tightening suddenly. “Not so good, now that you ask,” he replied, wincing at his own tone. *You disappear from his life with the woman who ditched him for someone with even more money, and then you call him twenty years later to ask for his help. Ezra, he ought to just hang up on you.*

“Hold on,” said the voice.

*Here it comes,* Ezra thought, waiting for the polite excuse or perhaps the recrimination that would allow John Thorpe to make his escape. Avoid a messy entanglement.

Instead the voice came back on the line. “I just had to shut the door. Get a little privacy.” Across the miles he heard the man settle down into a chair. He spoke again. “What’s wrong Ezra?”

Standish sighed. Hedged. Found himself eleven years old again. He gave in and spilled it all.

* * *

Vin nearly keeled over in shock when the door opened underneath his pounding fist.

“Ezra,” he grinned.

Ezra did not grin back. “There is no need to damage my door,” he drawled, returning to the living room.

Vin looked around at the boxes. His face grew dark. “Ya leavin’ Ezra?” he growled.

Ezra sighed. Dropped onto the nearest sofa and covered his eyes. For a short time there, he had felt better. Balanced. Thorpe had made some good arguments on both sides. But even he had said that only Ezra could make the decision.

For a long time after the conversation had ended, he had sat staring at the phone. His problem momentarily forgotten. John Thorpe’s last sentence repeating in his head. *Don’t wait another 20 years to call me, Ezra. You can always reach me here. Good news or bad.*

Funny, Ezra had promised to call. But already he wondered whether he ever would.

He remembered suddenly that Vin was still standing in his living room, glaring at him. He looked up over the top of his hands and fixed Vin with an impudent stare.

“I don’t know what I’m doing, precisely, Mr. Tanner,” he said, his voice steely. “Have you come to antagonize me?”

Vin’s eyes narrowed. “We’re worried about ya,” he said. “You don’t answer yer door. You don’t answer yer phone.”

“I needed space,” Ezra snapped.
“We gave you space,” Vin returned, his hands on his hips.

“Well maybe I need more space,” the undercover agent nearly growled, green eyes flashing.

“Like the distance from here to Atlanta?” Vin retorted suddenly.

The sentence hung in the air between them a second before Ezra’s face darkened. “Get out,” he hissed.

Vin hesitated. Surprised at the vehemence. Surprised at the dismissal. “I didn’t mean…”

Ezra rose to his feet, fists clenched. “I don’t give a damn what you think you meant. Get out.”

Vin held up his palms. Ezra could see the confusion in his teammate’s face. But he refused to let himself care. He pointed to the door. Seething. Furious.

“Alright,” Vin said calmly, backing up. “I’m going.”

He stopped at the door. “Just promise you’ll talk to us before you make a decision.” The voice was almost plaintive.

“Get out,” Ezra growled again with more force, grabbing the door and yanking it out of Vin’s hand. He pushed the sharpshooter out onto the porch with one hand then slammed the door in his face.

Not even looking back to see if Vin had really gone, Ezra returned to the sofa, breathing hard. When he calmed down enough to think rationally, he almost laughed at the idea that he had thrown the tough-as-nails ex-Ranger right out of his apartment. Almost. He didn’t feel much like laughing. Vin’s words rolled around in his head and made him mad all over again.

*Atlanta,* he snorted bitterly. Atlanta where his career in the FBI had been about to blow up in his face. He had been pegged to take the fall in a bribery and corruption scandal. He could not prove his innocence. And he had no allies. He had made up his mind that if he were going to go down, he would make it one hell of a fire.

Ezra had begun laying the groundwork for his plan, when Chris Larabee had materialized out of nowhere. Met him over lunch. Told him what he wanted. Made some pie in the sky promise about never leaving his agents vulnerable in the field.

*Right,* Ezra had thought at the time. He knew better than to trust Larabee. Trusting anyone was folly. The only one you can count on to put you first is yourself. He had learned that from an early age.

Still, there was something about the way that Larabee had put every FBI director right on edge that piqued Ezra’s curiosity. Ezra had watched with something like glee as the hard nosed ATF agent simply walked into the FBI building, told Ezra’s supervisors that he was hiring Standish for the ATF and that they would be leaving the day after tomorrow. They had not said a word. They simply stood there stupidly and blinked while Larabee handed them paperwork.

As Larabee left the office, one of them found his voice. “He’s dirty,” he spat. “And he’ll turn on you.”

The contemptuous glare he got in return made him back up a step. Chris had smiled coldly, as he said, “Then you won’t mind my taking him.”

And just like that, Ezra found himself on a plane to Denver, transit arranged for his belongings. Plucked from the jaws of ignominy and disgrace and deposited in Denver.
Admittedly, at the time, he had not expected Team Seven, whatever the hell that was, to be different from the FBI. He would still be on his own. But he did need a way out from under the blame that was poised to fall on him, like a safe in some old cartoon. And this was an available exit.

He hardly dared admit to himself that he was curious about this Team Leader, who hid his thoughts almost as well as Ezra did and appeared to have no regard whatsoever for appearances. In direct contrast to Ezra’s own upbringing and his undercover work, where appearances were everything.

Ezra had accepted the offer to save his own skin. He had not imagined that he would come to care about his team or about his career. He had not imagined that he would ever turn down offers from other agencies and bureaus, offers with more money and impressive titles. He had slowly come to make himself a promise: I will not work for anyone else in the field of law enforcement.

He grimaced, as the promise sounded in his brain. He leaned his head against the back of the sofa and closed his eyes against his growing headache.

Now it appears that I will not work for anyone, he thought bitterly. Fitting, since I have indeed proven their suspicions right. Run out. Turned on you. There are no third chances.

For the first time in his adult life, he was stuck. Unable to leave. Unable to stay. Unable to face the present. Unable to return to the past or to see the future. He felt like a fish caught on a line. Struggling, twisting in the air. The difference, of course, he realized was that while he and the fish were both suffocating, someone would eventually come free the fish—one way or the other, to swim free or to die. Ezra Standish had to free himself. But he couldn’t tell which way was freedom. And which way was really death.

* * *

For the second time in one day Vin was surprised at a friend’s front door. This time it was to see Chris, standing in the doorway, answering his own door. He stood there in black jeans and a black t-shirt. The black flannel shirt Ezra had purchased hanging off his shoulders. He leaned in the doorway and grinned at Vin.

All the black made his face look even paler, the green eyes glowing like odd lanterns out of the thin face.


He hadn’t realized his thoughts had run away with him until Chris spoke. “You wanna come in,” he asked dryly, “Or should I step out into the light so you can see the bruises better?”

Vin made a face. “You’re not funny, Cowboy,” he said sourly.

Chris grinned. So far as he knew, humor had never been listed as one of his good points. He stepped aside and waved Vin in.

Vin entered reluctantly. Wondering now whether he should have come. Whether he should bother Chris with this. He knew Chris had started digging up what happened in Texas. Did he need to know that Vin had just made things even worse with Ezra?

Typically, Chris read him too easily to let him turn back now. “What’s wrong?” he asked, leading the way into the living room.

Vin saw Josiah stretched out on the couch. He looked from one to the other.
“I came to see Josiah,” he said quickly with a smile. He focused on the profiler. “I came to talk to you about that project I was working on yesterday.”

Josiah frowned. He could see in Vin’s face that there was something he needed to say and wanted deeply to avoid saying it to Chris.

He stood up.

Chris watched the exchange from the corner of his eye, pretending to stare at the TV, pretending not to notice Vin’s discomfiture. Something had just happened. And Vin was lying to keep it from him. Twin flames of anger and frustration began to burn in his stomach. How many more wrong turns could this disaster take?

He watched them walk out of the living room. Heard the front door open. Heard both men go out. Then he turned his gaze back to the TV. His gaze but not his focus. His focus was consumed by figuring out how to ferret out the truth from Vin.

A thread of his encounter with Buck tumbled into his mind. He scowled. In the next moment he pushed himself out of the chair. He doubted seriously that he could throw Vin down even in his best condition. So he did the next best thing.

The front door opening caught both Vin and Josiah off guard. Vin stopped in the middle of a word. But so far as Chris could interpret, the word was Ezra. If he had doubts about what he had learned from the few minutes he had spent standing on the other side of the door, the expression in the Texan’s blue eyes confirmed the worst.

He stopped and leaned in the doorway. “Anyone been to see Ezra?” he asked, his voice giving away nothing.

Vin’s eyes snapped down to his shoes.

The silence continued, while Chris waited for an answer.

“I’ve been there a couple a times since this weekend,” Vin said without looking up.

“And…” Chris prompted, thinking what a clever substitute “this weekend” was for “since you chased him off.”

“He’s okay,” Vin replied. At least that’s what he wanted to say. He had never been much good at lying, and, irritatingly enough, he found it next to impossible to lie to Chris. The few times he had tried, it had done no good anyway. God damn stubborn cowboy saw right through him. He searched for an answer. Something believable. His hesitation gave him away—again.

Chris pursed his lips. He disappeared into the house. Vin and Josiah waited, exchanging uncomfortable looks.

The team leader returned only seconds later, flicked a glance at each of them, then pushed between Vin and Josiah and started down the porch steps onto the driveway.

Both men heard the jingle of the car keys at the same time. They launched themselves off the porch.

“Where are you going?” Josiah demanded.

“Chris you can’t drive, yet!” Vin cried out alarmed.
“It’s only an hour,” Chris returned not looking back. “Hell, I can stay awake that long all at once.” Since he wasn’t taking his pain meds, the driving precautions didn’t apply anyway. Of course, he knew better than to bring that up.

His truck was in the driveway, where he had moved it this morning so Josiah would be able to get the table saw out this afternoon. Apparently whatever project he was working on required some more equipment. He had to admit it had felt strange to be behind the wheel after so many weeks. But they didn’t need to know that either.

They caught up with him by the time he reached the truck. He knew they would.

Josiah clamped a large hand down on his shoulder. “Where are you going?” he asked again, more forcefully.

Vin slipped between Chris and the truck, blocking the door.

Chris sighed in exasperation, but he turned to Vin instead and gave him a pointed look. “Get out of the way, Vin.”

“Wherever you need to go, me an’ Josiah can take you,” Vin said, crossing his arms stubbornly.

Chris managed to keep the triumphant smile off his face. He held the keys out to Vin “All right. Drive me over to Ezra’s.”

Vin’s eyes immediately told him the sharpshooter wanted to take the promise back. The blue-eyed gaze flicked up to Josiah. Chris moved to intercept it.

“I don’t think that’s a good idea,” Vin said.

Chris’s hand closed on the keys again. “I wasn’t asking,” the blond said, his voice hard.

Josiah looked away. Should have known. Once Larabee was on his feet it was going to be his way or no way.

Tanner knew he was trapped. He swore.

Vin yanked the keys out of Chris’s hand and muttered several more swear words directed at Chris. “Get in,” he snapped.

As he moved around the truck, Chris allowed a tiny smile to leak onto his face.

Josiah shook his head as the black truck went out of the driveway, wondering when they’d be back. Or if they’d be back before he had to explain to the next shift that Chris had gone out. Might as well accept it once and for all, he decided, with a shake of his head. I am a terrible babysitter.

* * *

They hardly said a word to each other for the entire drive.

Vin’s mouth stayed set in a hard straight line. Mad. Worried. Mad. Mad. Mad. An endless cycle that repeated itself in his head while his expression grew grimmer and grimmer. First of all, he didn’t like being manipulated. And Chris was going to get a piece of his mind, or his fist, one or the other, as soon as he was well enough to take it. Second, he didn’t want Chris to see that Ezra was packing to leave. Because the next question was going to be whether the rest of the team had known that and what the hell were they planning to do about it? Third. Ezra was a grown man. He could be stubborn.
and stupid and selfish if he wanted to, right? Wrong. Chris would never let him just leave the team. He was going to go ballistic when he saw the boxes. *God damn son of a bitch, Larabee. Just had to make me drive you all the way out there. Could have asked first. Don’t need to play no stupid games.*

All the while the thoughts rolled around in Vin’s head, Chris stared out the window, the furrow that was slowly deepening between his eyebrows the only clue to the direction of his thoughts. Vin cursed him roundly one more time for good measure as they pulled into the driveway.

“Listen, Chris,” Vin began, shutting off the engine. He wanted to warn him about what he would see. Chris paused, his hand on the door handle. “If he really wants to leave, you can’t stop him.”

Chris raised one eyebrow at the sharpshooter.

Vin smirked, reading the thought. “Punching his lights out ain’t gonna fix the problem.”

A fleeting smile crossed the leader’s face. He pulled open the door and slid out.

He glanced toward the door. “Could be a while,” he told the sharpshooter. “I’ll call when I need a pick up.”

An evil smile lit Vin’s face. “An’ if you ask nicely, I might come get ya.”

Chris glowered at him. He could only handle one problem at a time, and at the moment, Tanner’s hurt pride wasn’t high on his list.

“Good luck,” Vin said, watching Chris walk up the short steps to the front porch. He figured he ought to at least make sure that Chris got in the house before he left.

There was no answer when Chris rang the doorbell. Vin craned his neck to see in the garage window. Ezra’s Jag was there. He nodded at Chris’s inquiring glance.

Chris took a breath, pounded hard on the door. Then said loudly, “Open the damn door Ezra, or I’ll break it in.”

A passing jogger abruptly crossed to the other side of the street. Two children playing in a driveway two houses away stopped their game to stare. A neighbor doing lawn work paused in clipping his hedges and stared at them hesitantly.

Vin waved cheerfully but offered no explanation.

Chris had taken a step back from the door and was scanning it for a good, weak entry point, when the door opened abruptly. Ezra stood there, glowering at him. A phone connected to his ear.

“Yes, Mrs. MacIntosh, I know them… No you don’t need to call the police.” He went on, placating the person on the other end of the phone while his sea-green gaze scanned Chris from head to toe.

He hung up, glaring at Chris. “Apparently,” he drawled, “this was a nice peaceful neighborhood until I moved in. Next time the property values go down, you know who they’ll blame.”

He motioned Chris in. Vin gave Ezra a half-salute as he pulled out of the driveway. He made a face at the Texan as he pulled away. He should have known Vin would bring in the heavy artillery.

“Mr. Larabee,” Ezra drawled, closing the front door. Chris was looking at the boxes. A slow feeling of dread churned through Ezra’s stomach. He fought for a handle on how best to play this. “Would
you like some coffee?”

“Thanks,” Chris said. He paused before the box in front of the bookcase, bending to pull out a book, surprising Ezra with the way he moved. He was still stiff evidently, still pale, still thin, but not the gaunt specter Buck had fallen on in the yard and certainly not the battered wreck that Ezra had brought home on the plane. In fact, if Ezra didn’t look too closely or think about it too hard, he could almost imagine that Chris looked almost normal. Almost, he reminded himself as Chris put the book back and stood up slowly.

Ezra brought two cups of coffee into the living room and motioned Chris to take a seat. Chris ignored him and continued making his rounds of the boxes. Ezra sat on the sofa and waited, a carefully-crafted congenial smile on his face.

“You look much better,” he said warmly.

He received a taciturn grunt in reply.

Ezra made small talk, to which Chris made no reply. Typical.

Chris completed his inspection and then cut Ezra off in the middle of a comment about current politics. “Still sitting on the fence, then?” the tall blond asked. At least it sounded like a question. Ezra knew it was not.

“I haven’t the faintest idea what you are referring to,” he hedged, trying to sound insulted.

Chris waved a hand at the boxes. “Looks like you haven’t decided whether you’re going or staying.” He gave Ezra a penetrating stare, as he indicated the evidence.

Ezra refused to squirm.

“Well, you understand it is a big decision,” he replied calmly. “One has to carefully weigh one’s options.”

“Bullshit,” Chris said with a smirk.

“Excuse me,” Ezra snapped, indignantly.

“I said bullshit,” Chris repeated firmly. “You can lie to yourself if you want, but don’t bother lying to me.”

Ezra opened his mouth to reply, but Chris cut him off.

“If you want to go, go. If you want to stay, stay. I’ve made my position clear. The team needs you.”

Ezra leaned back into the cushions and stared at Chris from under hooded eyes.

The team leader bent his lean frame into a chair opposite and fixed Ezra with an intense gaze. “Fish or cut bait, Ezra,” he said quietly. “Dragging it out is what’ll kill ya.”

Ezra nearly spat out his coffee. He choked. Coughed. Chris handed him a napkin and regarded him intently over the top of his own coffee cup.

“I beg your pardon,” Ezra managed to cough out, blotting a stain on his polo shirt and glad to have somewhere else to look.

“Make your decision,” Chris replied calmly.
Ezra stared at him, jerked his gaze suddenly into his coffee cup. What was Chris trying to say? What was his agenda? After all they had been through, would Chris really let him walk away that easily? Would the team? Was the door really open? And could he really walk through it?

Chris saw the indecision swim through the undercover agent’s green eyes.

A sad smile flickered and died on the team leader’s lips. “It’s hard to make a decision when you’re trying to decide the wrong question,” he said slowly.

Ezra’s gaze snapped up to Chris’s face. He noticed suddenly how the bruises had faded. How the eyes were again animated by an inscrutable intensity. He remembered how hard it was to outmaneuver Larabee when he was on his game. Remembered how much he had enjoyed trying.

Chris saw the challenge in Standish’s eyes. Barely managed to suppress the automatic smirk that threatened to climb onto his face. He hadn’t come to get into a pissing match.

“Remarkable,” Ezra drawled sarcastically, “how my colleagues have suddenly developed such a deep understanding of my state of mind.”

Chris’s response was not what Ezra expected. “I do understand your state of mind,” he said simply, putting his coffee cup down to look Ezra in the eye. “The question you need to answer isn’t whether you are going to stay with Team Seven or leave it. And it sure as hell isn’t about your career.” He leaned forward. “The question is whether you’re going to let fear run your life.”

Ezra jerked. “This has nothing to do with fear,” he said with an incredulous laugh.


Ezra stared at him. Gave no answer. Worked hard to keep his face impassive.

Chris didn’t seem to notice.

He got up again and returned to the boxes. Squatting down beside a stack of framed photos waiting to be wrapped, he searched through them with interest. He pulled out the one of Team Seven on a fishing trip. The same one they all had. The same one Chris kept in his office. Only Ezra had smashed the glass in his.

“This what you’re afraid of?” Chris asked quietly holding up the photo, tiny shards of glass sliding down it onto the carpet.

Ezra didn’t answer. Chris searched the undercover agent’s impassive face.

He looked down at the photo again, passing his fingers over the tiny crumbs of glass to rest on each man in the picture, Ezra last.

He looked back up at his undercover agent and smiled grimly. “Don’t blame you,” he said. “They’re a pretty scary bunch.”

He pulled himself back up to a standing position and carried the picture back to the sofa. He laid it down on the coffee table in front of the chair he had been sitting in and fished around in his pocket for his wallet.

Ezra stared at him curiously, as the blond opened up his wallet, searching for something among the bills and receipts.
When he found it, he threw it down on the table next to the picture of Team Seven. A photograph. Of a smiling woman holding a child. The same woman and child who stood next to Chris in the photo on his office desk. The one that Buck had claimed before they sealed the door shut. It didn’t take much careful observation to see that at some point the picture had been torn into pieces. And at a later time, it had been carefully taped back together.

“That’s what scares me,” Chris said, looking down at the small, ragged wallet photo.

A lump formed suddenly in Ezra’s throat.

“Know what the difference is?” Chris asked, shifting his gaze back to the undercover agent.

Ezra looked up at him. Waiting.

Chris pointed back at the wallet photo. “That really happened.”

Ezra flicked his gaze back down to the table at the two photos. There was a long moment before he could speak. Chris stood and waited. Silent.

When the undercover agent did look up again, Chris saw, to his immense relief, that the stone-faced veneer of imperturbability had cracked. Beneath it, for the first time since he came in the door, he caught a glimpse of Ezra Standish. The real one. The one he had always believed existed. The one he and the rest of the team were slowly coming to know. Now, he realized, he had to tread carefully.

“What did you do?” Ezra asked softly, suddenly.

Chris smiled a sad smile. He sat down slowly in the soft chair. His head tilted to one side and he seemed to look inward and at Ezra at the same time. He was sure that Ezra had heard the story of his descent into alcohol-fueled rage and hell-bent self-destruction from Buck at some point. So what was he really asking?

“Tried not caring,” he said quietly, thoughtfully. “About anything. Or anyone.” He looked back at Ezra and shrugged. “But I didn’t really have it in me.”

Ezra looked down again at his empty coffee mug.

Chris continued, his voice far away. “Then I tried pushing everyone away, so I wouldn’t have to worry about it.”

“Course that didn’t work either,” he said smiling grimly. Mostly ‘cause they wouldn’t go, he thought, Buck’s face rising before him.

He shook his head to clear the memory. This wasn’t about him.

He pinioned Ezra with a serious look. “Then I ran away,” he said simply.

Ezra looked back up at him, an expression of surprise on his face. He knew that Chris had pushed Buck out of his life. But he had never heard this part about running away.

Chris smiled a self-deprecating smile as he guessed at Ezra’s thoughts. Buck would never have phrased it that way, but Chris knew he had run. Rabbited. Fled. He had run long and hard before he came to his senses and turned around. “I left the DPD. Moved out of the ranch. Hid in a bottle. Picked fights with the biggest bad asses in town. Joined the ATF and alienated every one of my colleagues by being an obnoxious, bad-tempered son of a bitch.” He shrugged, regretfully, but not exactly apologetically. After all, that plan had worked. Sort of. At least for a time.
“I was looking for oblivion,” Chris confessed. He paused before forcing himself to complete the thought. “Of one kind or another.”

Ezra gave Chris a sharp penetrating look before dropping his gaze back to the photos. Oblivion, he thought with an internal shudder. His glance flicked from the photo of the team back to the photo of Sarah and Adam. No matter what had happened to him, he had never sought to end his problems in oblivion. His survival instincts were too well honed for that.

He looked back up at the blond, to find the green eyes still gazing at him, still intense, with some sort of message he was trying to bore through Ezra’s head by the power of thought alone. Ezra almost smiled at the idea. He would have, but there was something more important. Something he suddenly, desperately, wanted to know.

“What changed your mind?” he asked suddenly.

Chris cocked his head. “About running away or about oblivion?”

Ezra suddenly felt as if he had intruded. Felt his face flush slightly, fought to keep the evidence from showing. “Um, both, if you don’t mind,” he said somewhat awkwardly.

A sardonic smile twitched up the team leader’s lips. You opened the door, Larabee, he chided himself silently. Now you gotta face up to it.

Ezra sensed the leader’s sudden reluctance. He started to say something about it not being his business, but Chris stopped him. Calmly, matter of factly.

“I got tired of being scared,” he replied.

Ezra stared at him. Fear was not a word that one normally associated with Chris Larabee, unless it was fear of him. Funny, that in the years he had worked for Larabee, he had never really thought about the tough, stubborn team leader being scared.

Chris shifted under the intensity of the gaze. “I didn’t want the fear making my decisions anymore,” he said awkwardly. “Seemed like a damn stupid way to live out the rest of my life.”

“So you just stopped. Just like that. Fear lost its power over you?” Ezra said narrowing his eyes. His voice suddenly laced with suspicion. The first inkling that perhaps Larabee was playing him.

He was shocked to hear Chris laugh. A hard, brittle, unpleasant laugh.

The gaze he leveled at Ezra burned. Hot. But his tone was icy. “Ezra,” he replied, his voice as hard as his laugh had been. “I’m scared most every day I do this damn job. Scared I’m going to make a decision that gets someone killed—or worse. Scared the bad guys will win. Scared that I’m going to have to put someone else I care about in the ground. And scared that the next time I won’t have the sense to turn around and come back.”

Ezra blanched. So it wasn’t going to get any easier.

But Chris wasn’t finished. “But,” he said quietly, his voice holding a keen edge. “If I spend the rest of my life letting that fear dictate how I do my job, how I live my life, then the bastards have already won.” He spread his palms out. “I’ve only got myself, Ezra. I get the credit. I get the blame. I can fail. I can succeed. But I sure as hell am not going to spend all my time worrying about what might or might not happen. Not when I can act to prevent it.”

He stopped. Short. Suddenly noticing that Ezra had gone pale. Chris felt the flush climbing up his
neck. He had said way too much. He had come here to bring Ezra back into the fold, he chided himself, not air his own problems. He reached for the wallet photo.

Ezra’s hand darted out to stop him.

They looked at each other, but somehow Ezra couldn’t find the words for what he wanted to say. It didn’t matter. Words never seemed to matter much to Chris Larabee.

The blond just nodded once at what he had seen in Ezra’s face, then pulled his hand and the photo back. He pulled his cell phone out of another pocket. And told whoever answered to come back and pick him up.

Ezra smiled inwardly. He had thought Vin had set him up, bringing Chris here. But maybe it was Chris who was calling the shots now. He felt his stomach unclench. Seemed like it had been way too long.

He watched Larabee snap his phone shut and return it to his pocket, then carefully return the tattered photo to its rightful place among the bills and receipts. Chris rose and thanked him for the coffee. His tone had lost its intensity. It was neutral. Official. He gave Ezra an appraising look.

“The official inquiry begins on Monday. I will be conducting it in the Team Seven offices. I expect you to be there with the rest of the Team—whatever happens,” he added with a tone of warning. “Before then, I expect to see you at the ranch to discuss your role in extorting information out of Bautiste. Off the record.”

A sarcastic smile appeared on Ezra’s face. He couldn’t help it. “Is that an order, Mr. Larabee?” Ezra asked.

Chris nearly smiled back. “Yes, it is, Agent Standish,” he replied.

“When will you expect my decision?” Ezra asked, some stubborn streak within him unwilling to relinquish the control.

Chris did smile then. That cold, vaguely threatening smile that made people want to hit him. “I think I’ll be able to figure it out, Ezra,” he replied. “You don’t show up, I’ll know you ran.”

He left then. Went out the door to wait for Vin. Left Ezra to assimilate the conversation.

It did not take long for the big black truck to return. Therefore Vin couldn’t have been far away, Ezra noted. There was a brief discussion, more of an argument really, Ezra could tell, although he could not hear the words that were spoken as he watched from behind the living room sheers. It ended with Vin climbing out of the truck and stomping angrily around to the passenger side, hurling what were probably some unusually colorful words at his boss. Chris climbed behind the wheel. Ezra smiled to himself as they drove away.

It was some time later, when he wasn’t thinking about anything but the dinner he was preparing on the stove, when a word popped into his head. Collateral. He puzzled over it. Wondered what it could mean. Then it hit him.

Common sense, and experience told Ezra that no one knowingly, willingly gives a conman something that might become ammunition later. Yet Ezra was willing to bet that few people had ever heard the candid truth about the aftermath of Sarah and Adam Larabee’s death. It was a topic that Larabee guarded intensely, avoided entirely if he could. Anyone with an ounce of sense knew the topic was off limits. Even Buck avoided it. Mentioned it rarely, and only when Chris wasn’t around. Yet Chris had offered it up freely, unasked, unbidden. Admitted to the fear he felt. Why?
The conman in Ezra answered for him. The admission was collateral. Assurance. Chris had given Ezra something to hold over his head, if he chose. Yet at the same time Ezra knew he never would. Did Chris know that? Was that his whole point? That he trusted Ezra to make the right decision?

For a moment, his anger returned. What right did Chris have to determine what was the “right” decision?

Then suddenly, there it was: the third option. One he had never considered. One that ran contrary to everything his mother and his own experience had taught him. An idea totally alien to his entire philosophy of living so far. And yet it was so simple.

He could give in. He could simply obey the order.

He stood totally still for a long time, wooden spoon dangling above the saucepan. And while his dinner burned, he began to laugh. A long, hard laugh. At his own expense.
Wednesday morning was clear and sunny, perfect for a long motorcycle ride. Thanks to Josiah’s ready generosity in staying on another night, the youth had had a long night’s sleep. As he felt the vibration of the road and the rush of the wind ease off his remaining tension, he began to ponder, not for the first time in the last few days, the idea that there were people in the world who had their days free. Every day. Stretching out before them filled with the luxury of deciding how they most wanted to spend their time. Of course, he realized, those people also had the problem of money covered somehow. He did not. And coming to the end of four straight weeks without pay was starting to have him concerned about the state of his bank account. Lost in his thoughts, he very nearly passed the driveway, heading instead to the next one, farther on, to the place he had been spending the majority of his enforced free time. He braked sharply, and swerved hard into the correct driveway. Gaining his balance he looked up to take in the view of the well-organized ranch before him unprepared for the spectacle that met his eye.

A free-for-all brawl. In the front yard. Five of them. From the looks of it Vin and Chris were getting the worst of it. Josiah had Vin in a full headlock and was pressing him down into the dirt, while Buck was wrestling Chris down into the grass. Between the combatants, he could see Nathan, arms spread, shouting. He gunned the motor, flying down the rest of the drive and skidding to a halt on the pavement. He leaped off his bike almost before he shut the engine down, tearing off his helmet as he raced to stop them.

He was nearly there when the sound finally reached his brain. In the absence of the motorcycle engine he could hear it clearly now, shouting, teasing, and above it all, laughing. Well, Nathan was only partly laughing.

“Stay away from those ribs, Buck!” Nathan called in warning.

Chris muttered something under his breath that made Buck release his hold long enough to slap him in the back of the head, which gave Chris the opportunity to scramble halfway out from underneath of the taller agent, only until Buck grabbed his back belt loop and dragged him back across the stubbly grass. This prompted Chris to say something else that made Buck laugh so hard, he actually fell over Chris in a heap. And Chris smacked Buck across the head.

Atop the slight sharpshooter, the giant profiler was quoting scripture, drowning out the threats being hurled at him by the young agent beneath him. He looked up casually to see J.D. standing there, helmet dangling from his left hand, staring at them as if they had all gone mad.

“Good morning to you, young Mr. Dunne,” the profiler boomed out cheerfully.

The other agents all looked over at him, red faced, gasping.

“J.D.” Vin said as casually as one could when being sat upon by a man the size of their profiler.

“Mornin’, kid,” Buck said boisterously, still pinning Chris down with both hands and both knees. “Heard you wimped out of duty last night.”

J.D.’s face turned completely red. “I had some business to take care of,” he murmured lamely.

Buck waggled his eyebrows suggestively at Chris, implying what he thought J.D.’s ‘business’ had been about.

“Knock it off,” Chris retorted, his former laughter turning into a cough. Buck got off of him.
J.D. stared at them all, a dark frown slowly gathering on his face. His gaze traveled from Chris, still lying on the grass, breathing hard, to Buck and Josiah getting to their feet, to Vin who rolled to a sitting position and gave Josiah a mock glare. To Nathan, who was muttering under his breath. And back to Chris, his thin gray t-shirt falling against his back as he rolled slowly over, showing his ribs faintly under the folds.

“What the hell are you doing?” J.D. exploded finally. He glared at Nathan, with an expression that clearly said I expected you to know better. Nathan hadn’t been given that look in nearly fifteen years. He felt himself grow indignant. Of course, he did know better, but that didn’t mean he had been able to stop the four hooligans who started the fight. He shook his head and scowled. What am I doing? he asked stopping his train of thought in utter disbelief. I don’t have to answer to J.D.!

“Easy kid,” Buck said, frowning.

“He’s just mad ‘cause no one invited him,” Vin muttered, brushing the dirt off his arms. His face had the imprint of grass in it. He spat a few pieces back onto the lawn.

“If he’d a shown up when he was supposed to, we’d a gladly kicked his ass, too,” Buck replied.

“Kicked his ass, too?” Chris retorted indignantly. “Whaddya mean, too? Looks to me like Josiah had your partner well under control.”

“He cheated,” Vin pointed out. “And he weighs a half a ton.”

“Excuses, excuses,” Chris muttered.

“Is this what you call recovering?” J.D. shouted at their leader.
To his credit, Chris merely raised an eyebrow. Buck opened his mouth to placate his young friend, but J.D. cut him off.

“Don’t you know no matter how careful you think you are, accidents happen.” He glared at Buck. “You especially,” he said, “After last weekend, you think you’d use your head.”

Buck quirked an eyebrow at his roommate but clamped his mouth shut on the retort he was about to make. Instead he turned back to Chris. Little help? his expression requested.

Chris sighed. He extended a hand toward Buck, and Buck pulled him to his feet.

“It’s alright, J.D.,” the blond said, dusting off his jeans and moving toward his youngest agent.

J.D. stared up at him. His expression still saying he clearly thought otherwise.

Chris looked back at Buck and Vin, apologetically. “Can you guys finish the barn?”

“Ain’t that where this whole ‘discussion’ started?” Vin said sarcastically.

Chris gave him a wicked grin. “Yeah, but now I got somethin’ else to do besides let Buck kick my ass.”

“Let me?” Buck said indignantly.

Chris ignored him and told J.D. to meet him in the house in a tone that told J.D. he was expected without delay.

Josiah had moved to J.D. “God be with you, Brother,” the profiler rumbled, placing his hand on the
young agent’s shoulder, and looking gravely down into the hazel eyes.

“Cut the crap, Josiah,” Nathan said, elbowing the large profiler.

Josiah smiled easily. “Just tell him the truth, and it’ll be over quick.” He turned toward his ancient and recently resurrected vehicle.

“What does he mean?” J.D. asked Nathan.


J.D. shook his head. “I don’t follow you,” he said finally.

Nathan looked back at Buck. “You didn’t tell him?”

Buck looked suddenly embarrassed. How was he supposed to know that J.D. didn’t know that the interrogation was part of the “babysitting.” It wasn’t like he had seen much of the boy in the past week. He just assumed everyone knew by now. “Hell, Nathan,” he shot back, covering his mistaken assumption. “I didn’t think he needed a warning. It’s not that bad compared to the one he’s gonna have with Travis.”

“Says you,” Nathan retorted. By the time he got back to his house after his “interview”, he had briefly thought about beginning a remodeling project a la Josiah Sanchez.

“Yeah, says I,” Buck snapped. “I don’t expect ol’ Chris to knock him on his ass. So it should be pretty easy.”

Vin headed for the barn, Buck’s words ringing in his ears. He had suspected something had happened during Buck’s “interview”, when Chris had called and asked if Vin could postpone his turn for a couple of days. Vin hadn’t asked why at the time. Then some thinly veiled jokes between Chris and Buck had led to this morning’s tag team wrestling match on the front lawn—that and a crack about Josiah bein’ too damn old to participate. He smirked to himself. His grin broadened as he remembered Josiah’s pious retort aimed sharply at Buck and Vin but for different reasons, that it would seem that size does in fact matter. Nathan had run out onto the lawn just as the teams had chosen themselves. Buck had enlisted him as referee, and then immediately pounced on Chris.

Behind him Vin heard Buck telling J.D. what he should have told him before. “Chris is gonna ask you to tell him what happened in Texas. Just tell him what you know. No surprises.”

“But the inquiry isn’t supposed to be until…” J.D. started.

Buck gave him that look, the one he hated, the one that labeled him a kid, a green, inexperienced kid. “This is the inquiry before the inquiry,” Buck replied. “The one that lets Chris know what to expect during the official inquiry.”

J.D. licked his lips. “Can he do that?”

Buck snorted. “He’s in charge. He can do whatever the hell he wants.”

The young agent nodded his acceptance. He grabbed his backpack and slung it up onto his shoulder. “All right,” he said, more to himself than anyone. “I can handle this.”

Buck smiled to himself as he watched the youth square his shoulders and draw himself up straight before entering the house. He shook his head and looked at the dirt, his smile fading. The boy had
yet to find out how scary Chris Larabee could be. It wouldn’t be today, though. That much Buck knew.

Ol’ Chris didn’t get real scary until you let him get close. That was when he started reading your mind and you started thinking crazy things like chucking up one career after another just to work with him. Or stepping in front of a bullet to protect him. That was when he stopped pulling his punches and started telling you how it was going to be. And you started doing crazy stuff like following his lead, even though you suspect he’s the kind of crazy that becomes myth—or urban legend. That was when the real roller coaster started up.

That was when Chris Larabee started scaring the pants off of you. By making you believe that looks really can kill when he levels those twin green rays of death in your direction. By making your heart stop every time he casually places himself in harm’s way. By knowing deep in your gut, and having to learn to live with the knowledge, that if Chris got his way, he planned on walking out of this life well before any of the men on his team. And you start thinking that maybe you ought to just keep an eye on him. Just to be safe. Just to make sure he doesn’t just slip through the crack between this world and the next before you even have a chance to notice. Like he was never there to begin with.

Which is how it would go, if Chris got his way.

J.D. still had a ways to go before he had to face that kind of scary.

* * *

“That it?” Chris asked, pinioning J.D. with a look that made J.D. feel like he’d been turned inside out like a pocket and was about to be shaken to see if anything else would fall out.

He managed not to squirm, replying calmly and firmly. “Yes. That’s all.”

Chris nodded. He drummed his fingers slowly, thoughtfully against the tabletop.

“What did you do with the surveillance pictures?” he asked.

“They looped back into my laptop,” J.D. replied.

“Nowhere else?” Chris asked.

“No,” J.D. replied insulted.

“Where are they now?”

“I destroyed them,” J.D. said, the tone of his voice showing that any other possibility was out of the question. “I’m not stupid enough to leave something like that lying around.”

He stopped suddenly. His face grew red with the realization that he just told his boss he willfully and knowingly destroyed evidence. He suddenly felt like a small fuzzy bunny looking up at a big, black, hungry eagle.

Chris smiled a slow, secret smile that made J.D. go cold. “Was that your idea?”

J.D.’s hackles went up. He wasn’t about to let Chris pin this on Buck or anyone else. He had done it on his own. He hadn’t asked for advice—or permission. “Yes,” he replied. “I took care of the surveillance. I destroyed the pictures.”

Damn! Our boy’s all grown up, Chris thought, but he kept it from showing on his face. He narrowed his eyes instead. “And you’re sure that they are well beyond retrieval?”
“Absolutely,” he replied. He had wasted a perfectly good spare mother board to wipe any trace of those images from his computer. A mother board he had got on the cheap, but still a perfectly good one.

He looked back up at the chilling smile. But he did not flinch. He had done what he had done. And he was prepared to take his lumps just like everybody else.

“I’m impressed,” Chris said finally, nodding his head.

J.D. gulped, unsure if he had heard correctly. Unsure what response would be appropriate. “Um, thanks,” he replied tentatively, feeling another blush burn up his neck and into his cheeks.

Chris ducked his head to hide his grin, afraid he’d leave J.D. with the impression that this was not serious or that destroying evidence was something to take lightly. Neither was true. What was true was that J.D. had acted to protect his teammates. Still, clearly there had been another gaping failing in his leadership, and they would have to have a serious talk about ethics later on. But after the inquiry. Now that there was one less piece of evidence for Chris to have to consider.

Chris leaned back in his chair and fixed J.D. with a stern gaze. “That’s it, then,” he said after a moment. “You can go.”

“Go?” J.D. asked confused.

“Go,” Chris repeated.

“I’m supposed to stay,” J.D. replied. “It’s my turn to…” he stopped. He couldn’t exactly tell Chris that he was supposed to babysit him.

Chris grinned evilly at the words J.D. didn’t say. He knew what the agent had been about to say all right.

“I didn’t mean…” J.D. hesitated.

Chris put up his hand. Put an end to the conversation. J.D. sunk back in the kitchen chair, relieved. Rescued. There was nowhere he could have gone with the idea that wouldn’t have gotten him deeper into trouble.

“I don’t think I’m really the company you wanted to be spending this evening with,” Chris drawled lazily, quirking up an eyebrow at his youngest agent. “Am I right?”

J.D. blushed again. He wished he could stop that. No wonder people thought he was a kid.

He licked his lips. Hesitated to step back into the mess he had just left. “Doesn’t someone have to stay here to…er…”

Chris waited, feeling the smirk growing across his face. Unable to help it. Morbidly curious to hear exactly what J.D. was going to say.

“You know,” J.D. stuttered. “Make sure that…”

He stared at Chris helplessly.

“Go, J.D.,” Chris said finally, taking pity on his youngest. “Vin and Buck’ll be here almost all day, and I’ll get another babysitter tonight.”

J.D.’s face turned completely red. He cleared his throat. “Chris,” he said tentatively. “You know we
“Trust me?” Chris asked filling in the pause.

J.D.’s face fell, unexpectedly. “That’s not what I meant,” he said.

“It was a joke, J.D.,” Chris said gently.


Chris frowned. “I’m guessing we’re not just talking about my last comment,” he said after a moment.

The look that J.D. gave him then shot right through him. “You guys think I’m so naive. That I don’t know what’s going on? Well, you’re wrong,” he snapped.

Chris lifted both palms out. “Whoa!” he said. “No one ever said you don’t know what’s going on. And if they did, they’d have to answer to me. You’re a top-notch agent, J.D. That’s why you’re on the team.”

J.D. looked at him exasperated. Not that he hadn’t wanted to hear those words. He had. And for a very long time. But Chris had missed the point entirely. “It was hell, you know. Buck didn’t sleep or eat for days,” he snapped. “Vin wouldn’t talk to anyone. At all. They brought in a new team leader.”

Chris dropped a hand onto J.D.’s arm. J.D. pulled it away, but he was not fast enough. Chris closed his hand hard around the arm and pushed it down against the table, needing to interrupt the young agent before he got a full head of steam. “I know,” he said firmly. “I heard.”

J.D. stopped. Took a deep breath. Closed his mouth. Realized he was about to holler at his boss. He dropped his eyes to the table.

Chris released his arm.

“I just thought…” J.D. tried again. He hesitated then looked back up at Chris. “It was a lot of people, you know,” he said, knowing that he wasn’t making sense, but trusting Chris to figure out what he meant. “It wasn’t just us.”

Chris gave him a sad smile. “I appreciate that,” he said gently. “And I’m sorry for what you went through.”

J.D. stared hard at Chris. Knew the apology was sincere, but not at all sure that his message had gotten through. He thought about showing Chris the cards. They were still in his backpack. He wasn’t quite sure why he still had them. Maybe it was because he wasn’t sure what to do with them. He couldn’t exactly send them back and say, “Thanks for your thoughts, but we don’t need ‘em anymore.”

He gave a sigh and let the thought go. It wasn’t really his place after all. “I can really go?” he asked, fingering his helmet beside him on the table.

Chris grinned and jerked his head toward the door.

J.D. didn’t waste a second. And Chris knew the boy would be next door in a matter of moments, revving his bike at the Wells’s door, and asking Casey to head out for a ride.

He, on the other hand, was going to attempt to do some minimal barn chores. He rose from the table,
stifling a groan. He was sore all over, since he had started his conditioning program in earnest. But it was the good kind of sore. Muscle sore. Workout sore. Not the kind of sore that was likely to get him in trouble. Nevertheless, he was smart enough to keep his mouth shut about it.

He wandered out to the barn, where Buck and Vin were painting the side that had taken the worst beating from the icy blast of a succession of winter storms. He picked up a roller and dipped it into a pan of white paint.

“How’d that go?” Buck asked, sidling up to him and beginning on the section next to Chris.

Chris shrugged. His interview with J.D. was between him and J.D. He had not shared what anyone had told him. Nor did he intend to.

Buck eyed him, nudged him with his elbow. “Better than mine?” he asked with a grin.

Chris leveled a mock glare at his oldest friend. “Anything would have gone better than yours,” he replied.

Buck grinned, but the grin was rueful. He rolled his shoulders to ease the tension out of them. “You know, Chris, when we realized that you…”

“Save it, Buck,” Chris said suddenly. “There’s a whole barn that needs to be repainted. And if you want me to help, we’d all better start working instead of talking.” His words encompassed both of his agents, including Vin, who sat on a sealed paint can, and had not said a single word. The sharpshooter hid his smile.

Buck closed his mouth. Took a sidelong glance at his leader and realized that Chris had probably heard as much as he could take about what the team had undertaken in an act of revenge over his death. And probably more than he could stomach about how his agents had reacted to losing him.

Buck made his face carefully neutral, and after a few minutes of concentrating on painting, began to whistle some song from his childhood.

Chris gave Buck a sidelong glance, grimacing at that damn song. Not that Buck couldn’t whistle. He could. He just never whistled a whole song. Just an endless loop of the same refrain. Over and over again.

Truthfully, Chris was glad of the distraction. Twice now he’d been told that Buck had taken it hard. Twice he refused to hear it. Still didn’t want to hear it. Ignored the instinct to judge by evidence. After all, if anyone knew him it was Buck. Knew where he’d been. What he’d done. How he’d failed. And what a bastard he’d been. Buck would know better than anyone why he wasn’t worth that kind of trouble. Regardless of what Nathan or even J.D. seemed to think.

He pushed the thought away. And began to whistle a clashing melody. Buck gave him an irritated glance and Chris almost laughed when a second later, Vin started a third. The three of them worked away in the cool breeze under the steadily climbing sun, each one whistling a separate tune, as loudly as possible.

Following the painting, they had an early lunch, consisting of a little of everything that had been left in the refrigerator since the first day of their suspension. A lot of which Chris hadn’t actually eaten. It seemed like he was making up for it now.

“Damn, Stud!” Buck teased, poking his head under the table, as Chris finally pushed back his plate. “You know your hollow leg looks just like your real one!”

Chris made a face at him. Vin laughed, leaning back.
“He’s right!” the sharpshooter said eyeing Chris’s empty plate. “Where you puttin’ all that?”

“You should talk, Tanner.” Buck cracked. “You an’ J.D. eat more ‘n any six people I ever met.”

“Well, Buck,” Vin drawled, patting his lean, flat belly for emphasis. “Reckon our metabolisms’ll slow down when we get to be your age.”

Buck glared at him.

“Hey!” Chris intervened, balling up his napkin and Tanner’s and flinging one with each hand. Both hit their intended targets, one bouncing off each agent and back onto the table. “You can fight after we clean up,” he said with a smirk.

He got up from the table and carried his plate to the dishwasher and a small armload of other items to the refrigerator.

Vin and Buck’s heads swiveled, watching him, matching grins on their faces.

He turned, exasperated to see them staring. “You gonna work or you gonna watch?” he asked.

“Hell,” Buck said with a grin. “If that’s the choice, I’m gonna watch.”

Chris made a face at him. He put another few items away. “The rest is yours,” he said, and moved off into the living room.

He sank down onto the sofa. Painting seemed to have taken a lot more out of him than he had expected. Although he had accomplished so little compared to Buck and Vin. Frustrated, that he still couldn’t stretch very high, he had had to let Vin finish up his section. The smallest section. And Buck had sent him in to heat up lunch to distract him from being frustrated. Smart, he had to admit, but not very subtle.

He toed off his boots, feeling fatigue sink into him like liquid lead. Every limb felt heavy. He barely managed to lift his feet up onto the couch. He considered for a moment trying to find out what was on TV. And was asleep before he even finished the thought.

In the kitchen, Buck and Vin finished up the dishes quietly. They threw a blanket over the sleeping figure and headed back out to continue the painting.

“Better tell Josiah to bring more food tonight,” Vin said dryly, resuming his spot on the paint can, while Buck took a turn up the ladder.

“Reckon so,” Buck chuckled. “If he’s gonna eat like that.”

“Thank God,” Vin muttered under his breath.

Buck looked down at the slight, wiry Texan. He knew how worried Vin had been. Tanner looked up suddenly and grinned that famous Tanner shit-eating grin. “Damn skinny cowboy was startin’ to make me feel fat.”

The thought made both of them laugh.

* * *

“Whaddya want we should do with this one?” the voice asked in a preposterously overdone film noir gangster accent.
Fuzzy, Chris wondered if he had left the TV on. But the voice sounded too familiar. He cracked his eyes open.

“Never mind,” the voice called cheerfully to some unknown person.

Chris blinked and rolled over onto his back to see Buck leaning his elbows on the back of the sofa and looking down at him.

“Well hey there, Stud,” the mustached agent said amiably. “Glad you decided to join us. Me an’ Vin got that whole wall done and we’re ready to set up poker night.”

_Poker night?_ Now he was really confused. He didn’t remember falling asleep on the couch. Let alone inviting anyone for poker night. What the hell time was it?

Buck watched Chris blink at him for a minute and then sit up slowly.

“What time is it?” Chris asked, his voice slightly raspy.

“Goin’ on four,” Buck replied with a grin. “You had a nice long nap after lunch. Thought me an’ Vin were just gonna have to carry you upstairs out of the way.”

Chris rubbed his eyes with the palms of his hand. Still groggy. Still slow. But coming around.

He peered up at Buck and noticed his hair was wet. Then he remembered they had been painting. Painting the barn. He looked around for Vin and heard dishes rattling in the kitchen.

Buck watched bemused as his usually razor-sharp leader tried to put the pieces of the afternoon together.

“We figured it was high time we held poker night. An’ since we been’ spendin’ all this free time takin’ care of you, we thought it only right that you should host the party,” Buck added by way of explanation.

Chris said nothing. Buck wondered if it wouldn’t be better if the blond just went right back to sleep, until he muttered, “What the hell are you gonna play with? No one’s been paid in a month!”

True, Chris wasn’t exactly joking, but Buck laughed anyway. Guess Larabee was done being disoriented now.

“Josiah’s got about a hundred old rolls of pennies in his basement. He’s bringing them over. Boring, I know, but it’ll have to do for now.”

Chris stifled a yawn. Glad they were taking their financial straits in stride. He himself felt guilty as hell about it, as he continued to collect his sick pay. He shoved the blanket aside and stood up slowly. He felt stiff and knew he needed to take a walk now or he’d never get himself awake enough to play. He didn’t want to get fleeced his first night. He would trust any one of his men to watch his back in a firefight, to protect his career in a case review, to take care of his life, limb and property when he was hurt, and to watch over the people he cared about if he couldn’t. But asking them not to take advantage of inattention or just piss-poor play at the poker table? That was asking way too much. Everyone on the team had learned that lesson the hard way.

“Where you going?” Buck asked, as the blond made his slightly unsteady way around the couch.

“Walk,” Chris said tersely. “Gotta wake up.”
“Not too far,” Buck said, the words coming out before he had time to think about it.

Chris gave him a glance of annoyance. “Yes, Mom,” he retorted.

Buck grinned. He’d been called worse.

The front door opened and closed.

“Where’s he going?” Vin asked, poking his head around the corner to peek out the glass in the front door.

Buck shrugged. “Taking a walk,” he replied. “Don’t imagine he’ll go too far.”

Vin snorted. “Maybe not today, but we don’t look out and he’ll be joggin’ up that hill.” He was referring to the long uphill just left of Chris’s driveway. And the insane way the team leader liked to start out his mornings. On a hard uphill leg of a five mile run.

Buck sighed and ran a hand through his hair, still damp from the shower. He seldom ran with Chris. Learned a long time ago that the man was a complete masochist when it came to workouts. Larabee had managed to work out a circular route from the ranch and back to it that ran five straight miles, up as many hills as possible, starting with the biggest one. “I hate to break this to you, Junior,” Buck replied, “But if he actually *can* jog up that hill, then he’s probably ready to do it.”

Vin gave Buck a sour look, but in it Buck could see the sharpshooter acknowledge the truth in that statement. Buck knew damn well that the young Texan and Chris Larabee had similar ideas about what constituted a “good” workout.

The doorbell rang promptly at six. Nathan and Josiah did not wait for someone to answer it. They simply walked right in. They were deep in discussion as they each carried an armload of food into the kitchen. Buck rubbed his hands together with glee as he opened the bags they set on the table.

In the living room, Vin arranged chairs around the card table. The coffee table had been pushed over to the hearth to make room for the card table and the chairs. Chris put out several large bowls filled with chips and pretzels.

Vin leaned two extra chairs against the wall—just in case. J.D. was out with Casey, and he didn’t expect that poker night would be a strong enough draw to change his mind. And Ezra… Vin had left a message on his machine, but had not received a reply. Not that he expected to get one. Until Chris had barged his way in there yesterday, Vin had been the only one of the Seven who had managed to actually talk to him. The others had been met only with a wall of silence. Chris hadn’t said a single word about what he had said—or perhaps done—to Ezra yesterday. And he didn’t seem inclined to give an opinion about whether Ezra would show up.

It didn’t seem likely. Poker night had never been Standish’s favorite team event, and he generally needed to be cajoled into coming on the best of nights. He said it seemed pointless to take money from people who never had any. Tonight, the caustic remark seemed particularly accurate.

Josiah heaved two large money bags onto the old card table, which looked like its legs just might give out under the insult of this new weight. He moved one to the floor. Then he reached into the bag on the table and began pulling out neat rolls of pennies and stacking them in the center of the table.

“How many you think we’ll need?” Josiah asked Chris as he passed by.

Chris eyed the bag. “Jesus, Josiah,” he replied finally. “That might be two weeks pay right there.”
Josiah grinned. “Might be, brother, but you’d be surprised how hard it is to get rid of a large quantity of pennies.”

Chris sat down at one end of the table and began sorting the rolls out to each place around the table. Little by little, the others drifted in along with the faint smell of something heating in the oven. Buck put shot glasses on the table and poured a round of whiskey for everyone. Nathan glared at the glass in front of Chris. Chris grinned evilly back at him. They looked to Josiah to make the toast when the doorbell rang.

They waited for whoever it was to come in. When no one came, Vin squeezed himself out of his chair, around an end table and the arm of the sofa to go to the door.

He was caught off guard to see their missing undercover agent on the porch, holding a bag of food and two six packs of good beer. He looked chagrined and complained that he was about to drop one of the six packs. Vin hurried to take both of them before anything happened to them.

“What are ya ringing the doorbell for, Ez?” the sharpshooter asked. “You lose yer key?”

Ezra smiled self-deprecatingly. “Temporarily, I assure you,” he replied. Lord only knew which of those boxes he had thrown it in. Or why he had thrown it in one to begin with. If he had quit, he wouldn’t have needed it anyway. He thought back to Chris’s comment on the lack of reason to his packing and nearly smiled. Larabee had nailed it all right. As if to add insult to injury, immediately after the man had left, Ezra had to look for and locate two items he had somehow thrown into boxes despite the fact that he was still using them.

Tanner jerked his head toward the living room, as he emptied the bags on the kitchen table. “Go on in,” he said. Yet it seemed less of an invitation somehow than a challenge.

The undercover agent assumed an air of relaxed nonchalance and ambled into the living room.

Three voices greeting him with surprise and pleasure.

“Thought you hated poker?” Buck teased.

“No,” Ezra corrected slowly. “I have nothing against the game of poker. It’s gambling I abhor.”

Josiah grinned knowing what was coming, even as the undercover agent continued with his slow southern drawl. “Playing against the five of you, however, hardly seems like a gamble at all.”

Three voices at the table rose in mock indignation.

The fourth person said nothing, but there it was in the green gaze and the tiniest of head nods. Like finding water in the desert. I knew you could.

Ezra Standish felt a real smile lift his lips for the first time in days.

The moment didn’t last; it was interrupted by Tanner returning. “Nachos are almost ready,” he announced. “An’ Ezra brought some fancy crap that no one can pronounce. Or stomach.”

Ezra glared at him.

Josiah looked up at Vin. “Do I have enough time to make that toast?” he asked.

Buck poured another shot and handed it to Ezra. They all raised their glasses.

Josiah threw a devilish smile at his companions. “You’ve all heard this before,” he said. “On our last
trip to the Saloon.”

Buck’s smile widened.

“But I think the one person who really needed to hear it missed out,” Josiah said.

They all looked suddenly at Chris as Josiah held his glass aloft.

“To Chris,” the big profiler intoned. “Our leader, our brother, our protector, our friend. May his light never leave us.”

“Hear hear!” shouted the agents of Team Seven as the unflappable Chris Larabee turned scarlet.

They proceeded to hoot and holler until he, too, had downed his shot.

He was saved from further discomfiture by the beeping of the timer on the stove. Four agents rose like a starting gun had just gone off. They disappeared into the kitchen, leaving Chris and Ezra to stare at each other across the table.

A slow smirk spread across Ezra’s face. “Not a bad toast,” he drawled thoughtfully. “But it loses something the second time around.”

Chris intended to send him one of his patented vengeful smiles, the kind that promise painful retribution when least expected. But he couldn’t. He was just too damn relieved and happy to see Ezra there.

* * *

After Chris started yawning and his attention began to wander from the cards, the team magnanimously decided to call the game. Ezra had been the evening’s biggest winner, but the prize money was not much to brag about. In fact, he had actually given the pennies back to Josiah along with everyone else. Josiah had looked at Chris and said pointedly, “See what I meant?” prompting Chris’s lips to twitch faintly in that familiar, fleeting ghost of an expression that passed for a smile.

It was early yet, but despite the long afternoon nap, or maybe because of it, Chris was clearly giving into fatigue. Josiah was adamant that they could clean up their own mess in the kitchen, and that Chris could stay parked in the living room. Four of the six moved into the kitchen to clean up. Buck made a great pretense of staying behind to clear away the card table and the chairs, but so far, nothing had moved, including Buck and Chris.

“Flip you for it?” the sharpshooter spoke suddenly to the undercover agent as they loaded the dishwasher.

Ezra turned to see an evil grin resting on the sharpshooter’s face. “For what great prize exactly are we competing?” he asked coolly.

“Who stays the night,” Vin replied, still grinning.

“And would that be the winner of said coin toss?” Ezra asked. “Or the loser?”

Vin’s grin broadened, but all he said in reply was, “There’s only two of us who ain’t been interrogated yet, an’ one of us has got to stay the night.”

Ezra cast an uneasy glance into the living room. Buck was slouched back in his chair, his long legs stretched out in front of him, actually poking out from under the other side of the table, his chin
nearly touching his chest. Chris was bent over, forehead resting on his folded arms. Neither man looked at each other. Neither looked animated in the least. Yet, Ezra could tell, even if he couldn’t hear, that they were discussing something. He looked over at Josiah and Nathan who were also deep in discussion as they worked.

During the time he had been busy keeping his teammates at bay, he knew they had been here, at the ranch, taking care of business. And that Buck had been busy taking care of the team. And that the team, had been busy pounding on his door and ringing his phone. All the while, Chris had been spending his awake time trying to assess the potential damage the team had done themselves when they went AWOL in search of revenge. He sighed. He knew he had not done his part. But he was not ready to be interrogated yet.

Vin regarded the undercover agent closely, from the corner of his eye, wondering if he had misjudged Ezra’s presence here tonight. “It was J.D.’s turn,” Vin continued nonchalantly. “But Chris let him off.”


Vin snorted. J.D. trying to rein in their leader would have been a disaster and the young agent knew it. And Chris would do just about anything to have a whole night to himself at this point. But Nathan and Buck had both vetoed that idea, and after today, Vin had to agree. He was better, but without someone here to rein him in, he was likely to take on a great deal more than he was ready to do.

“You don’t have to do much,” Vin assured the undercover agent. “He’s pretty much okay. You just gotta sit on him a bit.”

He hoped that sounded convincing. It was close to true. He wasn’t sure how successful Ezra would be at sitting on Chris. After all, Chris had managed to convince the undercover agent to take him out of the hospital and bring him back to Denver. On the other hand, Vin didn’t know what Chris had said to Ezra the other day, but if Ezra had come tonight, it must have worked—at least for the moment. Tanner couldn’t put his finger on it, but somewhere in his gut was a vague misgiving that if Ezra went back home tonight, whatever Chris had done would be undone. Vin had lived too long by his gut instincts to ignore them now.

The sharpshooter jammed another two plates into the dishwasher rack, with a clank that made Ezra wince. “Nathan’s got a top secret list of do’s and don’ts,” he grinned. If Chris had known that, he would have blown a gasket by now. “I’ll be by in the morning to take care of the horses. He’ll probably still be asleep. Lazy bastard,” he added with a grin.

Vin waited only a heartbeat, a pretense of waiting for a reply. Then he narrowed his eyes in sudden consideration. “Course if you got plans…” he trailed off.

“Don’t be ridiculous,” the southerner replied in his best disarming drawl. He knew the sharpshooter was trying to play him, but what the hell, he thought. Against the voice of self-preservation, before leaving home this evening, he had taken a deep breath, shored up his courage, and prepared for this inevitability. “My bag is in the car,” he said with a charming smile that covered up his smirk. “I assumed I couldn’t avoid my nursing duties forever.”

Vin grinned. Shoulda known, he thought with a nearly imperceptible shake of his head.

* * *

As it turned out, Tanner had not exactly told the truth. Not that Ezra would call him a liar, not to his face anyway. One who values one’s limbs and prefers that said limbs stay in their customary
locations would not lightly accuse the temperamental ex-Army Ranger of prevarication. Nevertheless, Ezra had risen somewhat earlier than his customary hour, showered, dressed, and prepared to begin a day of professional and competent boss-sitting to discover that his miraculously resurrected team leader had apparently flown the coop some time earlier that morning. It had to have been that morning, Ezra reasoned because the man had been soundly asleep when Ezra had unaccountably felt the ridiculous urge to check in on him before he himself retired to the guest room with a good book.

He could give no good reason for the urge to check on his boss last night. Nor could he give any logical reason for the momentary panic that gripped him now at the sight of the empty bed. He would have liked to have chalked it up to the idea that his teammates would call him incompetent and would likely blame him if something untoward had happened. But he knew that was not it. It was the silence. The same complete and utter silence that had reigned in the house when he had last stood in this doorway.

That had been the day they had returned from Texas. Without Chris. By evening, most of the team had been arranged in the chairs in the living room below. No one had said a word. No one had looked at each other. No one sat in or looked at the empty recliner. The silence had been oppressive. So Ezra had sought refuge upstairs, on the pretense of using the “facilities.”

Unexpectedly he had found himself in this very doorway. Staring at the empty room. And noticing suddenly a myriad of small, personal details about the space. Details that had made it belong to someone, like clothes draped carelessly over a chair, mud spattered running shoes lying on top of each other, abandoned in front of the closet, a basket of folded laundry waiting to be put away, and a pen lying across a note that had been scribbled as a hasty reminder of an errand that would never be run.

In the middle of these thoughts, the silence had intruded, and he was suddenly seized with the thought that for all he knew the others had got up and left. Left him. Alone in the house. An intruder in a place that somehow no longer belonged to his world.

His throat had closed up. He had stumbled through suddenly blurred vision toward the stair and was almost relieved to hear the voices rise suddenly up from the floor below. Voices he knew, distorted nearly beyond identification by the stridency. By the anger in the threatening words, shouted out into the yard outside from Vin Tanner. By the fear rising in the voice of J.D. Dunne, trying to intercede. Then had come the incredible calm, placating tone from Buck Wilmington. And the sudden realization fell on Ezra that everything had changed. Utterly and irreversibly.

He had excused himself. And driven off.

Now here he was standing in the door again. And he knew that Chris was around somewhere, had simply sneaked by while Ezra had been in the guest bath shower. He was absolutely certain that was the case. Yet he couldn’t stop the rising panic. The irrational idea that it was happening again. That he had awakened from a dream of the promise of returning to normal, to the same reality that had smacked him hard in the face the minute they stepped off the plane from Texas, Buck still clutching the envelope he had refused to resign to the overhead bin or even to let go of for the entire flight.

Forcing himself to turn calmly, to breathe normally, Ezra adopted a suitable unhurried pace and moved toward the stairs. As a betting man, he decided to begin his search in the barn.

As if by some secret signal, both men looked up to see the undercover agent standing there. By the tool and tack room. Watching them. His face revealing nothing of his thoughts.

“Mornin’ Ezra,” Chris greeted him, looking up from the hoof he was cleaning. He said a quiet word
to the horse as he put the foot down and stroked the leg. He gave a nod to Vin.

“Mornin’,” Vin echoed, leading the horse down to the end of the barn and out the large doors that had been thrown open onto the paddock.

“Good morning, gentlemen,” Ezra said coolly.

Chris and Vin exchanged a glance, but Ezra could not be certain what it had meant. Both men had a singular preference for non-verbal communication, and in the time that they had worked together, Ezra had become fairly adept at reading their moods and their intentions. After all, it was extremely difficult to miss the intention or meaning of any signal Chris Larabee sent directly to you, many of which were likely to make your hair stand on end. However, Ezra still had difficulty in deciphering signals that were not meant for him.

Instead he narrowed his eyes, and gave Chris a mocking smile. “I assume you are cleared for barn chores, then?” he asked.

Chris gave him a mocking smile right back. “Don’t know,” he said smoothly, as the smile grew into a smirk. “Is it on Nathan’s list?”

Vin flinched. But Ezra did not give Chris the satisfaction of seeing his surprise. He shot a glance at Tanner, who shrugged slightly. From the look of chagrin and dread in the blue eyes, Ezra knew immediately that Vin had truly thought the list to be a secret.

“If you are referring to the list of exercises on your refrigerator door, then I would say, no,” Ezra answered innocently.

The green eyes telegraphed back to him that Larabee didn’t believe the bluff for a moment, but could well admire the smooth delivery of the attempt. Ezra gave him the briefest of nods in recognition that he had been caught. Chris was not much more than merely competent at penny ante poker with the boys, but when it came to real-life high stakes, he was a true pro. Ezra had come to enjoy the inherent challenge in trying to con a boss who hid his “tells,” and spotted other people’s bluffs a mile away. It made him sharper. Taught him that he wasn’t always as good as he thought he was. Made him appreciate that he sometimes needed to work harder to hide things he did not want seen. Now was one of those times.

“I confess that I wondered where you had gone off to,” he said idly, running a hand down the smooth neck of a beautiful cream-colored mare that he had slowly come to view as his favorite, in part because it was smart as well as beautiful, and in larger part because it frequently took it into its equine head to flout Larabee’s authority.

“I thought you might enjoy the opportunity to catch up on your sleep,” Chris drawled, “seeing as how you’ll have to start getting up for work in a few days.”

Ezra narrowed his eyes at both the jibe and that knowing tone in Larabee’s voice. “I am staggered by your thoughtfulness,” he replied, “and your disingenuousness.”

Chris’s lips took on that cold grin. The one that made bad guys and, occasionally, undercover agents dearly want to shoot him.

Vin watched the exchange from the corner of his eye as he sent another horse out into the paddock. He gave no sign that he had heard, nor did he attempt to intercede. He was hearing plenty right where he stood. So far, he had gathered that Chris was strong-arming Ezra back into the fold. That was all right with him, except he hoped that Chris realized that the more a body tried to force Ezra
Standish to do one thing, the more likely he was to do the opposite.

Then again, Chris was one of the best readers of people that Vin had ever met. It was an instinct, a gift. It was what made him the leader he was. It was why he had a reputation for reading minds. Chris had to know that about Ezra. Didn’t he? Vin found himself unsure.

Let Chris handle Ezra. That’s what Josiah had been saying all along. Trouble was, who was going to handle Chris?

He released himself from his worry and went out into the paddock with the horses.

Behind him, neither man had given an inch. Ezra still glared at Chris through narrowed eyes. Chris still had on that infuriating smile.

“Should I have left you a note?” Chris said, his voice quiet and sarcastic.

“That would have been civil,” Ezra replied, his southern accent grown artificially pronounced.

Chris’s smirk broadened into a grin.

Clear as day Ezra knew Chris was calling his bluff. He knew what had driven Ezra outside. Ezra made a face back at the team leader just to show him that he may have called his bluff, but he had not yet won the game.

Chris laughed, revealing the deep dimples on either side of his mouth. The green eyes sparkled with genuine humor at his undercover agent’s silent display of sour grapes.

“Vin and I are taking the horses up to the near pasture,” Chris said, not so much changing the subject as letting Ezra know that this round was in fact over. “You want to come?”

Ezra felt himself relax.

“If we are leaving the horses in the pasture, how did you expect us to return?” he asked lazily.

Chris grinned. “Well, since you’re here, you can drive the Cushman. Otherwise, we had planned to walk.”

Ezra snorted. He glanced out the doors, past the paddock toward the specified pasture. It was not that far, but certainly a lot farther than the distance to the mailbox and back. He glanced at Chris. “It seems a mite further than the mailbox, if you ask me,” Ezra drawled, aiming and hitting his mark.

“Well, I’ve got all day,” Chris drawled back sarcastically, and very nearly imitating Ezra’s tone of voice.

Ezra laughed. “A fair point, Mr. Larabee,” he replied. “In that case I believe I would rather return to the house, and take advantage of the opportunity to catch up on my free time.”

Chris grinned to himself, as he watched Ezra walk away. So, this is how Ezra planned to punish him. The cold shoulder. Fair enough. He didn’t mind really. Not that Ezra needed to know that. He figured he deserved some punishment. After all, he had apparently put the team through hell. He could take whatever Ezra wanted to dish out, so long as Ezra kept dropping hints that he was planning to stay.

“Ready Cowboy?” Vin called from the fenced enclosure outside the barn.

“Ready,” Chris called back. He opened the door to Pony’s stall, and led the gelding out between the
row of stalls and out into the sun-dappled paddock. Talking softly, he led the horse to the fence. He would use the rails to mount.

They intended to forego saddles because they were too heavy to carry back. It would not have been the first time he had mounted the black bareback, but he also knew that he would not be able to swing himself up, yet. Not easily anyway, and Pony was temperamental. The black would not stand still for nonsense. If truth be told, it was one of the reasons he liked the horse. They understood each other.

Vin stood in front of Peso, a horse more ornery than even Pony. He scratched his horse behind the ears like a dog, as he watched Chris lead Pony to the fence.

“Damn ornery horse’s like to throw you right off,” Vin called. “Why don’tcha ride Buck’s grey. She’s easy and you can trust her.”

Chris almost laughed at that. It explained a lot about Buck’s attachment to his horse, he thought philosophically.

He shook his head at Tanner’s suggestion. But he addressed his next words to his horse. “He thinks I oughta throw you over for a girl. Don’t reckon you’d think much of that,” he said quietly, as he climbed the rails and stood facing his mount. The horse regarded him with liquid brown eyes, then nudged him once, hard in the shoulder.

Chris caught himself with the rail tucked tightly between his shins. He grinned and rubbed the long nose. “Didn’t think so. Me an’ you go too far back to let any ol’ girl get in the way, right?”

Without Chris even giving a command or a signal, Pony stepped up alongside the fence, presenting his side, and Chris mounted easily. The blonde leaned forward over the horse’s neck, talking softly. The ears twitched as if in response.

Vin grinned to himself. Like he had really expected Chris to ride some other horse.

“You’d better be nice today,” he said to his own horse as he swung himself up onto Peso’s back. Peso tossed his head as if to say he wasn’t making any guarantees.

The small herd fell into order as they headed for the pasture, Pony in the lead, Peso bringing up the stragglers. Vin watched Chris and Pony from the corner of one eye. If he had doubts about Pony’s temperamental nature, they were rapidly disappearing.

In the years he had worked for Team Seven, since he had acquired Peso, and had been riding the ranch, he had had ample opportunity to see how his friend handled a horse in a bad mood. Much like he handled his agents. He understood the problem, but he didn’t give an inch. Vin had seen Pony try to throw Chris off and attempt to brush him off on low-hanging branches or bare tree trunks. He had frequently seen Chris wrestle the prancing, sunfishing horse in the direction he wanted to go, and he had even seen Pony take a nip out of Larabee’s hide. Once, in a truly rare mood, Vin had seen the black gelding try to roll. Chris must have given the horse hell for that one, he was sure. He had sent Vin on ahead that time, saying that he and Pony were going to have a “talk.” Vin was not sure what that had entailed, precisely, and Chris never said, but Vin had never seen the horse try it again.

Today, Chris’s first day on a horse since his return, and bareback no less, Vin had to admit, Pony seemed to know his business. He had never seen Pony’s gait quite so toned down or seen the horse pick out his trail quite so carefully. He grinned. Ornery or no, Pony was Chris’s horse. The ears swiveled when Chris talked to him. And he greeted Chris with a nicker he gave to no one else. No doubt the horse would have been insulted if Chris had chosen another mount today.
Vin leaned over and asked Peso to take a lesson. Peso tossed his head again, and it was only the sharpshooter’s quick reflexes that kept him from getting smacked in the mouth.

“Damn ornery horse,” Vin growled affectionately.

It proved a long, slow walk back to the house, after seeing the horses safely pastured. They took one brief rest stop under a shade tree. Then Chris sucked up his determination, picked up his pace, and started off for the rest of the way home. Vin shook his head, as he caught up. Sometimes he didn’t know whether to admire Chris for being so stubborn or just haul off and slug him. Often, it was a toss up.

He kept his mouth shut, though. He knew his turn to sound off would be coming up soon enough.

He was not disappointed. He hung around doing chores for the entire morning, making an effort to stay out of the house. He didn’t want Ezra thinking that he didn’t trust him. It wasn’t that exactly. He was just afraid that it all might still blow up in their faces. He believed Josiah when the big profiler said that Chris was the best qualified to handle the undercover agent’s resignation. But still… He forced his train of thought off the tracks and concentrated on the barn wall he was painting. If he weren’t careful, he mused with wry self-deprecation, he was going to run out of jobs to do, and then what excuse would he give for hanging around all day?

He was surprised when he heard the voices on the porch. The brief discussion was followed shortly afterward by a car door shutting, gently to be sure, and the purr of the Jag’s well-maintained motor. He came around from behind the barn to see Ezra’s taillights heading up the driveway. Early. It was not yet one o’clock. Was that good or bad? From across the yard he could feel Chris’s gaze.

“Guess I’m the only one left,” Vin said. It came out harsher than he had meant it to.

“Come on in,” Chris said evenly. If he had heard the edge in Vin’s voice, he gave no sign. *Time to face the music,* Chris thought, and was almost surprised at the apprehension he felt, now that he had pretty much completed the entire picture of what had happened in his absence, and had a pretty good plan in place for how to deal with the results of the official inquiry. He could not fool himself about the source of his apprehension. He knew in his gut, that this conversation would not be about what the team had done while he was away. It would be about what he had done to his team, when he had made the decision to order them out.

Vin changed out of his paint-splotched clothes and cleaned off his hands before he took a seat in the kitchen.

“Hungry?” Chris asked.

“I’m a might thirsty,” Vin said. “Gets hot workin’ out there all day.” He hadn’t meant it the way it sounded.

Chris looked at him exasperated. “I told you…”

Vin waved him off. “I know,” he said. “But there’s work to be done, an’ you can’t do it. But I can.”

Chris sighed and dropped into a chair across from Vin. He pushed a glass of iced tea toward the Texan. They stared at each other for a minute. Chris looked tired. Maybe they shouldn’t have pushed that walk this morning.

Vin let the first few gulps of tea slide down his parched throat. Then he set the glass back on the coaster and began. “What’s left that you don’t already know?” he asked, seriously, looking Chris right in the eye.
A corner of Chris’s mouth twitched up in a sad smile before he answered. “Are we okay?” he asked.

Vin sat back. He hadn’t expected this tactic. He hadn’t prepared a response. He squinted across the table at the blond. Saw no deception there. No strategizing. That was in fact what Chris didn’t know. And that was what he wanted to know first.

Tanner swore inwardly. Outwardly he dropped his eyes to the tabletop and ran his hands through his long, tangled hair. It was a long moment before he looked up. He owed Chris his honesty. It was a point of honor. Vin didn’t feel that he had many such points.

There were a lot of things in his life that he did not look back on with pride. On top of that, his solitary nature and his direct manner had earned him few friends. Even in his Army unit, he had chosen to be a sniper. Sure they worked in pairs, but a sniper was always quintessentially alone. His team depended on him. He depended on himself alone. He was comfortable with that.

But Team Seven had changed him. He needed the team. He needed his friends. And he needed the leader, who had pulled him into the fold, had given him these friends and something Vin considered immeasurably more valuable, his own implicit trust and his friendship. Gifts that Vin had come to understand were offered to few. He knew better than to question why they had been given to him.

He answered slowly. “I don’t know, cowboy.”

Vin saw the regret lance through his friend’s face and then be replaced by thought. Typical Chris, he thought. Take a hit and come up planning what to do now.

He struggled to clarify what he meant. “Sometimes I think we are. I mean, I don’t hate you or anything…”

An expression of undisguised relief flooded through Chris’s face. Vin stopped. Interrupted. Could Chris really have thought… The train of thought ended, crashed, muddled up in a knot of derailed cars. He shook his head. Why the hell would Chris ever think that he could hate him?

He stared hard at his leader. We’re the ones who fucked up, Chris, he thought. You’re the one who should be mad as hell.

Chris ran his hands through his hair and Vin saw the fatigue press him even lower in his chair.

“Listen,” Vin said suddenly, firmly. “Forget I said that.”

Chris looked at him quizzically.

“What I meant is, I’m still mad.” There that was better. More accurate anyway. Except that he didn’t have any idea where he got off having the right to be angry. He didn’t have a leg to stand on there. Still, that was how he felt and there was no getting around it.

The shrug of Chris’s eyebrows and the twist of his lips said it all. No shit, Tanner.

Vin almost smiled. Of course Chris would know he was mad. They had been tiptoeing around each other, nicely, almost politely, since Chris had come back from Texas. But all along, both had been feeling their way along what this disaster had done to their friendship.

It was not like Chris and Buck. They had known each other too long. Weathered storms as bad, and maybe even worse than this one. There were no pretenses left in their relationship. Few little courtesies had even survived the long succession of careers that they had worked together in. In fact, there were days and weeks when the two long-time comrades could hardly manage a civil word to
each other. Yet there was the enduring comfort of perspective, the understanding that everything would one day be simply more water under the bridge. And that mutual respect and affection would outlast it all.

Had he not learned long ago not to judge himself or what precious little he could call his own by other people’s standards, Vin might have been envious of that friendship. But he knew better than to fall into that trap. He simply admired it, and hoped that one day he could call something like it his own.

Lost in consideration of how he could explain himself more clearly, he almost did not hear Chris’s words. “You’ve got a right to be angry.”

Vin’s head shot up at the realization of what he had heard. He stared at Larabee, bug-eyed, suddenly awash in a variety of conflicting feelings that all urgently demanded to be released. They won, all rushing simultaneously up Vin’s throat.

With a disbelieving shake of his head, he blurted out with vehemence that surprised even him, “No I don’t. I don’t have a right to nothin’ except to realize how damn lucky we all are.”

Chris stared at him.

But the gate was open, and nothing Vin thought or did could hold it back now. He half rose from his chair and stabbed his finger down on the table for emphasis. “Don’t matter though whether I got a right or not, I’m still pissed.”

He pinioned Chris with a hot glare, steamrolling to the point that really pissed him off. “I can see a lot from those damn rafters, you know. That’s why you fucking put me up there.”

It took a second for Tanner, red-faced, chest heaving, to catch a breath. And Chris realized in that space just what Vin meant.

Vin saw the realization hit. “That’s right,” he growled. “I saw that goddamn bullet hit you.”


He dropped his voice, brimming over with fury, as he laid out the rest. “An’ I know you took the second one right after. Right before you fuckin’ lied to us about comin’ out in ten.”

He saw the expression come into Chris’s face. As good as a confession. Yeah, Tanner thought. He had known he was lying. He had had no thoughts on how to get out of there. He had just wanted them all to go.

Chris made no attempt to deny it. Vin knew he wouldn’t.

Instead, Chris sank farther into his chair and took a long hard look at his sharpshooter. While Vin glared daggers at him.

Chris exhaled. He spread his palms across the wooden tabletop. Laying his cards down. “I didn’t have much choice,” he said softly but firmly.

Vin snorted. “Fuck you, and your no choice,” he snapped. “You coulda spotted me a target. You coulda given Buck and the others your position.”
Another thought suddenly occurred to him. Another piece fell into place with a sickening clank.

“You turned off your headphones so J.D. couldn’t get a line on you!” And then another piece. “So we couldn’t come back for you.”

Chris flinched. Caught.

Tanner’s eyes flashed fire. “You son of a bitch,” he bit out, rising to his feet. Out of breath. Hands clenched rigid at his side. Willing himself not to deck Chris right now.

Chris pushed himself up to full sitting height. He pressed his palms down against the table and willed himself to think and speak clearly. He looked the furious sniper full in the eye.

“And if I had done as you suggest,” he said calmly. “If I had done any of those things, who would be dead right now?”

Anger flashed through Vin’s eyes. He had no reply. Knowing the reasons why didn’t make him any less angry.

“You didn’t think we’d figure it out?” Vin spat back.

Chris stopped himself from shrugging. Forced himself to remain still. “You’re the first,” he said evenly.

Vin’s glare was hot and deadly.

“So it’s all right, as long as the only one who gets killed is you?” he demanded.

Chris’s surprised ears heard the answer hit the air a moment too late to stop it. A simple word. “Yes.”

He didn’t know why he had said it. He sure as hell hadn’t meant to. And he was angry that he had. Wished there were a way to take it back.

Not that it wasn’t true. He knew in the bottom of his gut and down through his entire being that it was true. But he also knew down to his toes that no one else needed to know it. And there were some who should never know it. He swore silently.

Vin’s next words caught in his throat. He choked on them. Stunned. Just like that. He had never expected to hear it. The truth in that one word. He sat down abruptly.

They stared at each other for a long moment.

“You asked,” Chris said suddenly, dryly, regretfully.

“Shit,” Vin said vehemently. Then he swore several more times repeatedly. In words that made Chris flinch.

He leveled a finger at Chris. “You listen to me, you stupid bastard,” he said. “Come Monday, you’re my boss again, but today I figure we’re on an even footing.”

There was no mistaking the Texan’s tone. And Chris listened. He knew he had no choice.

“You got six men who’d give their lives for you,” Tanner growled. “Who’d follow you to hell and back and fight the devil himself on your say-so. But I’m gonna knock you on your ass the next time I hear you say somethin’ like that. You made Buck and me fuckin’ leave you behind. You made us hate ourselves and each other for doin’ it. I’m not goin’ through that again. You plan on dyin’ on a bust, you just get it through your god damn thick skull right now that I’m goin’ right down with
The words echoed in the kitchen. And inside Chris’s head.

He ran a hand over his face, suddenly feeling like he was a hundred years old. Sometimes he really hated being in charge.

“It ain’t gonna be like that, cowboy,” he said softly, evenly, firmly. Tanner still breathing hard, still seething across from him. “It’s my job to take care of the team.”

He saw the protest start and interrupted it. “My job is to take care of the team,” he repeated, firmly.

His gaze bored into Tanner’s. “And your job is to watch the team’s back,” he said, scanning the sharpshooter’s angular face for signs that he disagreed. There were none. “So long as it is in my power to protect this team, I’m going to do just that. And if you’re not going to follow my orders, then I need to know. Because my orders aren’t open for discussion.”

His tone was flat. And Vin knew that he had been wrong about the even footing. Not in this discussion.

He dropped his eyes. “Regardless of consequence to yourself?” he growled.

Chris could hear the shreds of rebellion in the tight tones. But he could also hear them breaking up.

“Regardless,” he repeated firmly.

Vin swore again. At length. Then he fell silent.

“I need to know, Cowboy,” Chris urged gently. “This one’s up to you.”

“God damn it, Chris,” Vin seethed. “Do you know what you’re asking?”

Chris’s gaze did not waver. “I’m asking you to trust me.”

Vin’s laugh was short and bitter. “There’s not a damn thing on this earth that I don’t trust you with,” he replied. “Except yourself.”

Chris managed to hold back his own bitter laugh. He had heard that before, in one form or another.

When the blue eyes returned to his, there was a request in them. A plea. Something he thought he’d never see in the proud, stubborn Texan. Cold, guilty fingers clenched on his heart.

“I can’t make that promise, Cowboy,” Chris replied to the unspoken question. “All I can give you is the truth.”

Vin struggled to swallow around the lump in his throat. He forced the words out. “And that is?”

Chris smiled slightly, but his eyes remained earnest. “I’m not looking for death,” he said. He gave a self-deprecating shrug. “I’ve discovered I have a lot to live for.”

Vin’s mouth turned down at the corners. “It’s taken you a hell of a long time to figure that out,” he snapped.

“Three years,” Chris replied.

Vin searched the green gaze for signs of deception. This was the truth. All that Vin had told Ezra
was true. All that he had feared was also true. Chris was not looking to die, but if he had to, to save the team, he would. Simple. An acceptable exchange—to Chris.

Vin’s thoughts shifted, turning to Buck.

“Losing you will kill us,” he said matter of factly. Certain now. And knowing that Chris needed to know that his death would not save the team.

A logical maneuver, Chris thought. A last ditch effort to point out the error in his reasoning. The flaw in the maneuver was that this had nothing to do with cold reason and everything to do with who he was at heart. The self that he had lost, and whom he had found again thanks to a tenacious good friend who forgave without condition or limit; a straight-shooting Texan sharpshooter who didn’t need words to demonstrate his great integrity and compassion; a cynical profiler who nevertheless refused to let cynicism interfere with his belief in the basic goodness of mankind; a healer who never gave up and never gave in and had the courage to continue to care, sometimes in spite of the men he cared for; an undercover agent who believed that as long as he held himself separate he would never be vulnerable, but who, despite himself, had come to care, making himself vulnerable, and in the process found himself to be a better man than he had ever expected; and finally, an idealistic youth, who had joined them to fight crime, to take bad guys off the street, to become like men he admired almost too much for his own good, but whose spark of idealism and forthright good nature, reminded them all again and again why they were on the job. To protect the innocent. Which sometimes included each other.

Chris and Vin locked eyes for a long time.

Chris did not bother to deny Vin’s assertion. He did not believe it. But he had begun to see that Vin was not the only one who felt that way. Only time or bad luck would put that belief to the test. But his faith in them was implicit. They would survive. Could survive anything. So long as they had each other.

Vin broke off his gaze. Submitted. It was not his call to make. And as he had told Ezra, he could not change Chris. It was part of who Chris was.

Come Monday, they’d be back in the bullpen, and facing the official inquiry. But today and for the rest of the weekend, they were just seven twisted, messed up guys, who had taken some bad licks from life and had somehow found each other. He turned his eyes thoughtfully back to Chris. No, not somehow, he amended his thought. In some strange way, Chris had known what they needed and given it to them. Given them the gift of each other.

The silence went unbroken until Vin’s stomach growled suddenly.

Both men smiled. Identical smart-ass grins.

“You got anything to eat around here?” Vin asked gruffly.

“You know where everything is,” Chris retorted. “Get it yourself.”

“Yer a piss poor host, Larabee,” Vin said moving to the telephone.

“What are you doing?” Chris asked suspiciously.

“Orderin’ pizza,” Vin retorted. He gestured at the refrigerator. “You don’t think I’m eatin’ that crap again do ya?"

Chris listened to him order and state his name, repeating back a dollar amount and a length of time.
He hung up.

“Yer drivin’,” he said to Chris, wearing that shit-eating grin.

Chris got up. By the time they got to the place, the pizza would be done.

“Yer buyin’, too,” Tanner said.

“Don’t push your luck,” Chris retorted.

They were still arguing when they got in the car.

“You just wait, Larabee,” Vin said. “Payback’s a bitch.”

He heard the laugh, real and deep. “Don’t wait too long, Tanner. I plan to be fully requalified before the month is out.”

“That I’d like to see,” Vin shot back.

Chris grinned as he pulled out of the driveway. He knew the unvarnished truth when he heard it, even when it came from a smart-ass Texan.
Chapter 10

The elevator was crowded, or perhaps only seemed that way because of the outrageously blatant flirting being perpetrated by Buck Wilmington in one corner. J.D. stared at the numbers on the display and willed the elevator to go faster, wondering how the hell it could take so long to go up a mere eleven floors.

“Well, Karin,” the tall, handsome agent purred, bending slightly to read her security tag. “How ‘bout I come see you in the copy room around ten, an’ we can call that our first date.” He winked. “Then you’ll have no problem kissing me this Saturday.”

There was a giggle.

J.D. rolled his eyes and fought the urge to make gagging noises. The elevator opened none too soon. He stepped off into the familiar hallway. A moment later, the soft, urgent dinging sound behind him alerted him that Buck was still in the elevator, one hand on the doorway keeping it open, still making eyes at the new copy clerk.

Exasperated, J.D. reached back a hand and yanked Buck out by the back of the jacket.

“He’ll see you at ten,” he said curtly to the young copy clerk as the door closed.

Buck straightened his jacket and glared at J.D. “Now that was downright rude,” he growled. “What’s got into you boy?”

“It’s our first day off suspension,” J.D. snapped back. “Don’t you think it’d be a good idea to get to the office on time?”

“What for?” Buck retorted with a mocking wink. “Chris probably ain’t gonna be back from gettin’ his doctor’s note till around ten or so. I’ve still got plenty of time.” He paused to say hello to a passing intern, admiring the curve of her calf.

J.D. rolled his eyes in irritation. “Best I can figure out, you’ve still got an hour or so available on Sunday. Why don’t you go see if she’s free?”

Buck grinned slyly. “Maybe I’ll do that,” he replied. “Gotta make up for all that lost time.”

They were still trading jibes when they went through the already open bullpen door. Buck stopped in mid sentence, clutching his heart in shock.

“J.D.,” he whispered hoarsely, dramatically letting go of his chest to grab onto J.D.’s arm with one hand. “Look over there and tell me if you see it. An’ if you see it, tell me what it is.”

“What it is, Mr. Wilmington,” Ezra Standish drawled, straightening an already impeccable Windsor knot in his silk tie, “is someone who dresses appropriately for work. I know it’s a difficult concept to grasp, but once you get over that hurdle, you might even try it once.”

Buck walked slowly from one side of the undercover agent to the other, eyeing him from head to toe. He tapped his watch and made a show of holding it to his ear to see if it still worked.

“It sounds like Ezra Standish,” he said in exaggerated wonder, walking slowly toward Nathan, already at his desk and logging in to his computer. “It looks like Ezra Standish. Hell, it even smells like Ezra Standish.” He paused, dropping his voice. “But it can’t be Ezra Standish because it’s not
even eight thirty.”

He whirled suddenly, pouncing onto the undercover agent, and demanding, “What have you done with Standish, you imposter!”

Ezra bent away from him, nonplussed. “If you insist on invading my personal space, the least you could do is wear a reasonably good quality cologne. Now please remove yourself from my desk.”

Josiah’s cheerfully booming “Good morning, my brothers!” drowned out Buck’s retort.

“Morning, Josiah,” J.D. returned, feeling strangely as if it were the first day of school. As if it had been months since he had seen them instead of merely a day or two.

Josiah gave J.D. a wide smile before bending his tall frame behind his desk near Nathan’s.

Vin grinned silently to himself, as he rifled his desk drawer looking to see what snacks he had left.

“Who made the coffee?” J.D. called, rising from his desk and giving Vin a suspicious look. If Chris wasn’t here yet, that meant that Vin had been the first to arrive.

Vin grinned even wider at the question.

“I made the coffee,” Ezra grumbled.

At the pronouncement, Buck fell right off of Ezra’s desk and lay spread eagled on the floor.

Ezra looked down at him with thinly veiled irritation. “Will someone please remove this refuse from the office floor?”

Buck looked up at the ceiling and moaned. “The universe is upside down. Night is day. Day is night. The end is near!”

“Get up, Buck,” J.D. hissed. “You never know who might come down here.”

“Killjoy,” Buck retorted, peeling himself off the floor and tossing himself into his desk chair.

Josiah went by, clutching something in both hands. He disappeared into Chris’s office, noting the fresh new door standing open on its shiny new hinges.

The other five agents stared at him and then each other.

“What was that?” J.D. snorted leaning over toward Vin.

They all got up and went to the doorway. Standing on Chris’s coaster was a monstrosity of a mug, cobbled together from pottery clay and the pressed in pieces of Chris’s shattered coffee cup. Josiah was looking at it thoughtfully, appraisingly, as it sat, somehow hunchbacked, on the coaster.

“I repeat,” J.D. said, hardly able to talk for laughing. “What the hell is that?”

“Frankenstein’s mug,” Vin muttered.

“An apt comparison,” Ezra agreed, looking at the lopsided, overgrown, off-center contraption.

Josiah shrugged, unperturbed.

“Couldn’t you just buy a new cup?” Nathan asked, squinting at what had once been a perfectly
serviceable coffee cup and now seemed to be a modern art commentary on the ravages of caffeine.

“He likes that one,” J.D. pointed out.

“Not any more he won’t,” Buck snorted out through his stifled laugh.

Josiah smiled a quiet smile. “Sure he will,” he replied.

The others stared at him.

“It’ll hold more coffee,” he said smugly, as he walked out of the small office and returned to his desk.

The others were still laughing when they heard the far off ding of the elevator. Vin leaped toward the bullpen door. ‘Scuse me,” he said, darting into the hallway outside.

A moment later, the noise of applause and shrill whistling echoed down from the offices and cubicles beyond. Moving toward the door, they joined right in.

Chris stood at the elevator bank, entirely in black from head to toe except for his yellow hair and his face, which had grown extremely red. He appeared to be minutely examining his shiny black shoes. He let the noise go a moment longer before looking up at Tanner, standing among the “audience” he had clearly orchestrated. He threw the sniper a black glance that promised vengeance.

Larabee held up a hand. The noise quieted.

“Thank you,” he said. He gave an embarrassed smile to the mostly female staff, and moved rather quickly toward the bullpen door. The five agents in the doorway moved swiftly to their desks and pretended they had been there all along.

“Whew! That was some speech,” Vin said falling into step behind Chris as they came through the bullpen door. “Thought for a minute you’d never quit jawin’.”

“I oughta shoot you, Tanner,” Chris growled not even looking behind him.

Vin’s insubordinate grin was so wide, Nathan thought he might strain a muscle.

They paused at the door to Chris’s office. Buck suddenly leaped to his feet and threw himself into the doorway, arms spread, blocking the way.

“Not so fast, there, Slick,” he said, mockingly, crooking a finger at Chris. “Lemme see the note first.”

Chris reached into the inside pocket of his black jacket as if he were looking for a gun, and gave Buck a smile that would have made his blood run cold had he not known Chris quite so well. Instead of a gun, the blond team leader pulled out a folded piece of paper from a prescription pad. He waved it across Buck’s line of vision. Buck grabbed for it, but he pulled it back.

“Let me see it.” Buck said in the voice one uses when asking a toddler to show you what he is hiding so earnestly behind his back.

Chris made no reply, but his smile grew more evil. Buck moved out of the way.

“What the hell happened to my coffee cup?” Chris’s amazed voice asked, floating out from the office.

“Mr. Sanchez has had its capacity enhanced,” Ezra drawled from his desk. “To the detriment of its
appearance.”

Chris appeared in the doorway holding the mug by the handle as if testing whether it would really hold together. He looked at Ezra, a tiny smile crossing his face. He glanced up at the bullpen clock and gave the undercover agent the barest of approving nods.

Ezra allowed the tiniest hint of a smile to smugly cross his own face before he returned to scanning the e-mail that had piled up in his recent absence.

Chris raised the mug in a salute toward Josiah, then headed into the kitchenette to fill it. He returned, tried his new key in his new door, settled into his chair, logged into his computer and leaned back, listening to his agents teasing, jibing, picking incessantly at each other. He grinned as he let the sound envelop him. Then finally he gave a heavy sigh, grateful for the extra large cup of coffee, and called in his first agent.

The five remaining agents fell silent, exchanging glances as Josiah entered the office, closing the door behind him. Chris raised his eyebrows in question, as Josiah took his seat. The profiler nodded his head once to say he was ready, and Chris pressed the record button on a voice recorder beside him. He gave the date, his name, the purpose of the investigation and the name and position of the interviewee. He looked back up at Josiah and fired off the first question. The official inquiry had begun.

Josiah Sanchez was grilled for more than an hour over material he had already gone over back at the ranch. This time Chris took careful notes, went over details, backtracked and double-checked facts. Josiah had to admire his thoroughness. If he hadn’t already known better, he might not have noticed the questions that Chris, with great subtlety, did not ask.

The profiler knew Chris Larabee to be a man of great integrity. Admittedly, he did not always accomplish his tasks using the time-honored methods preferred by convention and politics, but he had a rock-solid code of right and wrong, the ethics, by which he lived, worked, and had proven his willingness to die. If he turned in his report and something in it raised a red flag, Travis would send Larabee right back to ask his team the very questions he was avoiding. And if Travis sent him back, Chris would have to ask them.

Josiah knew that Chris would be careful to prevent that from happening. But he also knew that if it came down to it, Larabee would willingly violate his own integrity to save the team from the ramifications of their own actions. Josiah mentally hauled another heavy stone up the great pile representing his own sins and plopped it right down on the top.

He heaved a sigh as he exited Chris’s office, closing the door behind him. He ran a hand over his face and then looked up at the five faces watching him expectantly. He did not have time to answer any of their unvoiced questions before his phone rang. He moved quickly to answer it.

They could hear the grim acceptance in his voice as he spoke. “Yes, sir. I’m on my way up.”

He paused, noticing they were still staring at him. “Travis,” he said simply.

Buck swore under his breath. “Doesn’t waste any time,” he muttered.

J.D. squinted at him, trying to control the sudden fear on his face. “I thought Chris was conducting our inquiry,” he said trying to sound merely puzzled.

Buck’s mouth pulled into a tight straight line. “He is. But Travis is conducting Chris’s inquiry.”

J.D. looked confused for only a moment. Then he inhaled sharply, his mouth forming a perfect “o”.
“I didn’t know,” he said quietly, after a moment.

Ezra snorted. “Let no act of self preservation go uninvestigated or unpunished,” he said, his voice holding a sharp edge.

“What did you expect?” Nathan responded sharply. “He let an armed assailant have his badge and gun. Did you think they’d just let that slide by?”

“And violated any number of other protocols,” Buck added grimly.

“And we have to testify against him?” J.D. asked angrily.

“You just have to tell Travis what you saw,” Vin replied calmly, resignedly.

J.D. stared at him. “And that’s okay with you?”

Vin shrugged. He wasn’t happy about it, but what choice did they have? “We take our lumps. Chris takes his. That’s the way it goes.”

Yeah, Buck thought. And having a bigger fish to fry takes the heat off the rest of us. He did not dare voice his thought out loud. But the glance Vin threw his way told him clearly that he wasn’t the only one who had some suspicions about how Chris was planning to play this out. Or how dearly the directors needed to rake someone over the coals for this. His good mood evaporated.

Josiah did not return again until two more hours had passed. By that time, Nathan had had his turn in Chris’s office for nearly the same length of time. He emerged, closing the door behind him in time to see Josiah re-enter the bullpen.

Buck and J.D. looked up at Josiah questioningly. They could see the anger written in the lines of his face.

“Is Travis alone?” Buck asked.

Josiah shook his head in response, not trusting his voice not to simply spill out the epithets he was thinking.

Buck swore. “He’s a got a director with him?”

“Two,” Josiah returned through his teeth.

Buck swore again. He looked over at Vin from the corner of his eye.

They glanced over at the closed office door.

Nathan’s mind wandered instantly back to a Texas hotel room and their hurried conversation about not bringing Chris into the inquiry. He had tried to tell them then, and he was proven correct now; their actions would drag Chris through the mud right along with them. He clamped his mouth shut tight and headed suddenly for the coffee maker. Saying “I told you so” would not do anyone any good.

“This could go bad for all of us,” Buck said, looking especially at J.D.

J.D. sighed. “But we knew that when we went,” he said firmly.

Buck rolled his eyes. That wasn’t his point. He let it slide. He didn’t see the point of belaboring what he himself had only recently come to realize. He threw an angry look at the medic’s retreating back
and cursed him for being right.

At one o’clock, Buck unfolded himself from his desk chair and crossed the bullpen to Chris’s office. He paused only long enough to knock on the closed door before letting himself right in. Chris looked up at his entrance. The fact that he neither glared nor commented on the intrusion showed that the team leader’s attention was clearly elsewhere.

“Lunch?” Wilmington asked.

Chris looked up at him, slightly dazed. He blinked and jerked his eyes toward the clock on his computer. Checked it against his watch. He rubbed his forehead unconsciously with one hand, the thought he had been pursuing now fragmented.

Buck narrowed his eyes. He did not comment on the fatigue he saw in Chris’s face. He was beginning to think he’d have to ask the question again, when Chris finally decided to answer.

“Right,” the blond said, suddenly collecting himself. “Sounds good. I’m starving.”

His tone was too automatic. From the corner of his eye, Buck watched Chris push himself to his feet, both hands on the desktop. Buck said nothing. He hoped Chris planned to go home early. Like maybe right after lunch.

Chris reached over to pull his suit jacket off the sofa, wincing slightly with the stretching motion. They had forgotten to put a hook on the back of his new door. He slid stiffly into the sleeves.

“Where to?” he asked, forcing an easy tone.


Chris smiled faintly back and nodded at the suggestion.

* * *

It took a mere moment for Chris’s eyes to adjust to the dim interior of the bar and restaurant, but it took less than that for the exclamation to reach his ears.

“Señor Larabee!” Inez exclaimed in delight, throwing down her white bar towel and hurrying around the bar toward the door. She stopped before him and looked him over with narrowed eyes. “I think we need to fatten you up,” she said sternly.

His embarrassed smile revealed his dimples as he looked suddenly at the floor. On impulse she laid a hand on one cheek, and kissed him on the other. “How we all have missed you!” she said warmly. Then she let him go to his friends, who were already sliding into their table.

J.D. was elbowing Buck mercilessly in the ribs.

“Yeah, yeah, I saw,” Buck grumbled. He hadn’t even had time to start a line of patter, and Chris had already stolen a kiss from the pretty Latina proprietor that he had been flirting with and asking out for the better part of the last three years, to no avail despite his obvious charm and much vaunted animal magnetism. It had become a running joke with the team.

“I don’t recall her ever kissing you,” J.D. said thoughtfully.

Vin grinned. He handed Ezra five dollars under the table.

“Shut up,” Buck growled, but his blue eyes twinkled as Chris slid into his accustomed seat at their
Buck leaned in close to his oldest friend. “Must be that big bar tab Team Eight ran up, waitin’ for you to come back. ‘Cause it sure ain’t your good looks.”

Chris smiled to himself but kept silent. He had paid Team Eight’s bill days ago, by credit card, over the phone, over top of Inez’s insistence that the drinks had been on the house. A reward for the safe return of a good friend. He had pretended not to hear it. Just like he was pretending right now that she hadn’t just kissed him. Although, he had to admit he was enjoying how J.D. was nettling Buck.

A young waitress took their orders. She blushed when Buck called her “darlin’”. She disappeared into the kitchen.

Inez smiled to herself, filling their drink orders. All soft drinks. It was a work day. She could hear them talking, laughing. A sound she had missed.

She had worried about them all while they were away. Then Team Eight had come in. Agent Stone had swaggered up to the bar and demanded that she open Chris Larabee’s tab. She had stared at him aghast, felt anger rise, until she realized that Stone had his tongue stuck in his cheek as if he were a cat hiding the pet canary in its jaws. Practically bursting with the news. “He owes us a round of drinks for savin’ his butt and bringin’ him back alive.”

Inez had stared at him in disbelief. Agent Stone had grinned back at her, the rest of his team joining him at the bar.

“Señor Chris is alive?” she had asked in wonder.

The men of Team Eight all began to tell the story of how they had found him, each man competing to be heard over the others. In the confusion she could not follow much of it.

She stuck two fingers in her mouth and let loose a shrill whistle.

The men of Team Eight and most of the rest of the patrons in the bar had stopped talking immediately. She had ignored the rest of the patrons looking at her expectantly. “Señor Chris is alive and you all found him?” she had asked to be sure she had heard right.

“Technically,” Agent Gustin had replied smugly. “I found him.”

“Ryan Kelly says they’ll probably keep him at the hospital a few more days. But he an’ his bad attitude oughta be back in a few weeks,” Stone supplied

Inez had smiled back at him. “Then I will buy the first round. Señor Larabee can buy the second.”

The men of Team Eight had cheered and high-fived each other, then bellied close to the bar and began shouting out their drink orders.

She smiled at the remembrance and glanced over at the seven of them again. Glad to see that seat in the center properly filled again. Glad to see the twinkle restored to Agent Wilmington’s blue eyes. Glad to see that sly smile on Señor Vin’s face again. Glad to see the young one’s exuberance restored. Glad to see Agents Jackson and Sanchez looking less serious and Agent Standish collecting money under the table. Glad most of all to see that rare smile the quiet leader had given her as she set a very large cup of coffee in front of him.

They took the full hour for lunch. Everyone pretended not to notice that Chris only ate half of his burger. Deep in conversation with J.D., Buck never interrupted his commentary or looked away as
he sprinkled some extra salt on the rest of his fries and pushed the plate toward Chris with his elbow. He kicked the blond under the table.

Chris flicked him an exasperated glance and continued his conversation with Josiah and Nathan. Buck smiled as he watched the fries slowly disappear anyway.

Immediately after they returned from lunch, Travis called Chris upstairs.

“What’s up?” Buck asked when Chris announced where he was headed. He knew it was too soon for Chris to be telling his side. They had only spoken to Josiah so far. Chris would be last.

Chris shrugged. “I’ll find out when I get up there,” he said philosophically.

J.D. relaxed visibly as Chris left the room.

Buck shook his head. Kid was wound up tighter ’n a clock spring. He’d been jiggling his left knee so hard all morning that Buck’s desk began to vibrate and Ezra had complained sarcastically about minor localized earthquakes. The boy needed something to do besides sit and worry over what he was going to tell the brass. Buck looked at the clock. Depending on how long they needed Chris for, nobody would be interrogating anybody for possibly the next hour or so. He searched his brain for an errand he could send J.D. on.

Buck suddenly spouted a stream of epithets that turned the air around him blue.

“What?” J.D. demanded alarmed.

“Of all the stupid… God damn it, you’d think a man would learn after a while…,” Buck snarled.

“What happened?” J.D. asked again, getting to his feet.

Buck could feel the others staring at him. Tense.

Buck balled up a piece of notepaper and threw it down on his desk disgustedly. He looked up at J.D. sheepishly. “I deleted that damn file again.”

“What?” J.D. said in disbelief.

Buck groaned. “I renamed it before we left. Thought it was somethin’ else, so I trashed it. I just emptied the bin. God damn, it,” he moaned. “This’ll be the third time I’ve had to write that damn memo.”

J.D. looked at Buck exasperated. He got up from his chair. “Get up,” he snapped.

Buck got up slowly, looking chagrined.

“I swear, Buck,” J.D. grumbled, sliding into the desk chair. “You’d think a man would learn…” The young agent, their computer whiz, set to work searching out where in the network the trashed file might still be.

“I know, kid,” Buck said sheepishly. Behind J.D.’s head, he couldn’t help but grin. “Guess I’ll get me some coffee.” Buck said, knowing that he had thrown that file out real good this time and it would take J.D. some phone calls to IT to get it reinstated. More than likely, J.D. would go down to IT himself to get it done faster, and so he could complain about it.

When Buck returned with his coffee, he saw J.D. working away, grouchy, talking to himself a blue streak. Buck smiled a smug, self-congratulatory smile that was hidden entirely by his coffee cup.
Vin gave him a knowing smile. Nathan, Josiah, and Ezra each nodded their silent approval.

* * *

Orin Travis flicked his gaze back and forth between his two senior agents. He had started out the meeting intending to send Chris Larabee home early, but now what he really wanted was to put the Team Seven leader under a hot spotlight and grill him. Something didn’t fit quite right and he wanted to know what it was. But pale as it was, Larabee’s poker face was too good to give anything away other than his perfectly appropriate reaction to the news Travis had just dropped.

On top of that, Travis had to admit he wasn’t sure how deeply he wanted to go to find out what might be causing his gut feeling. God knew he had enough that he did know about that he was required to investigate. Nevertheless, the Assistant Director did not bother to keep his suspicion and exasperation off his face. If Larabee noticed, he did not show it.

Kelly gave a sidelong glance to his Team Seven counterpart, wondering how it was that Larabee was still vertical. And playing the game to the hilt. Doug Stone had whined for three straight hours his first day back from getting his gall bladder out—and he hadn’t even had to stay in the hospital.

“You’ll have to hand over your files and the results of your investigations. And you’ll have to meet with Team Eight to discuss those results.” Travis continued stonily.

As he said it, Travis scanned his Team Seven Team Leader’s face closely for proof of his deception. He got a tight-lipped grimace.

“That’s two years worth of work that my team has done,” Chris pointed out, a hard edge in his voice.

Travis noted the edge with some exasperation, and a small part of him began to wonder when he had started to become paranoid.

“Sir,” Kelly broke in, looking uncomfortable. “Team Seven’s done all the work on this. I can’t bring my team in at the eleventh hour.”

Travis leveled a glare at Kelly. “Team Eight has been ordered to take over this investigation. Are you refusing?”

Kelly grimaced. “I’m not refusing,” he replied, keeping his voice even. “I’m saying that it’s not your usual policy to call in another team to take over an investigation, unless there’s a problem.”

Travis let out a sharp grunt of disgust. “Oh there’s been a problem, all right.”

Out of the corner of his eye he saw Chris flinch.

“There’s been no problem with our investigation,” Chris returned, clearly struggling to keep his voice calm, reasonable.

Kelly’s eyes flicked over to his Team Seven counterpart.

Travis’s eyes narrowed as he turned back to Chris.

“We put in two years of work on this investigation,” Larabee pointed out, anger rising in his voice. “Two years, and a whole lot of our own sweat and blood.”

Travis’s voice was cold and sharp. “Your team’s problems have superceded jurisdictional issues,” he snapped.
Chris narrowed his eyes back at his supervisor. Only the twitch in the tendons in his neck showed his effort to keep his temper under control.

Travis deliberately turned away from his most troublesome Senior Agent, returning his gaze to the leader of Team Eight. “The federal government wants someone on this right away,” he said evenly. “And Team Seven isn’t available to move on this.”

Kelly shifted slightly in his chair. “It’s going to take a while for Team Seven to fill us in on two years worth of work,” he hedged. Hopeful that Travis might see that Team Seven might be available by the time they had finished going over the files with Team Eight.

Travis somehow managed to direct his words to Chris, without removing his eyes from Ryan’s face. “Yes,” the gray-haired director replied icily. “It will give Team Seven something to do, while they await the consequences of their poor decisions.”

At that, Travis received a real Larabee glare, animating the bloodless face with its intensity. That just made Travis angrier.

Ryan Kelly looked from one to the other and realized he’d rather be sitting on a pile of hot coals than in this room, filled with the deadly flying shrapnel of accusations yet to be answered and punishments waiting to be levied. When the door to Travis’s office did open and spit them back out into the waiting room, he went first, feeling the tension rolling out behind him. He cleared the waiting room and stopped to breathe out the clearer air of the hallway beyond. Larabee was a lot slower, and somehow Kelly didn’t think it was his injuries, so much as stubborn resentment at the order he had just been given.

Kelly was still breathing the clearer air of the hallway, when he felt Chris and the big chip on his shoulder step up beside him. He couldn’t help but look over. Chris was staring intently back through the waiting room toward the closing interior door of Travis’s office. After the door had closed completely, he turned glittering green eyes to Ryan.

Ryan didn’t blame Chris for his resentment. God knew he’d be furious, too, if they tried to take away a major investigation he’d had his team on for two years and hand it to another team. Yet, he also knew there wasn’t much Team Seven could say about it, given the circumstances.

Kelly inhaled. “Chris,” he began, aware that he sounded pained. “I didn’t…”

Chris narrowed his eyes. “I know you didn’t. Don’t worry about it,” he said curtly.

Kelly spread his palms, as if he wanted to say more. He did. He just didn’t know what.

“Consider it a reward for your good work,” Chris said sarcastically. He gave Kelly one last glance before turning on his heel and heading in the opposite direction.

Kelly stared after him. Chris was pissed. That was clear. He could hear the anger vibrating in the air when he spoke. But still, Ryan could have sworn he had seen something else entirely in that last glance.

* * *

Chris returned to the Team Seven bullpen glowering like a black thundercloud.

“Pull together your files on Dowd,” he announced. “We’re handing the whole investigation over to Team Eight.”
Voices raised in immediate, virulent protest. He held up his hand and glared at them fiercely.
“Travis’s orders. Just do it.”

He disappeared into his office and, uncharacteristically, closed the door—again. Muffling the protests behind him.

He did not call anyone else in that afternoon. Nor did he come out. Around five, it was Buck who knocked on the door.

“Come in,” the clipped voice said.
Buck poked his head in. Testing the air. Wondering if he’d get his head bit off.

“What happened?” he asked, coming all the way in and sliding into a chair across from Chris’s desk.

“What happened?” Chris snapped, loudly enough that the others could hear him through the open office door. “You went fucking AWOL,” he growled. “So now when they want to turn up the heat on the investigation, we’re not available to do it.”
Buck flinched. He started to open his mouth. He wasn’t sure what he meant to say, maybe to apologize again. He didn’t know, but whatever it was, it died suddenly as he met the glittering green glare head on. He reached over instinctively and shut the door.

Chris waited until the voices started up again outside before he spoke again, staring intently at Buck. “Military intelligence got a line on some rocket launchers they believe were acquired by Dowd,” he said, his voice strangely flat compared to the intensity of his gaze. “Since our regional office has been investigating Dowd, they asked for our immediate cooperation.”

“And Team Eight is immediately available?” Buck asked.

“Travis just cleared their decks for action,” Chris replied.
Buck leaned back in his chair and regarded Chris silently for a moment. “Military intelligence?” he asked slowly.


This time Buck caught it. He sat up in his chair. “When do you want us ready to brief Team Eight?”

“As soon as possible,” Chris answered. He turned back to his computer.
Buck knew from the gesture that he was dismissed. He shut the door again on his way out.

_Damn!_ He thought. God it hurt to give up two years worth of work and what would have been a huge coup in their team dossier.

On the other hand, he couldn’t prove it and wouldn’t swear to it under oath or anywhere else, but somewhere down in his gut he was absolutely certain that Chris had done this. He had taken it out of their hands. Taken away the question of what to do about what they had discovered. Done his duty by the ATF and the public. Given Team Eight a juicy thank you gift. And fixed it so the information couldn’t be traced back.

J.D. watched his best friend and teammate, as he came out of the team leader’s office. Buck sat down
in his desk chair, looking sort of blank. J.D. stared at him curiously. He waited and when no acknowledgement of what had happened was forthcoming, he voiced his own opinion aloud. “This sucks,” he announced, prompting the other five agents to look up at him.

Buck blinked, as if catching up. “Yup,” he agreed but without force. Then he turned back to his computer. He had started this. He had brought Chris in on this secret by telling him what they found out. Now he could never tell what Chris had done.

He logged off and announced that he was leaving for the day. Team Eight could wait one more damn day before they started stealing their files away.

J.D. agreed and stood up after him.

Vin and Ezra gave each other a long glance.

They sighed in unison. “If we run now,” Ezra suggested, tilting his head toward the closed office door, “then someone else will have to make sure he leaves at a decent time.”

Vin grinned. He didn’t bother to say that he thought that a decent time would have been before Travis had called Chris up. Instead he just stood up and stretched. He jerked his own head toward the office door. “You just go along now, Ez,” he drawled mockingly. “I ain’t afraid of Larabee.”

Ezra cocked an eyebrow at the sharpshooter expectantly.

Vin winked. “He don’t move so fast yet.”

“Good luck, then,” Ezra said shortly. He left the area immediately.

Nathan and Josiah left at a more civilized pace, hanging out only long enough to hear Chris say that he was in fact leaving very shortly, and to see Vin plant himself in one of Chris’s visitor chairs, replying that he’d just wait until Chris was ready then.

Chris glanced up at Nathan and Josiah. They looked away again and moved off toward the elevators.

In the ensuing silence, Vin cocked his head to one side and regarded Chris. “Thought you’d be madder,” he said quietly, staring at his friend intently.

Chris flicked a quick impatient glance at him. “Can’t fight the whole U.S. government,” he replied. “What choice do we have?”

Vin didn’t reply. There’s always a choice, Cowboy, he thought. You taught me that. Chris had given this battle away, rationally, sensibly, reasonably, obediently, and way too easily.

Chris looked back up at him, his lips twitching up in a sudden smirk that dissolved so quickly, only someone who knew him well would have noticed it. Vin read its meaning as I’ll never tell.

Chris turned off his computer. “Let’s get out of here,” he snapped irritatedly.

Vin smiled as he followed his black-clad leader out to the elevators. Damn sneaky, Larabee, he thought to himself. Remind me never to turn my back on your bad side.

* * *

Chris didn’t show up at the office until nearly ten the next morning. He gave no explanation for his late arrival. He took a look around the bullpen, made a few inquiries about the collection of the files on Dowd, and asked Buck to put together a timetable for setting up briefings with Team Eight. Then
he went into his own office and dropped his coat and briefcase onto the couch and slid behind his desk.

Nathan paused in the doorway on his way up to face Travis. He shot Chris a hard look, noting the Team Leader looked even more tired than he had yesterday.

J.D. must have noticed as well because a second later, the youth brought the coffee pot to Chris’s door.

Chris glanced up at the medic impatiently. If Nathan had been more suspicious or less charitable, he might have called the look defiant. He glowered back, but he clamped his jaw together and said nothing, moving on toward the bullpen door, and the corridor beyond. Silently reaming Chris out in his head.

J.D. slipped behind Nathan into the Team Leader’s office, holding the pot out before him.

“Thanks,” Chris muttered and flipped over his monstrous mug from Josiah.

“Sure,” J.D. returned with forced cheerfulness, pouring the coffee, some of it slopping over the edge of the cup. He didn’t notice, leaving as quickly as he had appeared.

Chris swore silently, watching him flee. He needed to move J.D. up to this morning before the boy got any more jittery.

He sipped his coffee. Black. Like his mood. He swore again. He had only just arrived and already he felt like something Buck scraped off the bottom of his barn boots. He needed to put in a long hard day. He needed two more interviews at least. And he needed to roll up his sleeves and do some heavy duty maneuvering. If anything, he was going to need to get sharper and be on his game by the week’s end. But this recovery thing was still kicking his ass, and he hated it.

He stopped swearing and dug in. There was no point complaining. Just get the job done. Then he could worry about things like sleeping, and eating, and getting Buck the hell off his back. He smiled to himself, hearing the voice of an old training officer who used to tell his young SEALs, “There’ll be plenty of time to sleep when you’re dead.” Chris felt like calling the old timer and telling him “Don’t bet on it.”

Then he took out his notes, reviewed yesterday’s comments, and buzzed J.D. to come in.

J.D. stood up like his chair had been suddenly electrified.

Buck stared at him. “Easy kid,” Buck said calmly, almost under his breath. “He’s only gonna ask you questions like he did before.”

J.D. stared back at him, anything but calm. “But this time it’s real,” he snapped. “This is my career. My work. You don’t know how hard I fought for this position. To even get an interview!” His eyebrows came down as his voice came up, now a harsh and strident almost whisper. “You all had it handed to you. I had to fight my way in here.”

Buck pushed his chair back. He shot a glance at Chris’s door and caught the team leader’s eye. Chris looked back down at his notes. The message was clear. *Handle it and get him in here.*

“Ease off the throttle, flyboy,” Buck snapped irritably, getting up and dragging J.D. into the conference room. He shut the door and pushed the young agent into a chair, leaning over him, getting his attention.
“Ease up or you’re gonna crack,” Buck said, his voice calm and serious, but his eyes were hard.

J.D. stopped suddenly in mid retort. Staring.

“First, when you talked to Chris back there at the ranch, that was the real deal. Unofficial maybe, but as real a deal as you’re gonna get. Second, Chris is calling the shots here. He’s in charge. Got it?”

J.D. opened his mouth to protest that he never thought otherwise. But Buck cut him off.

“Third, I don’t know how he wants to play this exactly, but you gotta trust him. He ain’t gonna sell you out and he ain’t gonna throw you off the team. He’ll do what he can to protect the team, but you gotta help him out. You gotta play it his way. He’ll tell you what he needs from you. But you gotta get yourself together so you can hear it when he asks. You got me?”

J.D. stared at him.

“I’m serious, kid,” Buck said. The dark blue eyes were solemn, his face grave. “If ever you needed to be able to read him, it’s now. Cause he ain’t gonna be able to come right out and ask. Speak when you’re spoken to. Answer only what’s asked. Don’t volunteer anything. Leave everything else to him.”

J.D. swallowed hard. For a short few days, he had allowed himself to hope that everything would be all right, that things would go back to being the same as they were. Their mistakes erased. He had allowed himself to forget the magnitude of what they had done. He had allowed himself to disregard Nathan’s warnings. Now he knew.

He might not always be able to read Chris, but he could read Buck loud and clear. Do what Chris says. Just like back at the warehouse. He chided himself. Then it had been life and death. But now? He stopped cold. It was still life.

Buck saw the accusation in J.D.’s eyes. But he did not flinch. He did not know exactly what was running through J.D.’s head. But he knew Chris too damn well. He didn’t know the game plan, but he could guess the general direction Chris would go if he had to. And Buck had already asked himself the hard question already, right after his argument with Chris on the porch. Are you just going to let him do it again? Take a career bullet to save your ass.

But this time, Buck had made peace with his answer. Yes, he had realized. For the team, if I have to, I’ll let him chuck up one hell of a career. I’ll let him play this any way he wants to. I’ll let him get his ass fired or worse. And then I’ll do what I always do. I’ll sign on wherever he goes next.

The simplicity of it had floored him at first. He loved his job. But he had loved his other jobs, too. Then, he realized that this had nothing to do with work and careers and everything to do with something he had known since the second week of his sophomore year of high school, when the skinny blond new kid without the sense to keep his head down got smack in the middle of a slugfest between the freshman class punching bag and two off-season thugs from the wrestling team. By the time Buck realized that someone needed to get the principal and that he was the only one available, the skinny blond had already got the crap beat out of him and the freshman had had the sense to run away. Buck looked on silently, as the principal stood over the new kid, and knowing damn well what had really happened, demanded to hear it from the boy’s own mouth. The blond kid refused to pin any blame on anyone, and so he went to detention for fighting, still wearing that cocky grin on his split lips. In that moment, truth was revealed for young Buck Wilmington: Wherever Chris Larabee went, that’s where the action was going to be. So far, he had never been disappointed.

He locked eyes with J.D. the way Chris had locked eyes with him on the porch. Face to face, leaning
over the boy like a vulture, he waited until he saw it. Acquiescence. Submission. Obedience. Whatever the plan was, J.D. would follow. Buck let his young teammate up out of the chair and watched him go into Chris’s office, closing the door behind him.

* * *

J.D. slid quietly into the seat across from Chris’s desk, exhaling, and steeling himself to adhere to Buck’s advice, as Chris turned on the recorder. J.D. had never listened so closely before to what was not being said.

“I have a list of surveillance equipment signed out to Team Seven,” Chris said, pushing a requisition form toward him. “I also have a list of communications equipment missing from Team Seven’s locker,” he continued. He pushed a second list toward J.D.

Dunne fidgeted nervously as he looked at the list. Chris ignored it, suppressing the thought that an IA agent would have shredded the boy by now. He was a great agent, cool in the trenches even under a hail of flying bullets. But he was too damn honest. His own integrity was likely to hang him up by his toenails. Chris remembered only too well how that had been slowly beaten out of him by his careers.

He looked up at the young agent. J.D. swallowed. Chris thanked God that there were no actual witnesses to the interrogation.

“Is this your signature at the bottom of the requisition form?” Chris asked, pointing at the signature. He sounded almost bored.

“Yes,” J.D. responded, his voice calm despite his restlessness.

“Look at the date,” Chris replied. “And look at the reasons for requisition.” He looked up sharply. “What case was this equipment signed out for?”

J.D. swallowed hard and looked straight at Chris. “There was no case,” he replied, forcing the words out.

Chris scanned another document that J.D. couldn’t see. He looked back up at J.D. “Under whose authority did you requisition this equipment and for what purpose?”

J.D. stared back at him. Chris could see the balk in the wide hazel eyes. They opened wider with the shock of realization.

Trust him, Buck had said. Easy enough to say, but it wasn’t Chris who was lined up in the sights to take the blame. And Buck didn’t even know the bullet was coming. From Chris. In the back. And he was asking J.D. to pull the trigger.

A silent plea filled the J.D.’s face. *Don’t ask me to do this!*

“Under whose authority did you requisition this equipment and for what purpose?” Chris repeated, an edge in his voice. *Come on, J.D.*., he thought, staring intently at his youngest agent. *You have to do this. You need to give him up.*

J.D. stared helplessly back at his boss. Then he saw it in the green eyes. *Trust me.*

He opened his mouth and forced out the answer. “Buck Wilmington.” Shame flooded him.

Outrage followed as he read the approval in Chris’s eyes.
Chris read the anger in the young agent’s face. His fingers clenched on the bottom of his desk.

“Was Agent Wilmington in command of the team at that time?” he asked.

J.D. narrowed his eyes. “Yes,” he said. Then quickly amended, “I mean, no.”

Chris raised his eyebrows. “Yes or no, Agent Dunne, which is it?”

J.D. coughed, cleared his throat, anger gathering in his face like a storm cloud. “No, he wasn’t in charge,” he said.

Chris’s eyebrows came back down. “He wasn’t in charge, but you followed his orders anyway?”

J.D. stopped squirming. His body went rigid. He glared back at Chris.

He stuttered on the answer. “We, I mean I just thought…”

“You thought what?” Chris interrupted, his voice cold.

“Buck, I mean Agent Wilmington, has always been second in command,” J.D. said defiantly. “It’s always been our chain of command. You first, and if not you, Buck.”

He halted. Stared at his hands in his lap, defeat now warring with his anger and shame. He looked up to face Chris and was suddenly confused to see a familiar half smile resting on the team leader’s face. Chris’s head moved once in a tiny nod of approval. Heat rushed up J.D.’s neck. He had just betrayed Buck, his best friend, a man who was like a brother to him, to the man who was supposed to be Buck’s best friend. How could this be what Chris wanted?

The expression flashed full across his face, his face that showed everything, whether he wanted it seen or not.

He saw a strange sadness tinge the half smile on Chris’s face. None of it showed in Chris’s voice as he asked the next question. “What reason did Agent Wilmington give for requisitioning the equipment?”

J.D. gave a steely glare back at Chris. “We were conducting an investigation.”

“An official investigation?”

“No,” J.D. snapped.

“Were you aware that this was an unofficial investigation?” Chris asked sharply, his gaze intense.

J.D. locked eyes with the team leader. “Yes,” he replied. “I was aware that the investigation was unofficial.”

“Were you aware of the nature of the investigation?” he asked. His gaze was telegraphing a message to J.D.

“Yes, I was,” J.D. answered, narrowing his eyes trying to force himself to read the silent message. But all he could think was You bastard!

“What did you believe was the nature of the investigation?” Chris asked, eyes locked on J.D.’s

J.D. swallowed. He took a breath. “We wanted to find out who killed our team leader,” he replied. The words were awkward. He felt cold inside.
Chris steeled himself for the next set of questions. So far J.D. had done just right. Now was the crucial moment. He willed J.D. to hold on, to stay with him just a bit longer.

Chris took a silent breath. “Agent Dunne, did Agent Wilmington order you to conduct an illegal surveillance?”

J.D. flinched, his face burning.

Chris cocked his head suddenly to the side, grabbing his attention. The green eyes intense.

J.D. felt his throat tighten as it fell on him. The one open road. He could defy Chris right on the tape. He could tell him to go right to hell. And that would be exactly the opposite of what Buck wanted him to do. Buck who didn’t know yet that Chris was giving him up. But even if he had known, he would have told J.D. to save his own career.

He hedged. “I planned and carried out the illegal surveillance.” That was the truth, he reassured himself. Buck had not ordered him to conduct the surveillance. He had said they’d need one. J.D. had simply risen to the occasion.

Chris’s eyes narrowed. “Did you conduct this surveillance under the supervision of Agent Wilmington?” His gaze darkened, zeroed in.

J.D. looked down at his lap. Unable to maintain the eye contact. He hoped he got the message right. He hoped Buck would forgive him. He knew that either way the team was over. It would never be like it was. “Yes,” he said quietly.

Chris leaned forward across the desk. J.D. refused to look up.

“Whom did you place under surveillance?”

J.D. hesitated. He heard Chris inhale to ask again. “Samuel Bautiste,” he replied angrily.

Chris pursed his lips, eyes still narrowed.

“And what did you hope to gain from watching Samuel Bautiste?” he asked, a note of puzzlement in his voice.

J.D. looked up again. Choosing his words carefully. “To find out where the rocket launchers came from.”

“Did you find out where the rocket launchers came from?” Chris asked, a slow smile spreading across his lips, even as his voice remained calm and detached.

“Yes,” J.D. replied, now understanding why that smile made people hate Chris. “They were sold to the militia by Dowd.”

“Your surveillance yielded this information?” Chris asked.

“Yes,” J.D. replied, looking sharply at Chris. Wondering if he could risk saying more.

The look in Chris’s eye stopped him.

“Thank you, Agent Dunne,” he said, relaxing back in his chair, and drawing the requisition and equipment inventory forms off the desktop and placing them in a folder. He gazed at J.D. through half-lidded eyes and gave him a nod. “That will be all for now,” he said. He made no move to turn off the recorder.
Aware of the tape still going around, recording his every move and word, J.D. forced himself out of the chair. Closed his jaw and turned away, feeling shaky.

“Close the door behind you,” Chris ordered, his tone perfectly neutral.

J.D. did as he was asked.

Out in the bullpen again, he glanced at the clock. Nearly noon. He slid silently into his chair, and ran a hand across his forehead. Sweating.

“You all right?” Buck asked him.

J.D. turned a pale face up to him filled with shame and guilt. Struggling to contain both, the young agent shook his head. Not willing to trust his voice.

Buck narrowed his eyes. He got up and grabbed both their jackets from the coat hook near the door, throwing J.D. his. He gestured toward the door with his head.

J.D. got up automatically.

Buck announced that they were going to lunch. Neither man spoke again until they were in Buck’s truck. Then J.D. bent over across his legs, resting his head on the dashboard. He started swearing, his words muffled by his arms folded under his head.

Buck stared at the young agent, trying to keep an eye on the road at the same time. Worried now, he swung into a nearby parking lot. “What happened?” Buck asked, forcing himself to keep his rising fear out of his voice. What the hell went on in there?

“I’m sorry,” came the muffled reply. “I’m so sorry.”

“J.D.” Buck said forcefully, grabbing the youth’s shoulder. “Sit up and look at me.”

Slowly, reluctantly, J.D. Dunne sat up, scrubbing a hand down his face, looking suddenly older. “I’m sorry, Buck,” he said, his face and voice pleading for forgiveness. “I couldn’t lie. And it’s on tape.”

A multitude of bad scenarios passed through the more experienced agent’s mind. He forced them down. “What did you say?”

J.D. forced himself to look his best friend in the eye. It was the least he could do. “He made me give you up.”

Buck stared at J.D. not understanding.

“I gave you up,” he repeated. It sounded even worse the second time. He forced himself to continue. Buck deserved to know what had happened. “I told him I was following your orders. I told him we conducted an illegal surveillance operation on Bautiste under your supervision.”

Buck’s reaction was not what J.D. anticipated. In fact, he didn’t even know what to make of it. For a long moment, Buck just stared at him, past him, and out the window behind him. Then he grunted once. If anything, he sounded puzzled.

The dark blue eyes focused back on him. “How did Chris react?”

J.D.’s face darkened with anger. “He seemed real satisfied,” the young agent retorted bitterly. “Like that’s what he wanted to hear.”
Buck pursed his lips and grunted again, staring out the windshield this time. J.D. watched him. Neither man spoke.

Then Buck shrugged, shook himself and backed the truck up, turning it around and back toward the road.

“He betrayed you! That bastard betrayed you! And you’re just going to take it?” J.D. stuttered, his voice shaking, the realization sinking even deeper as he said it.

“I’m not…” Buck began, suddenly unsure. He grabbed for a belief. “I don’t really know what he’s got up his sleeve,” Buck said forcing a lopsided smile. “But since, from what you say, it doesn’t look like I have to go back and scrape Chris off the ceiling, I guess I’ll just trust him.”

“What if he’s wrong?” J.D. snapped.

Buck shrugged again, his face shadowed. “You told the truth, J.D. You conducted an illegal surveillance under my authority and supervision. I’m prepared to face the music if I have to.” And Chris knows that, he thought grimly. He had already considered that Chris was putting himself way out on a limb to save the team. After all, he did lead the team in going AWOL. He did supervise and lead an illegal surveillance operation. That was already too obvious. Would Chris use it? Because he sure as hell couldn’t cover it up. What about the rest of it? Breaking and entering, trespassing, menacing, extortion, attempted assault with a deadly weapon. And then there was Richter… He went cold.

You can’t save me from the truth, Old Pard, he thought, the team leader’s furious visage rising suddenly before him in the remembered dark of Larabee’s deck. The realization of how far out he already walked on that limb—under his own power, his own choice, his own blind rage—settled on him. Cold, hard, suffocating. Maybe there was no out for him this time.

Chris’s voice came back to him. You’re not going down for this. You hear? Whatever happens now, you follow my lead.

Buck willed himself to keep trusting that promise.

* * *

J.D. hardly spoke at all for the rest of the day. Chris disappeared for two hours at lunch time, not telling anyone where he was going or when he’d be back. They almost didn’t see him leave. After lunch, he called Ezra in behind closed doors.

Standish went in, cool, unruffled, almost disdainful. He came out again an hour later, looking the same way.

J.D. glared at the undercover agent. He felt Buck’s worried glance fall on him. Again. He did not speak. At five he announced that he was leaving. He turned to Buck and said only, “I’ll see you at home.”

Vin glanced over at the closed office door and then back up at Ezra. “How’d that go?” he asked, casually.

“As expected,” Ezra replied curtly.

“You sang like a bird?” Vin retorted, a grim half smile on his lips.

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Ezra snapped. His lips curled up into a smirk, as he leaned forward and
dropped his voice. “I very grudgingly gave up the information he wanted.”

A desk away, Buck wished dearly that J.D. had hung around long enough to hear Standish’s comment. A reminder. How to play the game. Of course, Buck thought bitterly, none of us really knows what game we’re playing. He stared at the closed door and bit back the thought that maybe Chris didn’t know all the rules either.

Chris was still at his desk after the others left. He had refused to leave. They turned out the lights. They unplugged the coffee machine. He gave them an exasperated glare and told them he had work to do. Buck made a move back toward his own desk, but a nasty look from Chris stopped him. “Go home,” the leader said curtly.

Buck clenched his jaw on his retort, as the others filed out past him. Felt his stomach burn. Déjà vu, this tone and look. This anger.

“I’m not leaving,” Buck said from the door.

“Go, Buck,” Chris growled, the temperature of his glare rising another few degrees.

“No till you tell me what’s so all-fired important you have to do it tonight before you fall over.”

The smile Chris gave him was feral, flickering with a cold malevolence, a loathing that Buck realized he had not seen in a long time.

“I’m sure J.D. gave you an earful,” Chris replied, his voice casual, conversational belying the tension in his face.

Buck rubbed the back of his neck. He didn’t agree or disagree. He just looked back up at the blond with a sigh. “You’ll have to mend some fences there,” he said softly.

“First I have to save his job,” Chris snapped. He glared at Buck.

Buck swallowed. He put his coat back on the hook and took two steps to lean in the doorway.

“You gotta give me up to save him, don’t you?”

Chris’s jaw tightened. His throat worked. Suddenly dry. All moisture sucked out of it somehow. “I’m not giving you up,” Chris grated out, his voice harsh. The look he gave Buck burned.

He couldn’t explain. If he did, then IA would somehow know. Know it had gone too smoothly. Too expertly. Too easily. Maybe if he had a team full of Ezra Standishes he could pull it off. But he didn’t. They weren’t all so practiced and smooth in their deceit. They weren’t shrewd manipulators. Some of them were Nathan Jackson, and J.D. Dunne, in whom truth glowed out of their eyes. So it needed to look real. It needed to be messy. And it needed to look like it hurt. That part was easy. It hurt like hell. Just ask J.D.

Now there was Buck standing in his doorway, his face so loaded down with regret that it made Chris squirm to look at it.

It had been that way once before. After Sarah and Adam. When he couldn’t stand to look at Buck’s grief and wanted no witnesses to his own. Wanted to replace the regret, the concern, with something he could handle. So he battered Buck with everything he could throw, words, fists, recriminations, bottles of whiskey. To make him angry. Push him away from him. Out the door. So he could self-destruct without the guilt of taking someone else with him. Out of the path of the rocket launcher of Chris Larabee’s rage. Chris went cold at the comparison.
He stared up at Buck. God he didn’t want to go back there. Wouldn’t make it this time.

Buck saw the green eyes refocus. Saw the expression. That one. Saw the rage and grief coming like a whirlpool to suck them both down. Just like after Adam and Sarah. Only that time, the last time, he and Chris had just about drowned each other, stepping on each other, trying to escape it. This time was different. This time when the familiar green eyes looked at him, they betrayed their owner’s intention. Maybe on purpose. Maybe despite him. Maybe Chris didn’t even know. But Buck saw it. This time they were asking him for help.

He took two steps into the office. He didn’t sit. He leaned over the desk. Like he had leaned over J.D. in the conference room. Forcing Chris to lean back to look him in the eye.

The tall mustached agent spoke quietly, earnestly. He spoke with his whole body, the way only Buck Wilmington could. “I’m in this with you. If we go down, we go down together.”

Chris blinked at him. Words unspoken threading through his eyes. Read there by a man who knew the language well enough to read it. A denial. A protest. Buck waited. Watched stubborn refusal reanimate the eyes. And tell him that Chris hadn’t given up yet. Watched the half smirk kick up the corners of the thin lips.

“You need to know that,” Buck said pushing off the desk, his own smirk mirroring Chris’s, although his eyes remained earnest.

The smirk melted into a grimace. Buck cut off the protest before it could even be voiced. With a hand gesture once made in jest to a nervous young man fidgeting with his tux in front of a bathroom mirror in a church basement, two minutes before it was time to take his place at the top of the aisle. His feet fidgeting ludicrously toward the outside door. Buck dangled his car keys from two fingers, giving them a jingle. I got the car keys. You just say the word.

Chris almost grinned in spite of himself. The directors might throw the book at him next week. And take the whole team down after him. But Buck would still be driving the getaway car. Damn fool, Chris thought with fond exasperation and a sort of wonder. What the hell makes you think I’m worth this kind of trouble?

Buck waited until he saw the resignation. And something else. Was it relief? He smiled, careful to keep it to himself, as he turned back for his jacket and went out the door.

* * *

He was there again, when Vin arrived early at eight A.M. At least Vin believed it was again. From the pale, drawn look on his face, the slight hunch of the shoulders, it wouldn’t be hard to imagine that he had never left. He was still dressed in his usual black, so that gave no hints, and Vin knew that Larabee kept a change of clothes in the filing cabinet anyway. He must have stared a moment too long.

“You got somethin’ to say, or are you just gonna stand in my doorway,” the gravelly voice grated out.

“I got lots to say, Cowboy,” Vin retorted. “But you don’t wanna listen.”

“You’ll get your chance to say plenty,” Chris snapped back.

Vin swallowed his retort and turned away from the door. Not even eight-thirty, and Chris was already in one hell of a mood. No point rilin’ up a rattlesnake, he thought, heading for the kitchenette. The coffee machine was still unplugged. He shook his head as he started up the coffee.
Maybe Chris would feel better with some caffeine in his bloodstream.

Vin was already back at his own desk with a mug full of satisfyingly strong hot coffee, by the time Buck and J.D. arrived.

“Mornin’, Pard,” Buck said cheerfully, passing by the office doorway. He didn’t pause, but Chris glared darkly as the words. “You look like shit,” rolled casually back to him.

A moment later, Buck reappeared, a printed schedule in his hand. “Potential briefing time slots,” he said casually. “J.D. can start with tapes anytime. The rest of us can start to slot in earliest tomorrow. Ezra’s work is still TBD. He needs to do wrap up on some associated cases from before we went to Texas.”

Chris gave the paper a cursory scan and then handed it back to Buck with a nod. “Take it up to Ryan and get the first briefings scheduled. Have J.D. get copies of surveillance tapes. You do the first briefing with him.”

“What time didja get home last night?” Buck asked, totally ignoring the instructions he’d just been given, to focus on the dark circles and the pale, thin face.

Chris glowered up at him, but did not answer.

“Did I mention you look like shit?” Buck asked with a smirk.

“Yes,” Chris replied through his teeth.

Buck opened his mouth to make another smart remark, but Chris interrupted him. “Didn’t I just give you something to do?”

“Yes, sir,” Buck said, still smirking. He leaned closer. “Nathan’s gonna go up one side of you and down the other,” he said.

Chris’s only answer was a cold smile filled with the same poisonous loathing, he had glimpsed yesterday.

Buck’s smirk died. He looked at his friend closely. “You do remember, don’t you, that this wasn’t your fault?” he asked.

“The hell it wasn’t,” Chris retorted icily. He flicked a glance toward the bullpen door, where Nathan and Josiah were just entering. “Shut my door on your way out.”

At nine, Travis’s assistant summoned J.D. up to Travis’s office, requesting him to bring the audio from the warehouse. The young agent cursed furiously.

“Just tell the truth. It’ll be all right.” Buck reminded him.

The look the youth gave Buck was almost despairing.

“All right?” he snapped. “You mean like it was all right in there?” he snapped, jerking his head at Chris’s closed door.

Buck sighed. He had spent more than an hour last night trying to tell J.D. that Chris was doing his damnedest to save J.D.’s job. To trust him. J.D. had been adamant that if saving his job meant betraying his friends then he didn’t need the job that bad. And was more than willing to tell Chris to his face. Buck had barely managed to convince him to wait for the results of the inquiry before
running off half-cocked.

“Just tell the truth, J.D.,” Vin interrupted exasperatedly. “You do anything else, Buck and Chris will have your head. And Travis’ll have your badge.”


“There ain’t no winnin’ this one, kid,” Vin snapped. “Just tell the damn truth. Least that way it’ll match the tapes.”

J.D. opened his mouth to reply but shut it again. He scooped up the tapes from the warehouse in Texas, and stalked out the door.

Buck glowered at the reticent sharpshooter.

“What?” Vin asked grouchily. “You looked like you needed backup.”

“Great,” Buck replied. “You tryin’ to save him or kill him?”

Vin shrugged. “Hard to tell the difference since our leader won’t tell me the game plan.”

Buck snorted. You know the game plan, Junior, he thought. Same as it was in Texas. Chris on point and us with no intelligence. Only he couldn’t say it out loud. Because Chris wasn’t telling. He just held onto his faith that Chris’s plan would work. They needed Chris’s plan to work.

Ezra arrived at nine thirty.

“So much for turning over a new leaf,” Nathan commented sardonically.

Ezra ignored him, choosing instead to scan the visible occupants of the bullpen. “My, don’t we all look particularly grim this morning,” he said pleasantly.

No one answered him.

“Where is Mr. Dunne?” he inquired.

“Travis,” Vin replied.

“And two directors,” Josiah put in.

“Mr. Wilmington?” Ezra continued.

“Setting up briefings with Team Eight,” Nathan replied.

Ezra nodded his understanding. “And Mr. Larabee?” he asked.

“Hiding in his office,” Vin muttered in reply.

“Can’t say that I blame him,” Ezra replied, sipping his Starbuck’s with satisfaction, and realizing that first sip was likely to be the most pleasant moment of his entire day.

* * *

Listening to the audio again was excruciating. Despite his best efforts to remind himself that it had not happened as it appeared on the tape, the sounds rocketed him back to the close confines of the van, positioned at mid-distance in the parking lot. He could feel the adrenaline coursing up his veins
again, taste the bitter oily coffee from the early morning briefing. Hell, he could even smell the stale old sweat of too many busts spent in that van, eyes and ears for the team, central nervous system, with tied and useless hands.

Again he heard the pre-raid check. Saw Chris, silent, tight-lipped, tense. Heard Chris go over their new positions one last time. Background chatter buzzed. He heard himself and his teammates check in, as they arrived at their positions. Ready. Then the tense cheerful banter of cocky agents who couldn’t see what was coming.

The gunfire began suddenly, as it had in the warehouse, crackling across the audio feed. Strident voices raised up, calling warnings, orders, reports back. Swearing.

He felt the sweat well up on his neck, under his arms, as he heard the sound of Chris and Buck’s nearly simultaneous realization that intelligence had sorely underreported the sheer number of militia.

Travis saw the young agent’s knuckles go white on the edge of his chair as they all heard Chris give the order to retreat. Heard him say that his position was overrun. That he would find another way out and to regroup at the van. Agent Dunne’s eyes focused far away. His face drained of color. Unconscious now of the three senior ATF officers in the room, his vision blurred with moisture as, again, six members of Team Seven checked in, regrouped. Agent Dunne’s voice reported that Agent Larabee’s headset had gone offline. They heard Buck Wilmington order the team to wait—as ordered.

The next ten straight minutes of background of gunfire and crackling reports from other positions, sirens, ambulances, juxtaposed against a foreground of tense, utter silence was too much to bear outright. The relief was evident in the young agent’s face as they forwarded the tape, but his relief was short-lived.

He heard his own voice report that ten minutes had passed and that Larabee’s headset was still offline. For the first time now the three directors heard the startled exclamations, the identification of a rocket launcher. Shouts, automatic gunfire. Approaching sirens. Then the roar of explosion and fire.

Then the screaming.

Suddenly the room was too small as the four men in it stared at each other.

“Turn it off,” Travis snapped suddenly.

Caught in his own flashback to a war on foreign shores, Director Costas reached hastily, clumsily to stop the recording. Silence fell suddenly. Hard. Heavy.

“Thank you, Agent Dunne,” Travis said clearing his throat and forcing himself not to wipe the sweat from his forehead. Blank eyes, still horrified, turned slowly toward him, as he continued. “We have a few questions regarding the events on the tape. We will remind you to speak from your own point of view, what you actually witnessed. Refrain from speculating on what you did not actually observe. You are reminded that as a federal agent, you are bound by duty as well as moral obligation to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. Consider yourself under oath.”

The young agent nodded, but Director Hofstader noticed he did not unclench his hands from the arms of his chair.

Costas began. “Did Agent Larabee give you any indication why he changed the deployment of his agents?” He added. “In direct violation of the orders he’d been given.”
For the second time in two days, J.D. felt his stomach sink into his toes. Again he was being asked to betray his teammates. Angry and tired to his toenails, resignation fell on him with the realization that they had beaten him. They held all the cards. He had none. Nor did he have the strength or cunning to outmaneuver them.

One open door yawned wide before him. Like Buck had been saying all along. One way out. One clear escape route that he knew Chris and Buck would never take. But he did. Hating himself, he opened his mouth and bled out whatever they wanted to know.

At the end of an hour and a half, they kept the tape, and he found himself in the hall outside Travis’s office, staring blankly at the elevator panels. Wondering if he could just leave the building and not come back.

He knew Buck would be waiting to hear how it went. Would Chris ask him, too? He would want to know, of course. If positions were reversed, J.D. would want to know. He hoped Chris was too busy to ask. J.D. did not want to have to tell him how he told the directors that Chris changed the team’s positions against direct orders from the mission commander. Or that he could not say for certain whether the repositioning did or did not contribute to the failure of the primary mission. Nor could he say whether if they had maintained their original positions, they may have been able to hold a defensive line against the militia, as the mission commander had intended. Worse yet, was the question, why he, Agent J.D. Dunne had followed Larabee’s orders over the orders of the mission commander, as outlined in their pre-raid briefing. He winced, recalling his own answer. “I believed he knew the situation better than the mission commander.”

“Even after the mission commander denied Agent Larabee’s proposal?”

J.D. had felt his face grow hotter. “He’s my team leader, and I followed his orders.” He realized only after he saw the grim “I told you so” pass between the two directors that he had given up too much.

The elevator bell dinged. He shuffled angrily inside and wondered what the hell he was going to say when they asked him what happened up there.

He thought perhaps no one would notice when he entered the bullpen. But then, he realized, no one ever entered the bullpen without being noticed. Not even Vin, who could move like a shadow and who had a way of scaring the wits out of a person by suddenly appearing where he had not been a mere moment before. At least Chris’s door was still firmly closed. It wasn’t much, but it was something.

J.D. slid into his desk, pretending he didn’t see the glance that passed between Vin and Buck. Neither one said a word. Vin’s silence relieved him. But Buck’s unnerved him. J.D. raised his eyes to meet the cobalt blue ones regarding him intently across his own desk.

The door to the team leader’s office opened, causing J.D. to jump.

Chris leaned in the doorway, his gaze falling on J.D. like a searchlight. J.D. looked resolutely down at a pile of papers on his desk, pencil poised in his shaking hand, pretending to work.

He didn’t see the grim regret that flashed across the team leader’s face as Chris noted his computer expert’s pale, tight expression. He scanned down to the shaking hands and back up to the face that didn’t look back at him. There had to be a better way to do this. One that didn’t shred his men like this.

Perhaps if he called J.D. in. Told him that he had done just right in putting the responsibility back on Buck. Hoped that in his anger, J.D. had thrown the rest of the blame back onto him, onto the team
Standing there, it occurred to Chris that maybe he was wrong. Maybe he could just tell them what he intended. Trust them to understand the reasons why he had to give IA something they could uncover. Something they could punish. Why he had to force the shit to roll back uphill and away from his most vulnerable agents. Away from J.D., who was too young, too inexperienced, who had not yet overcome the prejudice of his own youthful looks and optimism. No matter how many times he proved his worth in the field. Away from Ezra, with black marks against him before he even arrived, with enemies in political places, and an attitude that only made things worse. Who could not escape the suspicion of corruption and treachery, no matter how many times he had proven his loyalty. Away from Vin, whose innate reticence simply made other people uneasy. Never mind that he had never yet proven himself to be anything but totally trustworthy.

Chris opened his mouth to call a meeting. But a glance from Buck stopped him. A tiny shake of the head. Let it ride. So he said nothing. He turned and went back into his office, closing the door again. He never saw the hand that Josiah laid firmly down on Nathan’s arm, holding him to his chair. Nor did he hear the softly uttered words. “Let him be, Brother.” Only after the door closed, did J.D. look up at Buck, covering his expression with a mask of anger.

It was Ezra who interrupted. “You sang like a bird?” the undercover agent drawled casually from his desk, without even looking up, a dry parroting of Tanner’s own words to him. He was surprised at his teammate’s reaction. J.D. rocked back like Ezra had thrown a tub of cold water in his face. What the hell did that mean? Do you think I went in there willingly. That I wanted to give him up? The recriminations foundered and went under. Truth rushed up his throat. “Yes,” he snapped, his anger shredding his caution. “Yes I did. Are you happy? I gave Buck up to Chris. And I gave Chris up to Travis and two directors. So now you can go ahead and say whatever you want. And don’t worry. Because J.D. Dunne cracked first.” He finished on his feet. Fists clenched. He was suddenly aware that he was shouting. Straining forward. Suddenly noticed Vin and Buck were both wrapped around him. Pulling him backward to his seat. He wondered dimly how they had gotten around their desks so fast.

The undercover agent looked back at him, an infuriating smile covering over his momentary surprise. “Good man,” Standish said calmly. When his own phone rang suddenly, he left for Travis’s office, still smirking. Leaving J.D. seething behind him.


“Calm down,” the sharpshooter repeated, steel in his voice.

J.D. turned toward him in disbelief. “You fucking calm down. Don’t you get it? They asked me the questions. And I told them just what they wanted to hear.” His angry sudden gesture encompassed Travis ensconced in his office suite a floor away and Chris, locked up inside his own office not
twenty feet away.

“You told them the truth?” Buck asked.

“What the hell difference does it make?” J.D. snapped, aware now that all other activity in the bullpen had stopped and that Nathan was now staring at them, a peculiar look on his face. He didn’t stop to wonder about it. He had a full head of steam. His face was hot. Red. And he could feel his heartbeat throbbing in his temples.

“What the hell difference does it make what I told them?” he shouted. “Don’t you get it? We’re finished. Toast. History. Chris violated orders. He handed his badge and gun to a known aggressor. They want to make it his fault the bust went bad. Then we went fucking AWOL. And Chris wants to pin it on you!”

The rest of his words were lost, as Buck’s large clammy hand suddenly clamped down over his mouth. J.D. didn’t silence his protest until the hand squeezed hard enough to cut his cheeks on the edges of his teeth.

“Stop.” Buck hissed.


“God dammit,” Buck swore suddenly, sending a dirty look to Chris’s closed office door. He turned away. You’re like a damn disease, Buck thought angrily. Kid looks up to you. Gonna teach him this, too?

He returned to his chair. “Let him go,” he spoke to Vin, suddenly spent. J.D. could do whatever he had in mind to do. If Chris wanted to do everything himself, then let him. Let him contain the fallout. Let him live with the consequences of what he started.

Just like I’m gonna live with the consequences of what I started, Buck thought angrily, forcing himself back to work.

Nathan and Josiah stared at each other. “We gonna survive this, Brother?” Nathan asked softly. He was surprised to see a quiet smile light into the big profiler’s eyes, and turn up the corners of his mouth slightly.

“Already have, brother,” the profiler replied cryptically, patting his breast pocket. “We already have.”

Nathan fought down the urge to sigh in exasperation. He may not have understood Josiah’s words, but he understood the quiet confidence in the tone. He willed himself to be patient a while longer.

J.D. excused himself for an early lunch. Buck rose to go with him, but he was refused, with a coldly burning glare. J.D. went out alone.

An hour later, he did not return. Ezra reappeared from Travis’s office. And a close look told Buck how thin the mask was that covered Standish’s anger. Nathan and Josiah left together, bound for some vegetarian place. Vin went out to run some errands, including picking up sandwiches for himself and Buck. And for Chris, too. Although Buck noticed, Vin had never asked Chris what he wanted. Or if he even wanted anything. Ezra had simply disappeared.
Another thirty minutes passed before Buck started to get antsy. He shot a glance at Chris’s door. Still closed. God knew what Chris was doing in there. He hadn’t said two words to anyone since Buck had left his office at eight thirty that morning.

After another twenty minutes, now starving and worried, the tall mustached agent made up his mind to get his coat. The phone rang.

The phone rang in Chris’s office. He did not move. At the second ring, he snaked a hand out gingerly to answer it. Trying to move nothing else. His head ached so much his teeth actually hurt. Hearing Buck’s voice on the other end did not help. He recognized the brittle edge to the cheerful tone. And dreaded the earful he was about to get.

“Well, hey there, Stud,” the voice boomed cheerfully. Chris winced. “So you are still here.”

Chris did not reply. His jaw had been clenched so long that a dull burn had begun to spread along the muscles on both sides. He was not about to unclench now, since he knew from experience that anything he could say would clearly be wrong. He just waited for Buck to clue him in on what they were talking about.

The silence was apparently okay with Buck, as he simply plowed right on. “I got a call from Inez.” He interrupted himself casually. “Hey, did you know that J.D. just took a two hour lunch?”

Chris grimaced at the non sequitur. Knowing it was just Buck winding up to hit him with both barrels. He’d done this dance before. He had about two seconds to figure out where the fire would be coming from and duck the best he could. He had never yet succeeded in dodging the blow completely.

Already it was too late.

“Seems Inez would like someone to come pick him up.” Buck paused, lining up his next shot. The real one. “And she suggests that he probably shouldn’t return to work.”

Chris cursed silently. The thought alone sending stabbing pains through his temples. He tried to avoid thinking about what Buck meant even though it was entirely too clear.

“She thought I would want to come get him myself,” Buck said casually, cheerfully, and Chris knew that he still had some ammo left.

Buck loaded. Lined up his shot. Chris expected to take a small caliber zinger right in the teeth. He realized an instant too late that distracted by the small shot, he had failed to notice the Howitzer cannon being dragged up beside him. Until the direct hit.

“I figured this was more your area of expertise,” Buck said so coldly, Chris actually felt ice sinking into the acid pit of his stomach.

He still said nothing. He reached over and hung up the phone and dragged himself into his jacket. For a second, Buck thought that he was going to have to knock down the office door and tell him again. When the door opened, he realized he had been wrong. Larabee was on the move. Just real damn slow. And pain was written over in every inch of his face and form.

Buck stood up. To take it back. To say he’d go. But he shut his mouth at Chris’s glance.

“I got it,” Chris hissed, pulling himself fully upright and forcing himself to walk normally.
Like a robot in a Chris Larabee costume. The thought came unbidden.

Buck sat back down again, staring out the bullpen door. Chris’s words floating back to him. He smiled softly to himself. Chris Larabee could say more in three short syllables, than Ezra Standish or Josiah Sanchez could say in a page.

When Vin returned and threw a sloppy, still-warm Reuben down on the desk in front of him, Buck discovered that his empty stomach was too tied up to eat it.

* * *

Inez looked up when the front door opened. And down again, as she recognized a nurse from the pediatrician’s office down the road. She waved a young waiter over to take care of the customer and returned to the busy work she had been doing behind the bar for the last twenty minutes.

She had been expecting Buck Wilmington at any moment since she had called his office. When the man had answered, she had expected some smarmy comment about his animal magnetism causing her to finally call him. His serious tone had taken her off guard. But he promised someone would come by to get J.D.

As for Agent Dunne, she had been keeping an eye on him. He had walked in angry. Now he sat at the end of the bar. One of her new employees had already poured him three or four drinks before she caught sight of what was clearly going to be a train wreck. Not that she had never seen the young ATF agent drink or get drunk. She had. Team Seven often blew off steam in her bar. She had even seen him angry drunk. But she had never seen the team let him drink angry and alone and in the middle of the day. She didn’t profess to know the men of Team Seven all that well, but she was certain that Agent Larabee would have the boy’s head for drinking on a duty day.

The bell on the door announced its opening again. She drew back in surprise. It was not who she was expecting. He looked gaunt. Pale. Almost frightening. She didn’t let it show on her face.

Her eyes fell immediately on the object of his search. He nodded once at Inez, conveying simultaneously his gratitude for the phone call and his wish that she should leave the two of them alone.

She moved back into the kitchen to supervise the clean up from today’s lunch crowd.

“Leave me alone, Buck,” the boy snapped. His words slurred.

“Can’t do that,” the man beside him said with a sigh.

The young agent rounded angrily. Then his eyes flew wide in recognition and fear.

“Chris,” J.D. gulped.

The team leader smiled a tight smile. He eyed the half-empty whiskey bottle that sat behind the bar, slightly apart from the others on the shelf. He knew on instinct that the bartender had been keeping it handy. It was good stuff, too, he noted and for a moment felt a twinge of envy. How long would it take them to figure it out if he just joined J.D. instead? The pure misery in the boy’s face brought him back from the thought.

Chris looked J.D. over thoughtfully, and J.D. steeled himself to face Larabee wrath of the first order. Chris didn’t yell, and at first, J.D. thought that had to be really bad. Instead, the team leader sat slowly down on the next barstool over, hands shoved into the pockets of his black jacket. Looking at J.D. through partly hooded eyes.
“What can I get for you, sir?” a young bartender asked, whipping a white cloth across the dark stained wood. He looked hardly old enough to drink, let alone serve the stuff.

Chris indicated the half-empty bottle with a jerk of his chin. “That what my friend’s been drinking?”

The bartender’s eyes slid sideways to J.D., who was slowly sinking down onto the bar. “If this is your friend, that’s what he’s been drinking.”

From the corner of Chris’s eye, it almost looked like the young agent was melting, would slowly drip down the sides of the stool like molasses to wind up in a sticky pool at the bottom of his chair. Chris shook the thought away. Either he needed a lot more sleep or he was finally cracking up. Either option seemed likely.

Chris reached into his coat.

*My God he’s going to shoot me,* J.D. thought numbly. Stupidly. The thought of it alone made him laugh. He wished Buck were here, so he could tell him the funny joke.

Chris pulled out his wallet. “I’ll take the rest of the bottle.”

The bartender looked surprised, but shrugged and rang it up. “You can’t carry an open container out of here,” he said.

Chris looked back over at J.D. “Guess we’d better finish it then,” he said with a wolfish grin.

J.D. blinked at him, as Chris took the bottle and two shot glasses in one hand and J.D.’s elbow in the other and guided his computer and technology expert clumsily to Team Seven’s regular booth.

He poured two shots. He slid one across the table to J.D. and kept the other one for himself.

J.D. looked at him suspiciously. Well, as suspiciously as one can, through glazed, slitted eyes.

Chris clinked his glass against J.D.’s and tossed the shot back. The burn was comforting. All the way down. Heat rose up almost immediately and he felt the pleasant, gentle spin of all the rough edges inside him softening suddenly. Then he remembered that he hadn’t eaten. He smiled a moment, remembering a time when it wouldn’t have mattered. So much the quicker way to get started on his drunk. This was not one of those times.

J.D. downed his drink. Getting sloppy, Chris noted. Part of it ended up dribbling down his chin and into his collar.

“Have another,” J.D. slurred, attempting to pour another shot for Chris.

“No thanks,” Chris replied evenly, putting his hand over J.D.’s and setting the bottle back on the table. “I have to drive.”

“Oh,” J.D. replied. He stared at his own glass. “Guess I gotta get back.” He blinked up at Chris. “You’re gonna kill me.”

Chris grinned at that. “I doubt it, J.D.” he replied.

At the questioning look in the glazed hazel eyes, he said simply. “I’d have to answer to Buck if I did that. And I’ve had my quota of that this month.”

J.D. stared at him. Chris watched the eyes struggle to focus and waited, thinking about how much less his own head throbbed now that he’d had that first shot.
“If I tell you a secret,” J.D. said, “Promise you won’t get mad.”

“No,” Chris replied. “But I promise not to go ballistic.” It wasn’t a lie. Right now he didn’t have the energy to go ballistic. He didn’t even want to think about how to drag himself back out of this booth. The whiskey bought him an hour or more. He wouldn’t drive until he was sure it was out of his system.

J.D. seemed to consider Chris’s words as if they were dickering over a sale price. “Okay,” he said after a moment. Offer accepted.

Chris smiled slightly and wondered if he had been like this at twenty-five and drunk. Probably not. By that time he was an officer in the Navy SEALs. He had already faced battle. Had already seen men wounded or dead under his orders. By that time he had already begun to promise himself a career where he wouldn’t have to lie to people about how their loved ones got killed. A career where he never had to leave anyone behind. Or put his friends in danger.

He sighed. Just another one in a long string of promises broken. What was the phrase that Mary Travis used? Oh yeah. Another black spot on his less-than-stellar reputation. If only she knew…

J.D. was looking at him with undisguised impatience.

“Your secret,” Chris prompted, as if his attention had never wavered.

J.D. grinned and wiggled forward in his seat. “I emptied all the bottles in the cabinet.”

“What?” Chris asked.

“Yeah,” J.D. replied, his voice low, conspiratorial. “I emptied all the whiskeys, an’ filled ‘em with water.” He stopped and raised a finger to his lips. “Buck doesn’t know.”

It dawned on Chris that J.D. was talking about the cupboard where he and Buck kept the liquor at the townhouse they shared.

“Why would I get mad at that?” Chris asked confused.

J.D. looked at him exasperated. And let out a long burp. “Cause Buck said thass what he did to you.”

Chris went cold. He remembered that. He had come out of a three day bender with his head ringing so hard he thought his nose would bleed, looking for some hair of the dog that bit him, only to find all his whiskey bottles filled with water. Buck was nowhere. He had done the deed and fled.

He forced the memory—and especially the reason why he had been on a three day drunk—away. “That was a little different, J.D.” he said mildly.

“Nuh-uh,” J.D. retorted. He sat up straighter and stifled a snicker. He crooked a finger at Chris and waved him closer. Reluctantly, Chris bent closer, the smell of metabolizing whiskey almost too much for his head and stomach.

“He doesn’t know, yet,” J.D. whispered, loudly. Bobbing his head for emphasis. Then he snickered again.

J.D. waved a hand unsteadily in front of his face. “’Sall right now,” he said. “You’re not dead anymore.” He giggled.

Chris closed his eyes suddenly, as the room spun away from him. When he opened them, he was startled, alarmed, to see tears pouring down J.D.’s face. His shoulders were shaking.

“I’m sorry, Chris,” the boy slurred. “I didn’t mean to do it.” Both hands flew up to cover his face.

Bewildered, Chris pushed the unfinished shot and the bottle away from J.D. He leaned forward and pulled the hands down.

“What J.D.?” he asked as calmly as he could manage. “What did you do?”

“I gave you away.” A shuddering breath ran through the boy. “They’ll fire you.”

Chris got out of his seat, headache all but forgotten, and moved around the booth, forcing J.D. over with his hip, he sat down on the end of the booth.

“Are you talking about the directors?” Chris asked, holding J.D.’s hands down away from his face and trying to get the boy to look at him.

J.D. nodded. “I told them everything they wanted to know.”

The hazel eyes held a depth of sorrow but something else. Something sharper and harder that caught Chris by surprise. He swallowed. Fought the urge to shake the boy until that expression fell out onto the floor. Where he could pick it up and drop kick it into the nearest dumpster. He swore to himself.


Almost despite himself, J.D. turned his streaked face up to Chris.

“Did you tell the directors the truth?” Chris asked. His voice working on J.D. Dunne like a needle full of truth serum.

The shaggy black head bobbed slowly up and down. “Yes,” he croaked. Mesmerized by the intensity of the glare. Boring down through him.

“Then you did what I needed you to do,” Chris replied, his voice softer, but no less intense.

“But…” J.D. protested.

Chris cut him off. “Whatever you said is fine, so long as it’s true,” Chris replied. Hidden from his face was the thought that that might not be strictly true, but then, he had known from the start that he would not be able to contain all the fallout. Just mitigate it. Try to get it to come crashing down in the places where it would do the least damage.

“And Buck?” J.D. mumbled. Tears still floating on the hazel surfaces of the eyes that still held onto their innocence despite all they had seen.

Chris clamped a hand onto the top of J.D.’s head. He could see the eyes unfocusing, twitching, as the room began to spin around the boy.

“I’ll protect Buck,” Chris promised with a lopsided smile.

“Chris,” the boy rasped suddenly. And Chris knew what was coming. He barely got out of the way as J.D. climbed over him and ran, staggering toward the men’s room.
Chris returned to his other seat, where he could see the restroom doors, and leaned his head against the back of the chair. He let his eyes drift closed for just a moment. Feeling the pounding begin anew.

A sharp thump brought his eyes open to face Inez’s blazing glare. A large glass of water, two aspirin, and a bowl of soup with soda crackers sat on the table in front of him.

“Eat it,” she ordered, sweeping the whiskey disgustedly off the table. “I’m sure you’ll have time while you’re waiting for Agent Dunne.”

Chris glowered at her. He made a move to get up and see to J.D.

“I’m sending the bartender in,” Inez growled, blocking him, as if reading his mind. “The boy has a lesson to learn about when to stop serving.”

“Now eat,” she snapped, stalking away again across the floor, muttering.

He laughed softly to himself as she walked away. But he did as ordered, beginning with the aspirin and half the glass of water. He kept an eye and an ear on the men’s room door the whole time.
Chapter 11

When another hour had passed and neither J.D. nor Chris had returned, Buck began pacing the bullpen. Swearing to himself. His own lunch still largely untouched and lying on his desk. He could feel the others watching him. He swore more savagely.

Then his cell phone rang. He scooped it off his desk. “Where the hell are you?” he snapped.

There was a slight pause, during which he had time to consider that he had forgotten to check who was calling. Even that didn’t account for his relief when he heard Chris’s calm reply.

He ducked into Larabee’s office and away from the prying ears.

It was evidently a short conversation, as he emerged quickly, looking no less perturbed.

“Well that didn’t take long,” Ezra commented as Buck returned.

“Musta been Larabee,” Vin cracked. He looked up at Buck’s anger-shadowed face. “What’s up?” he asked.

“J.D. and Chris are both taking half sick days. They’ll be out the rest of the day,” Buck replied.

Nathan muttered a “Hallelujah!” that was only partly sarcastic.

“How clever of them,” Ezra muttered under his breath, a twinge of envy making it through his irritation. He wished he could go on a two hour drunken binge at lunch and get the rest of the day off for a reward. He didn’t mention what he knew, it being imprudent to reveal a valuable information source.

“Well, Bucklin,” Vin drawled with a grin. “Looks like you’re in charge.”

Ezra glanced up, a caustic comment on the tip of his tongue. A sharp look from Josiah had him swallowing it, feigning innocence. He thought it to himself alone. And look how splendidly things went the last time you were in charge.

Buck slid into his chair, glowering at his computer. Command had never been something he sought. He was good at second in command. He was comfortable there. God and the whole ATF knew what had happened the last time he took charge. He would be happy enough if he never had to lead the team again. He wondered how Chris would react if he told him that. He wondered who Chris would make the new second in command.

* * *

Buck jangled the keys in his lock extra noisily, as he opened the door. Experience had taught him that it was always a good idea to let Larabee know you were coming. Especially when he’s edgy. He pushed the door open and began to holler out that he was home. Then he caught sight of Chris on the couch. One arm flung over his face. The tattered afghan J.D. refused to part with twisted around him. Out.

Craning his neck to peer down the hall, Buck could just see J.D.’s feet and the end of his bed. He put his keys down noisily, and stomped up the stairs. He flung his jacket and briefcase onto his bed. Then he stomped back down the stairs, considering which of the two he should wake up first, the drunk one or the stupid one. He thought he could start with the one he was angriest at, but then he
realized it was a toss up.

His decision was made for him as he came back down the stairs to see Chris, sitting up and scrubbing his hands over his face, attempting to wake himself up completely.

Buck stopped at the couch, jerked his head toward J.D.’s room at the end of the hall. “Drunk? Or did you beat him up?”

Chris glared at him over his hands and Buck noted that despite the bloodshot eyes, the blond looked a little better than he had at the office.

“You been asleep all afternoon?” Buck asked incredulously.

“What time is it?” Chris asked, his voice raspy.

“You check on the kid?” Buck asked.

Chris glared at him indignantl. If there was one thing he knew how to do, it was make sure his drunken friends didn’t vomit themselves to death in their sleep. He did not say that to Buck. He simply retorted, “Yes. Several times. He's sleeping and he feels like crap.”

“Bet he’s not the only one,” Buck snapped, slapping his palm against Chris’s forehead.

“Get off,” Chris growled.

“You been drinking?” Buck accused.


The palm left his forehead long enough to slap him hard on the side of the head.

Chris swore and glared harder.

“That’s to make you think about what you’re teaching that kid,” Buck retorted.

“You should talk,” Chris snapped. “You had a drink lately?”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Buck snapped.

“Nothing,” Chris retorted. He didn’t really want to go there. He was sorry he brought it up. “Just drop it.”

“No,” Buck said hotly. “I haven’t had a drink since poker night.”

“And before that?” Chris accused.

“You got something to say, Larabee, just spit it out,” Buck snarled.

“God damn, Buck,” said the strangled voice from the hallway. “You make more noise than a parade of elephants in tap shoes.”

Both men turned to stare. J.D. Dunne wavered unsteadily in the door, one hand pressed against the side of his head, glaring at them as if he wanted them both to spontaneously combust.

Chris smirked back at Buck. “A parade of elephants in tap shoes,” he repeated with precise enunciation. “And you worry about what I’m teaching him.”
“Shut up,” Buck said. He refused to be sidetracked. “I’m not through with you yet. Don’t move.”

He turned toward J.D. and began a slow stalk down the hall.

Chris counted the seconds before J.D. realized he was trapped. It wouldn’t be long.

“Well hi there, J.D.!” Buck boomed out cheerfully, his voice filling the small hallway. “You have a nice afternoon?”

Chris winced as J.D. clutched both sides of his head. He silently welcomed the young agent into the fold.

Buck continued to carry on a one-sided conversation very nearly at the top of his lungs until J.D. finally pushed by him and fled into the downstairs bathroom. Buck hollered needless advice after him about how many aspirin to take and how much water.

He turned back to see that Chris had resumed his position on the couch. Arm back over his eyes.

“Get up,” Buck snapped, kicking the back of the couch once, right about where he judged Chris’s tailbone to be.

“You do make more noise than a parade of elephants in tap shoes,” the blond muttered.

“You an’ me were having a set-to,” Buck reminded him.

Chris lowered his arm to peer over it. “We were discussing that last time you went on a bender,” he replied.

Buck went cold. He paused. Then answered, his voice a low growl. “While you were gone.”

“I heard,” Chris responded.

Buck came back around the couch, shoved Chris’s legs over and sat down heavily. He leaned back and closed his eyes.

“Did you at least teach him a lesson about drinking on duty?” Buck asked, cracking an eye open and looking down at the team leader.

A rueful smile spread over Larabee’s thin lips. “I think I’m the one who got taught the lesson,” he replied.

Buck waited for Chris to elaborate. As usual, he didn’t. Buck shook his head in exasperation. He reached down and swatted Chris on the leg. “What do you want for dinner?”

Chris snorted. He felt damn lucky the soup had stayed down. But he didn’t want to tell Buck that.

As usual, Buck was way ahead of him. “Potato chips, coffee, and a bar of dark chocolate?” Buck asked pointedly.

The thin smile widened. “Ask J.D. what he wants.”

Buck grinned evilly back at his long-time friend and went to rap on the bathroom door. He began calling out suggestions like eggs over easy, chili cheese dogs, pork lo mein, nachos, and meatball subs. The only reply was a loud thump as something heavy was thrown at the door.

Buck and Chris exchanged identical grins.
It was twenty minutes later that Buck nudged Chris awake again. The mustached agent set a plate containing potato chips and a pile of chocolate onto the coffee table beside a tall mug of steaming black coffee. He watched as Chris peeled himself up to a sitting position. Saw him locate J.D. through the kitchen doorway, forehead against the tabletop, both arms on top of his head. The blond gave a sigh.

Buck was watching him guardedly. But not guardedly enough that Chris couldn’t read the worry there. Chris closed his eyes. He was too damn tired to run tonight. His head felt better, though, and so did his stomach after he had spent the larger part of four hours asleep on Buck’s well broken-in couch. The hot mug was pressed into his hands and he breathed in the fragrant steam for a while before taking a sip.

Buck patted his knee. Then the couch shifted slightly, as Buck’s weight left the cushions. A minute later he heard noises in the kitchen. There was a quick, short rap that he interpreted as the sound of another mug of coffee being set down next to J.D. He didn’t open his eyes to look and had to catch himself before his own mug slipped out of his listless fingers. The hot liquid splashing down onto his leg roused him more fully awake. He pulled himself straighter up, took another sip from the mug, set it down and started on the first potato chip.

After serving out the meager dinners, Buck took his reheated delivery pizza upstairs into his bedroom. He dialed Nathan.

“I thought you were never gonna call,” the medic said irritably. “How are they?”

Buck grinned evilly, sticking the pointed end of a melted, cheesy, meat-laden pizza slice into his mouth, realizing only now how empty his stomach felt. “Well,” he said, his mouth full. “J.D.’s got the hangover from hell.”

“Good,” Nathan replied. “And Chris?”

Buck sighed. “He’s moved back a couple o’ squares.”

Nathan swore under his breath. “Damn stubborn fool,” he said. “How many interviews left to go?”

Buck put down the pizza slice he was working on. “Chris has to interview Vin an’ me before he turns it over to IA. Then Tanner and I gotta talk to Travis. Then they’ll wanna talk to Chris. Then we wait for follow ups and fallout.”

Nathan sighed.

“There’s nothing we can do, Nathan,” Buck said into the ensuing silence. “Nothing except hold the line and follow orders.” We been there before, Buck thought acidly.

“And put the pieces back together after this is over,” Nathan added firmly.

“Right,” Buck agreed. But to himself he thought, If we still have them all.

“You got it covered over there?” Nathan asked.

Buck smiled at the medic’s concern. He’d probably been steadily reaming Chris and J.D. out in absentia since he had arrived home. And his pretty fiancée was probably listening patiently to a litany of both men’s faults. Nevertheless Nathan would be over in minutes if Buck said either one of them needed him.

“Got it covered, Nate,” he replied, starting on his second slice. “Gonna see if I can get Chris to stay.”
“Good luck,” Nathan snorted.

Buck grinned at that. Yeah, he knew it was a long shot. But it wouldn’t be like him not to give it a try.

* * *

Chris found himself staring at the ceiling at two A.M. Right on schedule. Only this time there were a few extra questions floating around in his brain. The first one was answered. It was his own bedroom ceiling. He had spent enough early morning and late night hours staring at it to recognize it.

The next question was harder. How did he get here? He knew the dull ache in his head wasn’t a hangover. Therefore he hadn’t been drunk. So that possibility was out. It took another few seconds for the events of the day to start to replay themselves. He remembered Buck trying to convince him to stay at the CDC, as the other team members affectionately and not-so-politely referred to the townhouse that Buck and J.D. shared. He also remembered handing Buck several lame lines about why he couldn’t stay. At the time he had thought they were too lame to convince himself to even get off the couch, let alone convince Buck to send him home. He frowned. That’s where the memory ended.

Knowing from recent weeks and past experience that attempting to go back to sleep while questions and concerns were swirling around in his brain, would be pointless, he reached for the bedside reading lamp. The white light exploded like shards of glass into his head, as he flipped the covers back. As his eyes adjusted, he realized that he was still wearing the clothes he had worn to the office yesterday, minus his jacket and shoes.

He staggered into the bathroom. He hoped to hell that no one had let him drive. Or if he had, that he hadn’t hit anyone. Surely he’d remember that? A note was taped to the mirror.

Call me when you’re conscious.

--Buck

Ah, Chris thought rubbing his eyes. That explained a lot. Giving a sigh, he pushed aside the questions about how he had gotten home. He changed into a pair of sweats, padded down to the kitchen and went to work on the other questions, the same ones he’d been trying to figure out, since he woke up in a Texas hospital room surrounded by his team. All alive. All well. And all in a heap of trouble.

Odd things float into a man’s head when he’s sitting alone in his kitchen at two in the morning. Chris knew this well. He also knew well that sometimes, those strange, disconnected thoughts can offer a clue to whatever it is that put him alone in his kitchen at two in the morning. Josiah had said it had to do with freeing up one’s subconscious. With letting ideas that one wouldn’t consciously connect with a problem float in, be tried on for size. Thinking out of the box. Clearly, Josiah had spent more time studying the matter, so Chris believed him. But even though he had never studied the matter, Chris had always known instinctively to let the ideas come. Not that he believed it had to do with any inherent wisdom on his part. More like he had already exhausted all avenues of logic and reason without success, or he wouldn’t be up at two in the morning, still worrying the problem to death. So it was time to pursue other options.

Now, as he slouched in the hard oak chair, an article he read years ago about dreams helping people solve their problems bobbed up to the top of his thoughts. The article had given several examples of famous inventors who found ideas or figured out how to get past obstacles from their dreams. He thought about his nice comfortable bed upstairs and wished with every aching bone in his body that
he could go dream away his problems. But then, a person had to actually be able to relax and sleep in order for that plan to work, he thought sardonically.

In that instant a fragment of a dream floated up from somewhere in the back of his brain. The dream that had awakened him. He had been with Sarah. But she was crying. She was crying, and he didn’t know why. But he knew it was his fault. He concentrated on the fragment, trying to pull the rest of it out of his brain.

Then he remembered. He had gone away with Buck. Forgot to tell her. Forgot all about her, in fact.

He went cold.

That never happened, he told himself. I would never do that.

His stomach tightened.

He lurched out of his chair, moving anywhere. Anything to break the chain of thought, send the dream out of his head.

His eye fell on the coffee pot. He’d been drinking way too much of that stuff. But it was better than drinking whiskey. Nathan would let him have it for drinking too much coffee. But Buck would knock him into next week if he started drinking now.

It was hell having a friend who knew your bad habits. Made it too damn hard to run away. An unpleasant smile tightened his face. Wondering, and he wondered how it was that Buck always knew when he had one foot out the door. Or maybe it was that Buck expected him to have one foot out the door at all times. God knew that’s how he had lived most of his life.

Except those six years. The six years he hadn’t wanted to be anywhere else.

He put the coffee pot down. Suddenly there wasn’t enough air inside the house to breathe. He left the filter and the coffee and the water sitting on the counter, and staggered through blurred vision toward the sliding glass doors. He slipped out onto the deck, barefoot on the damp boards under the moonshine, breathing in great gasping gulps that made his chest hurt.

* * *

The telephone rang, and Buck leaped for it out of the shower, slipping across the tiled bathroom floor. The cordless handset clattered off the sink, where he had left it, and he caught it before it hit the floor. Impressed with his own prowess, he answered it, “Wilmington. Miracles performed daily,” a puddle slowly gathering at his bare feet.

“Hey,” Chris’s voice replied listlessly on the other end.

“’Bout time you called, Pard. Thought maybe you were gonna sleep all day.” Buck’s cheerful tone belied the frown on his face.

A derisive snort was the only response. Buck’s eyes narrowed.

Chris pushed the plate away from him. He had choked down about as much as he could manage. What he really wanted was to put his head down on the kitchen table and stay that way for another hour or two. Maybe he should go back upstairs and go to sleep.

He pulled himself together.
“Where’s my truck?” the voice in Buck’s ear asked, gathering strength.

“Well now, you were in no shape to drive,” Buck began smoothly.

“No shit. Where’s my truck?” the voice repeated, with more resolve.

“I’ll pick you up,” Buck answered. “I’m just getting out of the shower now.” He grabbed his towel and started to dry off.

There was a sigh. He frowned even harder. “What? You think IA is gonna figure we cooked up a whole defense and hid all the evidence during the forty-five minute drive to work?”

He didn’t get an answer but in the silence, he could almost hear Larabee thinking, They might. Yet he knew that Larabee wasn’t exactly being excessively paranoid. After all, that was why Buck brought the house phone into the bathroom instead of his cell phone. If IA wanted to look for conspiracies, it would be harder for them to get records from the house phone than from their ATF issued cell phones.

The silence continued.

“So now you gotta stop talkin’ to us, too?” Buck snapped, irritated.

Chris swore quietly. Then there was another silence before he said softly. “I wish to hell this were over.”

“Me too, Pard,” Buck said gently. “We just gotta hang tough a little longer.”

There was a quiet sigh. When next he spoke, Chris’s tone was cool and even. His usual self. “I’ll see you when you get here. Just don’t make me late.”

“I’ll be out the door in fifteen,” he replied, running the towel over his hair and dropping it in a corner.

Chris gave some sort of affirmative to that and hung up.

Buck threw himself into some clothes, swearing quietly the entire time.

He pulled the big, black truck in as close to the front door as he could get, and swung it around so it was ready for a quick get away. Before he even reached to shut the engine off, he saw Chris coming out the front door. Buck watched watched him check the locks and give the house a quick glance over as he came down the steps. The mustached agent clamped his jaw down on any comment he felt like making as Chris got into the passenger side, without a word.

Buck headed the truck up the driveway, resisting the urge to give his old friend the once over. He had already seen plenty. Chris looked like ten miles of bad road. He was pale and still way too thin. Add to that the tense hunch of his shoulders as he fastened his seat belt. As soon as they hit the road, the blond leaned back against the headrest and shut his eyes.

Buck turned on a soft country station and resisted the impulse to sing along. Risking a glance at his friend, he couldn’t tell whether Chris was asleep or not. The tension in his face hadn’t eased. Perhaps it had become permanent. A stoplight turned green, and Buck pulled through, tapping one finger to the music as he contemplated the differences between driving Chris’s big black truck and his own prized red rebuilt classic pickup.

The sudden gasp from the passenger’s side startled him. The truck swerved, as he glanced over to see Chris bolt upright, eyes wide. Staring out the windshield. Breathing in huge gasps. Pulling the
truck straight into the lane where it belonged, he tried to keep one eye on the road and one on Chris.

“What’s wrong?” he asked.

“Pull over,” the strangled order came.

“What?” Buck asked, his own voice rising.

“Pull over,” Chris ordered stridently.

Buck found a spot on the shoulder. He hadn’t even stopped the truck before Chris had undone the seat belt and was fumbling with the door lock. Buck slammed on the brake. Chris bolted. Out of the truck and down the embankment through the weeds.

Swearing violently, Buck searched for the hazard lights then threw himself over the passenger seat out the door after Chris.

He found him thirty feet farther down. Seated, hunched over, head between his knees.

Buck approached cautiously. Squatting slowly down in front of the blond.

“Hey,” he said easily. “My driving ain’t that bad.”

There was no response but hard breathing from the man before him.

Buck chewed his lip. “Chris, look at me,” he said. When Chris did not move, he repeated the command more forcefully.

The blond slowly raised his head. Buck steeled his expression in the nick of time. Damn, Pard, he thought. I’ve seen addicts less strung out than you.

He stared at Chris, trying to read the expression in the red-rimmed, glassy eyes. Wondering whether he should be grateful or worried that Chris seemed to be letting him.

Then a tiny, sheepish, hint of a smile ticked up one corner of the pale face. The eyes were bleak. “I think…,” Chris said softly, hesitantly, his voice a near croak. “I think I need a new plan.” Words rose unbidden, repeating in his throbbing head, I don’t want to lose this…

Buck reached out and grabbed his boss, his leader, his friend around the back of the neck, pulling him tight against his shoulder. “Then we’ll get a new plan,” he replied firmly.

Traffic whirred through the intersection above them. They stayed still as statues for a moment until Chris’s voice broke in. “Let go, Buck. People will talk.”

Buck grinned, pushing the blond head back. “I expect they already do, Pard.”

He pulled Chris to his feet and walked behind him up the embankment. While Chris climbed in the passenger side, Buck flicked open his cell phone as he walked around the rear of the truck to the driver’s side.

“J.D.,” he said into the phone. “Tell the boys that I’m gonna be late. And Chris ain’t comin’ in today.”

He paused. “How the hell should I know what Travis is gonna do? I’ll be there when I get there.”

He paused and listened again, then laughed grimly. “Oh no, boy. You’re goin’ to work today. An’ if
you ain’t there on time, I’ll kick your ass when I get in. I can do that, since I’ll be in charge.”

He hung up the phone. Boy had a lesson to learn. Do the crime. Do the time. Get yourself drunk and hung over, get to work anyway, and keep your mouth shut about it.

He got back behind the wheel and swung the truck around. Chris had pushed the passenger seat all the way back and had both hands over his face.

Buck patted his leg. “First things first, Pard,” he said. “Let’s get you fixed up.”

A short, bitter laugh answered him.

He sighed to himself. Humor was a good sign, at least.

Buck pulled the big truck back into the driveway, back into the spot he had just left. He eyed Chris, who was slowly getting out the passenger’s side, wondering whether he should go around and help. In the end, he decided that as long as Chris seemed to be moving toward the door, he wouldn’t interfere. He followed the blond into the house and watched him struggle out of his jacket, finally hurling it across the living room with a curse.

“Easy there, Stud,” Buck said, stripping off his own jacket.

“I don’t have time for this,” Chris growled, dropping onto the nearest chair and dropping his head into his hands, again.

“Head hurt?” the tall agent asked.

A muffled noncommittal grunt was the only reply.

Buck nodded to himself. The answer was pretty obvious. Not that Chris would admit it. Buck wondered why he had bothered to ask.

Chris pulled his head out of his hands and leaned it back against the back of the chair in exasperation. He gritted his teeth and cracked one red-rimmed green eye at Buck, who was still standing over him.

“It’s the eleventh hour, Buck,” Chris grated out. “We don’t have time to come up with a new plan. And I don’t have time for a sick day.”

Buck shrugged, never taking his eyes from the haggard face. “First things first,” he repeated. “I’ll get you some aspirin.”

He walked away. Chris stared after him, something niggling at him, something he ought to know. He closed his eyes again, and Buck’s face floated up into his imagination. He realized suddenly that it was the look. The twinkle. The quirk of a smile. All absent. They had somehow disappeared from his friend’s face. And he had not even noticed when they had gone. He swore to himself. A long litany of curses. How had it taken him this long to notice what had been happening to his team?

What the hell kind of team leader am I? he thought angrily, heat rising in his face. His head throbbed mercilessly.

Safely upstairs, Buck rifled the medicine cabinet with one hand, while he dialed Nathan’s cell phone with the other hand. On the last number he stopped. Short. And swore. He couldn’t call Nathan.

The medic was probably just about at the office by now. Not that Jackson wouldn’t come. He
would. He’d come racing. And then he’d go ballistic. Up one side of Chris and down the other. He didn’t think Chris needed to be reamed out right now. Nathan would hear that Chris wasn’t coming in, when he arrived at the office.

Buck chewed on his lip, hesitating. Finally, slowly, he dialed Nathan’s home, hoping Raine would answer. She did.

She sounded hurried. And surprised.

“Raine, it’s Buck.”

“Nathan’s not here,” she answered, confused. “He left for the office about twenty minutes ago.”

“I know,” Buck said. “I was calling for you.”

He could almost hear her suspicions rise on the other end of the line.

“What’s happened?” she asked.

He fidgeted. He felt almost like a school kid again, caught breaking the rules.

“Chris ain’t feelin’ so hot. Can you come over and take a look at him?”

Raine sighed. “Buck, I’m on my way to work,” she said almost sternly.

It was the almost that gave Buck hope.

“I’d feel a lot better if you came by,” he said hopefully. At least he hoped he sounded hopeful, rather than pleading. He was never much of an actor.

She sighed again. He heard the sounds of dishes clanking together and a door opening in the background.

“I can’t come over and give him an unofficial checkup,” she replied. “There are rules about these things.” He could hear her frustration over the line. “If you’re that worried, maybe you should take him to Four Corners General.”

“Where you’d be happy to check him out?” Buck snapped.

He ran a hand over his face. He hadn’t meant to take his frustration out on Raine. He guessed maybe he was getting to the end of his rope, too.

“I’m sorry,” he apologized. After all, Raine was a lady. She didn’t deserve to be spoken to that way. And she wouldn’t put up with it either. That was one of the things Buck liked about her.

“I understand you’re worried…” Raine began hesitantly, her resolve slowly cracking. “Nathan’s practically up a tree…” She stopped.

Buck inserted his last ditch plea into the silence.

“I ain’t askin’ you to write a prescription or anything that goes against your better judgment,” he replied. “I’m just askin’ ya, as a friend. A friend who won’t take any of Larabee’s garbage, an’ who’ll tell me if I need to take him to the hospital.”

She sighed. Then sighed again. “All right,” she answered, a note of iron creeping into her voice to cover up the softness that made her give in. “I’ll tell the hospital I’ll be late. But you owe me one.”
“I owe you a dozen, darlin’,” Buck replied, his relief evident in his voice. “I won’t tell ol’ hardhead you’re comin’.”

Raine smiled in spite of herself, as she hung up. Chris had earned the nickname a long time ago, apparently, but from her point of view, the description “hardhead” could fit any one of the men on Team Seven.

Buck tapped two aspirin out into his palm and headed back down the stairs. Chris was on the couch. Curled in a tight ball. And wrapped up in the blanket like it was a spider web. Tied up until the spider came back to finish him off.

The blond didn’t move, as Buck came down the stairs, causing the taller agent to wonder whether his friend had gone to sleep, was trying to go to sleep, or was just in some kind of holding pattern, staving off the pain. Buck didn’t know. He continued on into the kitchen to get water for the aspirin and found the empty coffee mugs and the coffee machine, still holding the dregs in the bottom of the glass carafe. He put out his hand. It was cold to the touch. The burner was cold, too. He shook his head. Then he took the glass of water and the aspirin out to Chris.

He was pacing the front hall by the time Raine’s car pulled into the driveway. He had watched Chris take the aspirin, made him drink the entire glass of water, and convinced him to go upstairs to his bedroom. He had gone without a word, the blanket still wrapped tight around him. Twice Buck had checked on him. Not surprised to see his head sandwiched between the pillows.

Buck opened the door before Raine could ring the bell.

“Hi,” he said softly.

She attempted to glare at him, but it held no heat. She craned her neck to look into the living room. “Where is he?” she asked.

Buck helped her off with her coat, reassured to see that maybe she planned to spend a little time.

“I convinced him to go upstairs. I hope he’s sleeping.”

Raine frowned. Clearly not very happy about being called here. “You’ll have to wake him up if you want me to take a look at him,” she said.

Buck nodded, as she brushed past him.

He reached out and grabbed a hold of her arm. She turned back to face him and in the instant read the sudden sorrow that flashed in his blue eyes.

“Listen,” he said, without a trace of the Buck Wilmington charm, she had become so used to in the past few years. It was strange not to hear it.

“I’m listening,” she said gently.

“Can you go a little easy on him?” he asked, feeling almost stupid.

“Is that why you called me instead of Nathan? Because you thought I’d go easy on him?” she asked, narrowing her eyes, and Buck felt again like a child, caught in a tall tale.

The mustached agent grimaced. His discomfort would have been amusing to her, if she didn’t already know how tense and upset Nathan was. She laid her hand over his big one, still holding her sleeve.
“He just doesn’t need anyone else on his case right now,” Buck said quietly, earnestly. He almost smiled as he said, “I suspect he’s already got Chris Larabee on his case. And that’s enough for anyone.”

She smiled gently. “I’ll go easy,” she promised.

He looked so relieved it was all she could do not to smile. He started to tell her which room it was.

“I know the way,” she said with a reassuring smile, pulling his hand from her sleeve. “You wait here.”

He settled down into a chair that gave him a good view of the stairs. Satisfied. And reassured that Raine would go lightly. Chris could use a gentle touch right now. God knew he didn’t know how to go easy on himself.

He studied the floor and the carpet, listening hard to try to catch the conversation upstairs. He could catch nothing except an occasional distant, muffled voice.

He had been listening so hard, he actually jumped when his cell phone suddenly rang. He jerked his glance to his watch. Nine o’clock.

“Wilmington,” he answered.

“What’s goin’ on?” Vin’s voice asked, tense.

“Nothing,” Buck replied defensively. Probably too defensively. He didn’t want to start Tanner’s wheels turning.

“He just doesn’t feel well,” Buck continued before Vin had a chance to ask anything else.

“Should someone come check him out?” Vin asked, a note of anxiety creeping into his voice.

“I’ve got someone,” Buck replied. There was silence and Buck had time to wonder whether he should have given away that much. Chris had spent two days pretty much behind closed doors and Nathan had made no secret of his suspicion that Chris was just plain avoiding him. Anyone who’d had a glimpse of the team leader could see why he might be avoiding the medic. Still, it would have been better politically, tactically to not let on that he had been concerned enough to call someone in.

As the silence continued, Buck realized that Vin was waiting for an explanation. “Raine’s here,” he said.

“Oh,” Vin replied. And in his mind’s eye, Buck could almost see him moving away from the medic’s watchful eyes.

“Just don’t tell Nathan. Not yet,” Buck said. “I want to hear what Raine says and then I’ll call him.”

“Sure,” the Texan said lightly. His voice betraying no concern.

There was long pause. Then Vin spoke again, his voice low, tense, all business. “You gonna be in?” The sharpshooter must have moved to a different place.

Buck ran a hand through his hair. “Depends on what Raine says.” So long as he was giving the truth away, he might as well let someone share the anxiety with him.

“How do ya want me to hold off Travis?” Tanner asked.
Buck blew out his cheeks in frustration. “Ask him to give us some time.”

He could almost hear Vin shrug. It was always odd talking to Tanner on the phone. So much of what he had to say was not said in words. Even when he was on the phone. Like Chris. Sometimes Buck felt like reminding him that he couldn’t see him over the phone lines.

“Don’t think it’s Travis’s call,” the sharpshooter said uneasily.

Buck blew out the breath again. “Well ask. If he can’t hold off, you go ahead.”

“Before I talk to Chris?” Vin asked. Buck could almost hear him wince.

Buck shifted uncomfortably. “It ain’t the same topic, exactly. So it shouldn’t matter, right?” He hated how uncertain he sounded.

He reverted to the same advice he’d been giving J.D.—and everybody else—all week. “Just tell ‘em what you saw.”

Vin snorted. Maybe it was a laugh. “Right,” he said, his tone empty, flat, noncommittal. Then he was gone.

Typical. No sign off.

Buck shifted his feet to another uncomfortable position and wondered when Chris’s living room had started to feel like a hospital waiting room.

* * *

After fifteen minutes, more for something to do than any other reason, Buck called Ezra at the office.

“Agent Standish,” the cool tone answered.

“Ezra, it’s Buck.”

“Mr. Wilmington,” Standish drawled. “How charming of you to deign to spend some of your valuable time on those of us at lower levels of the food chain. We who actually have to appear at the office to keep our jobs.”

Buck actually bit his tongue in his haste to cut off a smart remark concerning Ezra’s punctuality. “Ezra,” he said sternly, with as much self-restraint as he could muster.

“Relax, Mr. Wilmington,” the Southerner drawled, placatingly. “And before you ask, our good medic is nowhere in sight—or earshot for that matter.”

Buck squeezed his temples with one big hand. Larabee had just about used up all the patience he had this morning. He had very little left for the temperamental undercover agent.

The southerner spoke again. “I understand our fearless leader is unwell?”

Buck frowned, not quite able to read the expression in Standish’s voice. He chose not to answer that question, instead moving on to why he had called. “I called about J.D. Is he there?”

“Ah yes,” Ezra replied, and this time the smug tone was all too clear. “He is here and looking a strange shade of pale green.”

“Good,” Buck retorted to both pieces of information. “I want you to do me a favor.”
Ezra did not answer. He was waiting. So Buck went on. “I want you to keep him busy. Go hard on him.”

The southerner’s drawl clearly showed amusement now. “Hoping to instill a valuable lesson about the evils of alcohol and the responsibilities of the work place?” he asked, pointedly.

Buck grinned evilly into the phone. “You bet I am,” he replied. “He committed the crime. Now he has to do the time.”

Ezra laughed. “Well, then, consider the time served,” he said cheerfully.

“Knew I could count on you, Ez,” Buck said.

“Always, Mr. Wilmington. Always.” Ezra touched a finger to the brim of an imaginary hat in salute as he hung up the phone.

He glanced over at the pale, hunched form of the young agent. At his desk. Hands up to his head. Doing his best to go unnoticed.

Ezra contemplated a few moments how best he could administer said lesson. He decided on an opening gambit.

“Did you hear that, J.D.?” Ezra asked, smacking his palm loudly down on his desktop.

The young agent jumped. “What?”


“Um, no,” J.D. said.

He looked utterly miserable.

Ezra hid his evil grin.

“Well that was I.T. They need someone to come down and pick up the transcripts, and surveillance tapes for the briefings with Team Eight.”

J.D. looked at him with a pained expression. Ezra shrugged. “They need to be signed for. And you’re the only surveillance operative in the office right now.”

He received a dirty look for his effort, but J.D. slid out of his chair and headed unsteadily down the hall.

“That was a dastardly ploy,” Josiah said, as Ezra moved past him toward the kitchenette.

“Not at all, Mr. Sanchez,” Ezra countered. “That was merely a valuable lesson on why it is important to keep alert to one’s surroundings.”

Josiah’s deep chuckle made Ezra grin to himself as he headed for the coffee pot.

* * *

Thirty-five minutes passed before Raine came quietly down the stairs. The tall, lanky agent practically leaped to his feet. She gestured to him to follow her as she headed toward the front door. He took her coat out of her hand, as she removed it from the hall closet. He helped her put it on. Waiting. Anxious.
Finally he could stand it no longer. “So he’s all right?” he prompted.

She turned to face him. “I don’t know about all right,” Raine answered. “But certainly eight straight hours of sleep would help.”

She could almost see the relief flood through the big man’s dark blue eyes. She sighed. “He needs to sleep. And eat meals,” she emphasized sternly. “And if he wants to get himself back to normal, he also needs to take his medicine, and gain some weight.” She looked at Buck sharply. “And it wouldn’t hurt either if he went easy on the job right now.”

Buck’s smile did not reach his eyes. “Don’t ask much, do ya?”

She smiled ruefully. She licked her lips uncertainly. “That’s my opinion as a doctor.”

He squinted at her and tilted his head sideways.

“But you didn’t call me here as a doctor,” she said calmly, tying the belt of her coat.

Realization dawned in Buck’s face as he understood. “What’s your opinion as a friend?”

A frown flickered across her face. She settled on one of the many answers she could have given. The one she didn’t know if Buck would come up with on his own. She was uncertain how it would be received. “As a friend, I’d say he’s scared.”

Buck rocked back on his heels, his hands diving suddenly into his pockets. A strange expression passed over his face, but she noted with interest that it was not surprise.

“Sleep, huh?” he asked suddenly.

Changing the subject. She followed his lead. “Sleep seems to have been a problem lately.” She paused. “Something can be prescribed, of course, but you’ll have to bring him in to see a doctor.”

Buck shook his head.

Raine looked at him appraisingly. “If you have something else in mind, I don’t want to know about it.”

Buck grinned. “Nothin’ that don’t already have a doctor’s say so.” He smirked.

She shook her head again. Nathan’s crazy family. Soon to be hers as well. What’s a girl to do with them all?

Buck’s eyes softened. “Thank you,” he said.

She reached up impulsively and touched his cheek. “You’re welcome,” she replied.

As she went out the door, she turned back over her shoulder. “What should I tell Nathan?”

“I’ll talk to him,” Buck said uneasily.

She grinned and raised her eyebrows. “Why don’t you let me handle Nathan? I think you’ll have your hands full enough.”

He smiled suddenly down at his shoes. That was a better plan.

“Chris is supposed to call me later and let me know how he’s feeling,” Raine called back. “See that he doesn’t forget.”
“I’ll make sure he remembers,” Buck promised.

He stood in the doorway until her car turned out of the driveway again. Then he turned back into the house, staring thoughtfully at the ceiling as if he might somehow acquire the ability to see through it and into the master bedroom on the next floor. *Eight hours sleep,* he mused. Those painkillers would do the trick. Would knock Chris out good. The question was how to get him to take them.

* * *

The wiry sharpshooter took his seat calmly enough. He gave both directors a look that might have made lesser men believe Tanner had x-ray vision. Then he turned his attention to Travis and waited. Whether he was disappointed or even disconcerted that no delay had been granted on account of Agent Wilmington’s delay or Agent Larabee’s absence, could not be discerned from his demeanor. What could be easily discerned, however, was the hostility that emanated from his gaze.

The AD breathed deeply in and out to quell his rising irritation. This mess was not of his making. Nevertheless, it was clear that he was being regarded as the enemy. As if he had somehow betrayed them. He had not. They had betrayed their duty to the ATF. And this inquiry was partly to find out whether Chris’s particular leadership style had caused or contributed to that problem.

That was the part that stuck in Travis’s craw. He had no problem with inquiring how the dead militiaman had acquired Chris’s badge and gun. That was certainly an offense and should be dealt with. It was this secondary reason that felt to him like an ambush. Like scapegoating. A witch hunt. At least he had been able to warn Chris that it was coming. What Chris had done with this information, seemed to be anybody’s guess.

Travis realized the directors were looking at him. He gave them a nod. Ready to begin. It started off normally enough. But when it started to go downhill, Travis was the only one to notice.

As the sharpshooter, Tanner had taken an assigned position in the rafters.

Hofstader began by asking the young agent to relate his version of the events in the warehouse, both directors listening carefully for the places where his version of the story diverged from that of his teammates. Tanner obliged, his account becoming slowly more colorful each time Costas interrupted him for clarification.

“By the time the next fifty crawled out of the woodwork, the other two teams had cold feet and were halfway out the damn doors.”

Travis gritted his teeth at the expletive.

“Are you saying the other two teams positioned in the warehouse retreated?” Costas asked calmly.

Tanner looked at him disdainfully. “No, I’m sayin’ they turned tail and ran, leavin’ us holdin’ the line.”

“Who gave the order to retreat?” Hofstader asked.

Tanner frowned. “Don’t know, but by the time he gave it, we were the only ones still stupid enough to be sittin’ inside.”

Costas and Hofstader exchanged a glance.

“Go on,” Hofstader urged, making a note to return to this information. But first he wanted to hear the rest of Agent Tanner’s account.
Vin went on. His eyes focused farther away as he continued. “Once we heard the order to pull back, Larabee told us to get out.”

“Told us to get out?” Costas repeated thoughtfully.

Vin glared at him now. “Yeah. Told us to get out. As in save your sorry hides.”

Travis could see a red flush slowly working its way up Tanner’s neck.

The sharpshooter continued. “Buck asked him to give his position, so we could cover him. He ordered us out. He took a hit in the vest and then another one. The second one threw him back. Looked like it mighta gone through.” Tanner swallowed suddenly. He knew now. It had.

“And how did you react?” Costas asked.

Travis nearly interceded then, as it looked like Vin might come right out of his chair. He held his ground but his voice was hard, almost malevolent. “I started pickin’ off the bastards that were closing his position.”

Hofstader nodded. Tried , trying to hurry the narration onward to a conclusion.

The tactic seemed to work. Agent Tanner regained some of his discipline. His narration becoming more official sounding.

“Agent Larabee repeated his order to retreat. He took another shot in the arm, and went to cover. I lost sight of him. He told us to regroup at the van. He thought he could get out another way and he’d meet us at the van in ten.”

This time when Tanner looked up, he caught Travis’s eye. It was written all over Vin’s face. He had known then that Chris might not make it out of the warehouse.

“Another way out of the warehouse?” Costas asked suddenly. “At the time, what did you think he meant?”

Tanner jerked. His hands locked down on the arms. His legs twitched, as if he wanted to leap out of the chair. But he didn’t. “Why don’t you just ask the question you’re really asking?” he snarled.

Costas was unintimidated and undeterred. “All right, Agent Tanner. Do you think that Agent Larabee was at that time planning to pose as a militia member in order to escape?”

Hofstader cursed silently. He would have saved that question for later. Too bad Costas didn’t agree.

Tanner’s laugh was ugly. “Yeah, sittin’ under a pile of wooden crates, bleedin’ like a stuck pig, with a hundred militia guys no one told us about takin’ free shots at him while his team went out the door without him. Yeah, I think he was wonderin’ how he could get his hands on one o’ them cool camo jackets. Figure he just needed to raise his hand and ask one of ‘em to stop shootin’ long enough to trade.”

Costas glared at the agent. Reminded him of his place.

Hofstader redirected in a hurry. “How did Agent Larabee choose your position?” he asked.

Tanner looked at the older of the two directors with exasperation. He willed himself not to make a smart-ass remark. He replied frankly, trying to regain his calm. “Agent Larabee and I looked over the blueprints of the warehouse and cross-checked them with the team’s positions…”

The glance he received in return was pure venom. “Yes. *Those* positions.”

Travis swore. Give Tanner a few more years under Larabee’s command, and Chris will have spawned a double, he thought unwillingly. Had he been in a laughing mood, he would have enjoyed contemplating the repercussions of that situation. He was not in a laughing mood, and the two directors with him couldn’t even see the storm brewing. He battened down his own hatches and let it ride.

“So you assisted in choosing your position,” Costas affirmed.

“No,” Tanner disagreed. “I chose my position by myself. Larabee just gave it his okay.”

Hofstader’s eyes narrowed. The two directors exchanged a glance.

Costas continued. “When you chose your position, were you aware that *you* were now directly violating the orders of the mission commander?”

Tanner looked irritated. “Yes,” he replied.

Costas looked at him searchingly. “You knew you were violating the mission commander’s orders?”

“Yes,” Tanner repeated. His tone growing disdainful.

“Why did you go ahead then?”

“Cause it was a shit-for-brains plan that left our team too strung out to cover each other and wide open on our flank. And Chris told him so.”

“It wasn’t Agent Larabee’s call to make,” Travis interceded, hearing the tension rise in Agent Tanner’s voice. The foul language evidence enough of his increasing anger.

“The hell it wasn’t,” Tanner snapped.

“I beg your pardon?” Costas retorted, his voice soft, cold. A warning.

Travis closed his eyes momentarily. Tanner didn’t like to be threatened. This was not going to go well.

“I said, ‘the hell it wasn’t,’” Vin repeated, mockingly. “It’s his call if his team’s on the line.”

Costas stared at him. Travis and Hofstader both flicked their glances back and forth between the sharpshooter and the director.

The director’s face had become slightly pink. “So,” he answered, controlling the anger in his voice with limited success. “Are you saying that where his team is concerned, Agent Larabee believes his own authority to supercede the mission commander’s authority?”

Tanner laughed again. Hard. Mean. “I don’t know what the hell Larabee believes, but Mission Commander Agent Thackeray couldn’t out-strategize a team of pre-schoolers or find his own ass with a map, a compass, and a guide to help.”

Travis realized the moment to intervene had passed.
“What did you just say?” Costas roared in disbelief.

Hofstader rose abruptly from his chair and went out into the waiting room, looking like he had just swallowed a bug. It didn’t prevent him from hearing the rest of the inquiry. Tanner shouting at the top of his lungs that he’d follow Chris Larabee into hell if he asked.

Hofstader went back a moment later, and declared the interview over, talking right over Tanner, sensing that the young agent was about to tell Director Costas where to go and what to do when he got there. Together, he and Travis got Tanner out the door.

Costas was seething with rage. Red faced. The tendons standing out on his neck.

“I think we’ll take a few minutes before we go over our notes,” Hofstader said calmly. He and Travis left Director Costas to collect himself in the privacy of Travis’s office.

Vin reentered the bullpen looking somehow furious and shell-shocked at the same time. He slouched into his chair. Did not say a word. Just closed his eyes and shook his head. No one asked him how it went. They knew him well enough to know that now was not the time to talk.

They were saved from the uncomfortable silence by J.D. bursting into the bullpen. “Do you have any idea where all I’ve been sent this morning chasing those damn audios. They’re not even done!” he all but shouted in his exasperation.

“Shh! Mr. Dunne,” Ezra hissed petulantly. “Do keep it down. I have a bit of a headache.”

Three years of working for Chris Larabee had made Ezra impervious to the glare he received from J.D. He continued working on his next mission for the young agent.

* * *

He floated gently upward toward consciousness, bobbing to the surface like a cork. He remained there, eyes still closed. His head, blessedly, peacefully empty of thought and, for the moment, memory. He sank into the feeling, enjoying it, even as he knew that it would not last long.

After a moment, his eyes opened. His own bedroom. Facing the corner. Idly noting the long shadows and realizing it must be late afternoon, heading into evening. He tried not to think about the implications of that, either. Then it invaded his consciousness. The presence of someone else.

Suppressing a sigh or any other excess noise, he turned his head slowly to the right to see Buck. In the old rocking chair. Dressed for work, apparently. But now his sleeves were rolled up, his collar open, and his shirt untucked. Stocking feet. Brow furrowed, he was apparently working on a crossword puzzle in the newspaper. Chris very nearly laughed at that. Sarah had loved to do crossword puzzles. Buck, on the other hand, for most purposes, could hardly sit still long enough to help Adam do a dot-to-dot. Let alone the New York Times’s best.

Apparently, the motion had made a noise, because Buck raised his head. And gave a grin.

“Hey there,” he said quietly. The blue eyes raked over Chris’s face but good.

Since the jig was up, Chris began to push himself up to a sitting position, seeking out the digital alarm clock that would tell him what time it was really.

Disappointment crossed over Buck’s face. “There’s no hurry, Pard,” he said easily. “You could sleep a while more if you wanted.”
The green eyes flicked over to him suspiciously. He sighed. Chris had slept for a long time. Nearly eight hours in fact. Watching how long it had taken his friend’s features, the shoulders, the too-thin frame to relax even in sleep, Buck had begun to hope it would be something more like ten or twelve. He had done the chores. Straightened up a few things. Made himself a couple of meals. Watched some TV. Seen to the horses. Even attempted to do some work. But mostly he had parked himself in this chair, contemplating how far he had let Chris twist himself up. And what exactly it was that was twisting him up the most. A dozen or more possibilities presented themselves. All of them a long time coming. A number of them at least partly Buck’s fault.

Chris stared thoughtfully at the numbers on the alarm clock. Buck could see the wheels turning. Slowly. Chris raised his eyes again to level his gaze at his friend in the rocking chair.

“You slipped me a mickey,” he accused. There was no heat.

“You needed the sleep,” Buck replied. No reprisal.

Chris rubbed his eyes. He couldn’t exactly disagree. He smiled slightly. Buck Wilmington had to be the only person he knew who would drug Chris Larabee and then wait around for him to wake up and figure it out.

“How ‘bout some food?” Buck asked.

Chris shook his head. This morning’s scene played embarrassingly through his head. He pursed his lips and stared at Buck. He spoke hesitantly, almost unwillingly. “I think we gotta talk.”

Buck nodded. “That we do, Pard,” he agreed. “But first how ‘bout some food?” The tall, lanky agent didn’t wait for a reply, either agreement or disagreement. He simply stood and headed for the kitchen.

Chris shook his head. At the good fortune that had brought Buck Wilmington’s friendship into his life to begin with. And then at the mystery that kept it here, still solid, dependable, even though Chris knew he didn’t deserve it.

By the time Buck had figured out what to make and loaded it onto a tray, he caught Chris coming slowly down the stairs. Buck detoured back to the kitchen, balancing the tray and sneaking an appraising glance at his friend. Chris looked tired. Still sleepy maybe, but a lot less downright scary than he had at the side of the road—when he had taken another five years off of Buck’s life bolting out of the truck like that. The man was still rubbing his eyes as he came a little unsteadily into the kitchen, and Buck wondered whether the painkillers had entirely worn off yet.

Chris slid into his usual chair, slouched down. He was wearing the wind pants that Ezra had procured in Texas and a long-sleeved T-shirt. He yawned when he thought Buck’s back was turned.

Buck slid a peanut butter sandwich on a paper plate across the table to him along with a glass of milk. Chris looked at him funny.

“Thanks, Mom,” he said dryly, a smile grudgingly creeping across his face.

Buck shrugged. Raine had said eat meals. Not just potato chips, coffee, and chocolate. That was for emergencies.

Chris’s smile grew a little wider, when Buck sat down in front of his own peanut butter sandwich. He shook his head.

Buck shrugged again, and took a drink of his milk.
They ate in silence. Chris, surprised at how empty he felt. Especially when he couldn’t even choke down toast this morning. He turned his mind back to the thoughts that had been occupying him since two that morning, since Monday, since the week before, since he couldn’t remember when he had not been chewing on the same decisions over and over again. The sandwich hung neglected in his hand.

Buck frowned.

“What?” Buck said exasperated. “Do you need me to cut the crusts off?”

Chris looked at him blankly.

Buck swore. Goddammit, he thought. Is it too damn hard to just eat?

“You know, Stud, it might be a hell of a lot easier to come up with a new plan if you put some fuel in the tank,” he grated.

Chris swore and put the sandwich down completely. “We don’t have time for a new plan,” he snapped.

Buck stared at him. “All right,” he said. “Just how much longer you think you can last on this one?”

Chris blanched, as if Buck had just sucker punched him.

The tall agent swore to himself.

“Come on, Chris,” Buck said, putting down his own sandwich to lean forward. “Talk to me. Whatever’s going on in that thick, hard head, let me help.”

Chris stared at him. Then pushed back as if to leave the table.

Buck clamped a big hand down on Chris’s arm, and yanked him back down to a sitting position. “You took five years off my life bolting out of the truck like that,” he said quietly. “Now talk to me.”

Chris flinched. Buck had nailed him all right. A runner. He always was. Probably always would be. But he didn’t have to run now. He could take this for the team. It had to be easier than dying right? And he’d been prepared to do that back in that Texas warehouse. How hard could it be to take the fall for them? It was just a career. Just a job. Right?

Buck saw his friend’s expression harden. Saw the game face come up.

“Goddammit,” he swore, his hand clenching on Chris’s arm. “Do I have to take you outside and beat the truth out of you?”

He got that cocky smile as a reply, the one he loved when Chris gave it to the bad guys or flashed it at the brass, the one he hated when Chris directed it at him. Angry now, he made one last plea.

“Earth to Chris,” he snapped. “Remember me? Buck? The big dog? The guy who’s watched your back for over twenty years? You want to stand up in front of us and take the heat, that’s your choice. You’re the boss. But how am I supposed to watch your back if you won’t tell me where the fire is coming from?”

Chris stared at him. Blinked. “Shit, Buck,” he said, slumping against the chair back as if someone had just let the air out of him. “Maybe you should just get the hell out of the way of the fire instead.”

The hand on his arm clenched hard enough to hurt. Chris was forced to look up. The blue eyes that
bored into him were utterly devoid of humor. Hard, grim, and sad all at the same time.

“I did that once,” the man replied. “In Texas. I’m not doing it again. You don’t want to tell me your game plan, that’s fine. But know this: I’m with you. Right to the end. And if you get yourself fired to save our asses, I’ll be right beside you when you’re lookin’ for your next job.”

Chris stared at him. Mouth dry. Buck would leave the team? How the hell could Buck think he’d expect that?

Buck held his gaze until he saw that Chris knew he was serious. Dead serious.

It hit Chris then. What Chris expected didn’t enter into it. It was simply what Buck would do. He’d be there. Like he was always there. Like he had always been there. And no matter how this ended up, no matter how far out on the line he was willing to hang his own ass, he was never going to be out there alone. Firefights or firing. Even when they had left him in Texas, they had never quite let go.

He stared. The room closed in. And Buck saw the veins in the bloodshot green eyes grow slightly redder as Chris sucked in a deep breath. “I don’t want to take this hit,” he confessed.

Buck stared at him. “Then don’t,” he answered quietly.

Chris closed his eyes a moment, a bitter smile flickering across his face. “I have to. Josiah and Nathan’ll be okay, but J.D. and Ezra can’t afford a hit. They’re too vulnerable. And I’m not so sure about Vin. You and I are the only ones who can take the heat off of them.”

He opened his eyes again. Guilt leaked out of them. His voice was intense. Asking Buck to understand. “I can’t keep you from taking a hit, Buck. But I won’t let them take you down.”

He looked away, suddenly afraid that Buck would see it sitting there in his face. The truth. He’d do whatever he had to. To keep the team together. And to protect Buck. Whatever the cost, he would pay it. He knew he owed the man that much. And more.

Buck’s hand fell onto his shoulder, calling him to look back up. “So that’s your plan? You’re gonna throw the game?” he asked, a deep, angry frown furrowing his brow. “Give yourself up? That ain’t like you.”

Of course, he had known that Chris was willing to do it. Throw his career away. He had said as much that night on the porch. Whatever happens now, you follow my lead. Hell, Texas had proven he’d throw more than that. For the team.

Even knowing that, Buck had agreed. Despite himself, he had followed the plan—whatever it was—blindly, faithfully. Given his complete loyalty. All he had left to give. All the while hoping another way out would present itself.

He stared at Chris now. Had they come down to it then? Had they hit the worst case scenario?

Buck shook his head. “This ain’t one of your better plans,” he said finally. “Not to mention the rest of the boys ain’t gonna be too crazy about it either when they figure it out.”

Chris sighed. “What choice do I have?” He should have known Buck wouldn’t understand.

The mustache twitched upward. “Change the game,” he suggested. “Make ‘em play by your rules. Ain’t that what you’re famous for?”
His grin widened, as he added, “Two smart guys like us oughta be able to come up with a plan that’ll give you some cover.”

Chris looked at him doubtfully. Buck gave his arm a little squeeze and winked. Brash. Cocky. “Course, ya mighta mentioned all this before you shot out of the truck like a scared rabbit.”

One corner of Chris’s mouth quirked up. Embarrassed. “Guess I could have thought of askin’ before it got this bad,” he mumbled.

Buck smiled back. “It’s like Ezra said, Stud. Self-preservation is a new concept for you. Can’t expect to be good at it right off the bat.”

Without warning, the hand moved off of Chris’s sleeve and pushed him hard in the side of the head.

“Finish your sandwich,” Buck ordered. He grinned mischievously. “And when you’ve cleaned your plate and drunk all your milk, then we’ll take a hard look at how to get all of us out of this mess—including you.”

In spite of himself, Chris smiled and picked up the sandwich.

Buck picked up his own sandwich. “And if our two brains aren’t enough,” he cracked, “I know five more of the slipperiest, trickiest, wiliest ATF agents to ever keep AD Travis up all night.”

Chris’s smile grew a bit more. “Wondered how you kept ‘em away all day.”

Buck grinned back. “Threats mostly,” he replied. “But if I don’t call ‘em by eight, they’ll be knocking down the front door.”

Chris eyed his watch and reached for his glass. “I’d better get this milk finished then. And then we had better get to work.”

_We._ Buck nearly blew out a breath. He knew Chris was right. It _was_ the eleventh hour. But at least this time they had a chance to get Chris out of the way before the rocket launcher got lined up.

They settled into the living room, laying out a strategy over the coffee table. Buck sipped his coffee and noted that it wasn’t long before Chris began to yawn.

Chris cursed his luck. He should have known. It might have been the novelty of a full stomach stealing the blood from his brain. It could have been the sheer relief that maybe there was another way out of this stealing the adrenaline from his bloodstream, or it might have been the damn sleeping pills still working their magic. But whatever it was, he suddenly felt as heavy as lead. And his attention was wandering. He looked up at Buck apologetically and discovered that Buck’s face held more wry amusement than frustration.

Wilmington shook his head and chuckled.

“It’s not funny, Buck,” Chris growled, but it lacked the force of any actual anger. He was too damn tired for that.

Buck only laughed harder. “All right, Sleeping Beauty,” he said. “We’re not gonna get anywhere right now. You go back to bed and sleep on it.”

He thought suddenly. “Didn’t you tell me once that dreamin’ on a problem can help you solve it?”

Chris went suddenly cold. Buck noted the change in his expression. But the blond shook his head,
“Yeah, maybe,” Chris grunted noncommittally. “Maybe I’ll just dream up the answer.”

Chris moved slowly back up the stairs, as Buck promised he’d continue to work on the problem. Then Buck glanced at the clock. It was goin’ on eight and he had to call them anyway. Might as well take advantage of the opportunity, and call the cavalry while Chris was asleep, before he had a chance to return to his usual ol’ stubborn, ornery, I-can-do-it-myself self.

He waited to give Chris time to fall asleep. Then he slipped silently up the hall in his stocking feet to peek in the door and make sure. The blond had his head between the pillows. The quilt covered the rest of him. Buried. So far down that Buck actually craned his neck to make sure Chris was really in there and hadn’t tried to skip out. He chided himself for being paranoid, as he shut the door firmly behind him. He hurried down the stairs and around the corner into the den. Then he shut that door and started dialing the boys. Beginning with Nathan.

That chore finished, he opened the front door, leaving only the screen, making sure no one did anything stupid like ring the doorbell. He had told them all they were meeting while Chris slept. Still, some of his teammates had a penchant for being noisy. Then he gathered pencils and paper and settled down to wait.

He didn’t have to wait long. He didn’t know why it should surprise him, but it did, as he realized that some of them must have already been on the way. He should have known. In a way, he wished Chris were awake to witness it.

They gathered in the den. Behind the closed door. Ranged across the desk, the chairs and the old sofa, wherever there was room. J.D. took a seat on the floor.

“Listen,” Buck began, keeping his voice low. Their eyes were all glued to him. Their faces serious. Reminding him suddenly of the Texas hotel room. And before, in the bullpen conference room. When they had planned their unauthorized mission. Together. For Chris.

He took a deep breath. “Everyone here has seen Travis. And so far everyone has done exactly what Chris wanted.”

He could see the expectancy and the doubt in their faces. Could hear them thinking But...

He pursed his lips. “Oh hell,” he said suddenly. “Chris has a game plan. You’ve followed it perfectly. But now we want a new one.”

“A new game plan?” Josiah asked.

“It’s a bit late in the game to change the plan, is it not?” Ezra asked.

Buck glared at him exasperated. “Yes,” he retorted. “So we’d better come up with one fast.”

“Why now?” Nathan asked. If Chris wanted a new game plan, then Chris would get a new game plan. No argument from him. Just why so sudden?

Buck chewed his lip, musing on his reply, gauging their reaction. In the end, there was no good way to say it, so he spat it out. “He realized that he doesn’t want to get hung out to dry.”

J.D. scowled his protest. “We didn’t…”

Josiah interrupted. “Hold on there, son. No one here has hung Chris out to dry.”
“That’s right,” Buck agreed, grateful for the big profiler’s intercession.

“Chris set himself up to take the fall,” Vin said. It wasn’t exactly a statement. Nor was it exactly a question. He waited for Buck to confirm. Unflinching.

Buck dropped his head. “Yes,” he said.

He could feel J.D. staring at him. Accusing him.

“That’s a heavy burden Brother Chris has been carrying around,” Josiah said quietly, looking at J.D. He turned back to Buck, although his words were still directed at J.D. “Must have been hard to be the only one to share it.”

“Damn fool,” Vin growled. He looked up at Buck. “Think ya coulda waited a little longer to let us in on this idiot idea o’ Larabee’s?”

Buck glared back at him. Tanner should talk. Of all of them, he was the one who gave Chris the closest run for his money for sheer stubbornness and refusal to ask for help.

“I’m askin’ ya now,” Buck said, keeping his voice even. He blew out a breath, gathering up his resolve. “Fact is, we went AWOL. We conducted an illegal surveillance. Chris can’t cover that up. But he can keep IA from finding out exactly what this illegal surveillance entailed. And so far, he’s succeeded. But we can’t get out of this scot free. He’s got to give IA something. Something they can dig up. Something they can chew on. And punish.”

“He’s handing them the existence of our illegal surveillance on Bautiste,” Josiah said calmly.

“Bautiste is never gonna confirm that,” Nathan said scornfully.

“Right,” Buck smiled. “So they’ll spend a lot of time digging around and then end up with what Chris has already handed them.”

“A diversion,” Ezra said. “Which will allow us to slip out the back door with the real crime unnoticed.”

Buck winced at the undercover agent’s choice of words, which, as usual, was excruciating in its accuracy.

“So what’s the problem?” J.D. asked.

“The problem is punishment,” Buck answered. “You heard Chris at the first inquiry. He worked too long to keep us out of the brass’s direct line of fire to let that change now. He won’t give us up that way. So he thought maybe he could somehow convince the brass that we went AWOL because of his leadership style.”

“Lack of discipline,” Josiah nodded.


Ezra gave the medic a long-suffering look.

When the undercover agent turned back to Buck, his gaze was sharp. “That sounds like another diversion?”

Buck smiled tightly. Damned, Ezra was good at this political strategy. “Yes. The brass wants their pound of flesh. They want an example. And they want to do it in a way that is not going to be
politically embarrassing. That means, if they can get around Chris, they’ll want to punish the most politically vulnerable target they can legitimately pick.”

Buck saw Ezra drop his head. But he continued. “By offering them a bigger fish to fry, Chris thought he could keep them from trying to go around him.”

“Bigger fish?” J.D. asked, shaking his head.

“Me,” Buck said. “I authorized the illegal surveillance.”

“That’s not fair!” J.D. exclaimed.

Five voices urged him to be quiet.

“Of course it’s not fair,” Buck replied. “Do you think they’d buy it if it were easy?”

J.D.’s face turned suddenly red. Before he could voice his protest again, Buck went on.

“And then I’m supposed to tell the brass that I just did what Chris would have wanted. I blame Chris. And Chris agrees.”

He took a breath.

“Of course, then there’s the matter of how the militiaman got his badge and gun. But that’s a red herring.”

Vin looked at him curiously.

“The real question is whether Chris’s insistence on autonomy has made us a rogue team. One that answers to Chris and not to the brass.”

“And if they decide we are?” Vin asked, feeling the room suddenly growing warm.

“Well you know that Chris has always made it a point that he is responsible for the actions of his team,” Buck said evenly. “He’ll try to convince them that he is really to blame for what we did.”

Vin swore. He had known the answer, of course, but somewhere inside he had hoped he might be wrong.

“And us?” Nathan asked.

“No point punishing people who don’t know they’ve done anything wrong,” Ezra replied, his voice cold. “You kill the beast by cutting off its head.”

Vin swore. If that’s what Chris had wanted him to do, boy had he done it. He had pretty much handed Chris to the brass on a silver platter, when he flew off the handle at Costas.

Buck was watching him closely.

Ezra was shaking his head in disbelief. “I can’t believe I was a party to this ridiculous plan.”

Buck’s lips tightened. “He just wanted to protect…” he paused.

Ezra glared at him. “His politically vulnerable agents.”

Buck nodded.
Vin swore.

J.D.’s face was red. His eyes wide. “He coulda told us!” he said in disbelief. “We woulda done what he asked.”

Ezra laughed derisively. “Good God, Mr. Dunne,” he exclaimed. “You must have a high regard for your own acting skills. You’re precisely one of the people he needed to protect.”

J.D. opened his mouth to protest, but Ezra interrupted. “As am I. The least we can do is try to figure out how to get Mr. Larabee’s head off the chopping block, now that he’s come to his senses.”

Josiah shook his head sadly. His hand went to his breast pocket. “It’s happening again, and we still couldn’t see it.”

J.D. stared at him.

Buck shrugged. “At least this time, he’s askin’ us for help.”

Josiah gave Buck a penetrating look. “Is he? Because we seem to be holding this meeting in secret.”

Buck gave him a helpless look. He didn’t know quite how to answer that. Chris was asleep. He needed to sleep. But the truth was, Buck was afraid he’d balk once he gained a little strength and a little resolve.

“I can answer that,” a quiet voice said. The door came slowly open to reveal Chris. Haggard and pale in the dim light of the den. He looked around at his men. He hadn’t meant to listen in, but he had awakened from that damn dream and staggered out into the hall. Then he had heard their voices through the heating vent. It took him a while to realize that he needed to be down there, not hiding in his own hallway, wondering how much damage he had done to them.

Vin stood up. Then moved down to the floor next to J.D. Leaving a space on the sofa.

“Sit down, Chris,” Nathan said, moving closer to the arm.

He picked his way past them and settled into the seat Vin had just vacated. Smack in the middle of the couch. Between Nathan and Ezra. Josiah in the arm chair. Buck leaning on the desk. Vin and J.D. on the carpet. All looking at him expectantly.

He swallowed his pride. “I owe you all an apology,” he began.

Buck and Josiah both hid their grins as Nathan, Vin, Ezra, and J.D. all immediately shouted him down.

“Perhaps you were not aware that this is a team, Mr. Larabee,” Ezra said sternly, his voice rising over the others.

“And you’re one of us,” J.D. insisted.

Chris swallowed. Hearing his own words now coming back at him.

Vin just shook his head. And Chris knew he was in for an earful later.

Buck grinned. “Well, boys, you know the stakes. You know where we are. We got a lot of thinking and maneuvering to do before I have to go talk to the brass tomorrow.”

“Right,” J.D. confirmed.
“We might as well make their suspicions of collusion true,” Ezra sighed.

J.D. grinned. “Let’s start from the beginning. What do the brass have and what don’t they have?”

Chris looked at Buck uncertainly. “Listen,” he said calmly. “If you hold this strategy meeting and anyone finds out…” he trailed off.

J.D. grinned up at him. His face full of resolve and assurance.

Chris grimaced. “You don’t have to do this,” Chris said simply. “Any of you.”

“And you didn’t have to save my career,” Ezra replied. “Repeatedly.”

Chris ducked his head, the dim lamplight all but hiding the slight red flush that crept into his pale face.

A hand squeezed his shoulder. He looked up to see Buck reaching across the sofa. As always. “All for one and one for all,” he mouthed.

Chris smiled. Buck took a seat on the arm of the sofa beside Nathan. And Chris watched in admiration, as without anyone taking over control, the team together began to move toward a plan of action.

It slowly unraveled as the evening went on, short skirmishes erupting followed by loud arguments. The phone rang, just as Nathan and Ezra had both risen to their feet, shouting either at each other. Or possibly at J.D.—it was hard to tell. Josiah was trying to recall some order to the room, and Buck had risen partly off the couch. Chris, holding his head with one hand and hoping no one would notice was the first to notice the ring. Without a word or pause he fled into the front hallway to answer it. The others barely paused to acknowledge his exit.

In the relative peace of the hallway, he checked the caller ID. And winced. He picked it up just a moment before the answering machine would have.

“Hi,” he said quietly, guiltily.

“You forgot,” Raine said.

He was caught. Fairly.

It was a simple statement of fact, but her picture rose before him, and he could see her standing there, hands on her hips, giving him that same look she had given him this morning. He wandered into the living room and sat down heavily on the arm of the sofa.

“Sorry,” he said with a grimace.

It would have been too easy for her to take advantage of his momentary guilt and twist the knife, but that was not why she had called. “I just wanted to check on you,” she said.

The kindness in her voice made him close his eyes. “I’m okay,” he said quietly.

She shook her head, but couldn’t help smiling. She let his self-diagnosis slide. “Did you get some sleep?”

“Yeah,” he replied with a chuckle, rubbing the back of his neck with one hand. “A lot.”

“Good,” she replied. “And dinner?”
“Yes, I had dinner,” he replied, starting to sound a little prickly.

Safe on the other end of the phone line she smiled. “What did you have?” she asked. And acknowledged that she really couldn’t resist twisting the knife a little. After all, she had spent part of her morning dodging Nathan’s questions. It might not have been an official visit, but Chris still had a right to confidentiality.

Chris hesitated, but he answered, realizing even as he did how stupid it sounded. “A glass of milk and a peanut butter sandwich.”

Sounding grumpy now, he added, “And before you ask, I took the painkillers.”

Sure, Buck had given them to him, crushed up and hidden in the applesauce he made Chris eat on the pretense of making him have something in his stomach to go with the aspirin. But Raine didn’t need to know that.

She laughed, and he didn’t know whether to be suspicious or not. But she didn’t ask about his other meds. He had been quite definite and specific this morning that he had taken all of his pills except the “damn painkillers” faithfully.

“That’s a start,” she said evenly.

“I see it’s getting late,” he replied. “You probably want to talk to Nathan.”

“You’re trying to ditch me, Larabee,” she said sternly, sounding so much like Nathan that he winced. But she laughed. “I would like to speak to him, if you don’t mind.”

“I’ll get him,” Chris said, getting up.

“Chris…,” she began. She hesitated.

It took her a moment to realize his silence meant that he was waiting. But she didn’t really know what she wanted to say.

“They worry, you know,” she said finally.

Chris stopped in the hall. Head down. “I know,” he said softly. He remembered the look on Buck’s face this morning by the roadside. The second before he closed down his expression. His own surprise at Raine’s arrival. And the realization that Buck had called her—behind Nathan’s back.

Raine stopped short of saying more. It wasn’t her place. Instead, she let a note of wry reprimand enter her voice. “You’re stressing out my fiancé,” she said, only half joking.

“I know,” he said, and this time she recognized the dry humor that crept into his voice, as he said, “Right now he’s taking it out on Ezra.”

She laughed. “You’d better get him then,” she replied.

He slipped back inside the door of the den to see that Nathan had been moved aside and Vin now stood shoulder to shoulder with Ezra, both of them shouting down a red-faced J.D. Buck had left his seat on the arm of the sofa and was trying to get all three of them to stop shouting at each other. Chris took advantage of the opportunity to hand a surprised Nathan the phone.

“Raine,” he mouthed.

Nathan took the phone out into the hall, throwing a quick glance behind him before he shut the door.
Chris had taken up a position leaning against the edge of his desk, arms crossed, head tilted to one side, watching and listening intently, but by the look on his face, Nathan knew Chris was beginning to come to a decision on his own.

He closed the door behind him and crossed through the living room into the quiet of the kitchen. He slid into a chair as he took his thumb off the mute button and answered the phone. She sounded tired as she returned his greeting.

He hedged when she asked when he would be home, stumbling, before finally giving a sigh. “Raine,” he began. “I have to ask you this. Because it’s not my future. It’s our future now, and I need to know if you’re behind me.”

She did not reply. Too preoccupied by the sudden sinking in the pit of her stomach. He continued, and she could hear the barest hint of an edge in his voice.

“I told you we were meeting to discuss how to handle this mess we made. Turns out I was right about draggin’ Chris down with us,” He frowned, hesitated, but forced himself to continue before he lost his nerve. “Chris thinks he can save the team if he takes the blame.”

She bit her lip. Only her soft grunt let him know she was listening.

“We came to figure out another solution,” he repeated. The edge in his voice took on a note of frustration. “Only we’re not getting anywhere.”

“I see,” she replied, slowly. Carefully neutral.

She heard the long, deep breath and steeled herself. She knew only too well that whatever Nathan was going to say would not make her happy.

When he spoke again, the edge in his voice had transformed itself into something stronger. Something surer. “They’re gonna want to blame this on someone. Chris thinks that it ought to be him. But he doesn’t want to get fired.”

The sinking feeling in her stomach grew cold. “Do you think they’ll fire him?” She asked. She didn’t want to know the answer.

Nathan exhaled. “I don’t know, but if Chris thinks so, then he’s probably right.” He winced. The words began to tumble out. “I can’t do it Raine. I can’t stand here and let him take the fall for something we did, while he was…” He stopped. Short.

_He can’t say it_, she realized. “While he wasn’t there,” she finished for him. A nice neutral expression. He grunted in acknowledgement.

It was Raine’s turn to exhale. Reluctantly, she asked, “What do you want to do?”

She steeled herself for the answer.

“If they fire Chris, I’ll resign,” he replied.

She heard the resolve in his answer. She respected him for it. That resolve. But she loved him for the small note at the end, the one that swung upward, that told her he was waiting for her. Her opinion. To wade in and weigh the consequences.
It was the consequences that pressed her suddenly into a nearby chair. Her mind reeling. They had a house. They were saving for a wedding.

“You couldn’t have discussed this with me first?” she snapped. Angry.

He didn’t blame her. He had blindsided her with this. But it was decision time. And the decision had come to him. He was careful to keep his reply calm and neutral. “I’m discussing it with you now. Talk to me. I need to know what you’re thinking. It’s our future. Not mine. Not yours. Ours.”

She scowled. How dare he throw that at her, when she knew his mind was already made up. In the silence, he began outlining his reasons. Predictable. Her scowl deepened.

“How many times has Chris stood up for us?” he asked. “How many times has he saved one of our lives? My life? He’s been a good friend to both of us, Raine. I can’t let them hang him out to dry.” Buck’s words. Accurate.

Financial figures whirled through Raine’s head. They were just about to get his first paycheck, restored to him after more than a month without one. A month without his income had been hard enough. Now this?

“God,” she groaned quietly.

“You don’t have to agree,” Nathan said quietly.

She snorted derisively. “Right. And if I say I don’t want you to do this, what would you do?” she asked.

She answered for him. “You’d keep finding arguments to convince me until I agreed.”

He did not answer. She was right, and she knew she was. She needed no confirmation from him.

He heard a sound like something had been set down sharply. Her voice trembled when she answered and he didn’t know whether it was anger or something else.

“It’s not fair to put me in this position,” she snapped. “What kind of wife would I be? What kind of person would I be if I asked you to go against what you believe? To ignore your conscience?”

She took a breath. “And what kind of friend am I, if I tell you that despite everything he’s done for you—for us—that I don’t want you to do this. That quitting won’t change whether they fire him or not. What does that say about me?”

She squeezed her eyes shut and ran a hand across her forehead. It didn’t help. Her eyes burned, and she fought the rough edge that came into her voice.

“I’m not saying not to,” she said. “I’m just saying it’s going to be hard to make ends meet on just my income right now. We have loans. And a mortgage.”

Nathan swallowed.

She could hear him thinking, but she also knew that he had already reached his decision. While he was giving her his good solid arguments. The decision was made. The only one he could live with.

She fought down her anger. “Nathan, I love you,” she said firmly. “This is who you are. Hero. Martyr. Fool. I’m not sure which, but…” She took a deep breath, her hands now assuming the tremble she tried to keep out of her voice. “I support you. You have to follow the dictates of your
She heard his relief in his “Thank you.” The rest of the conversation was a blur. Half unheard. Lost in wondering whether she believed that the team—or rather Chris Larabee—was worth possibly losing her house. Her new home. And if not, did that mean he was not worth Nathan’s loyalty?

She felt like kicking herself. She knew how much the team meant to Nathan. How important his teammates were. In many ways they were more like family to him than his own blood kin. Not to mention that Chris had been a good friend to him. Had opened his home to Nathan and then to her. Had, in fact saved Nathan’s life, more than once. He had to do this. He had to stand up for Chris. For the team.

She heard her own words repeat back to her, as she stared at the phone, returning it to its cradle. I support you. Her lips curled up bitterly. I’m scared, but I support you.

Scared. That’s what she had told Buck had Chris so wracked up. Not eating. Not sleeping. Scared of the same thing she was. Scared of losing something important to him. His job. His team. His family. She was furious at him now. Even though she knew it was unfair. Even though she knew that Nathan’s decision was not something Chris was asking. And the part of her brain that still demanded that she be fair, reminded her that Chris would probably try to talk Nathan out of it. The unfair part of her didn’t care. She wanted to blame him, too.

She stood up angrily and was ambushed suddenly. Attacked by memory. Nathan. Home again from Texas—the first time. How silent he had been. For hours after she had brought him home from the airport. Then suddenly, haltingly, he told her how Chris had made them leave. How they had escaped and left him behind. Then she saw his joy when he had returned home the second time—and the fury that came with it.

She swore. Decided to let herself be furious. To blame Chris for getting killed and for worrying himself and the rest of the team half to death. To cuss Nathan out but good for his loyalty. For going along on a plan for vengeance. To call both of them and all the others every bad name she could think of. Right up until Nathan got home.

Because then she had to live up to her promise to support him. He was going to need her to be strong. And to have her head in the game. Especially if they had to figure out how to stretch her one income to pay off student loans, car loans, and the mortgage, plus all their other household needs.

Her glance fell suddenly on a pile of wedding planning books. Practicality stunned her. The wedding plans would have to be cut first. The tears that came were a mix of anger and grief. And guilt.
Chapter 12

Nathan slipped back into the den, unnoticed amid the din. His teammates were no longer shouting at each other, but they were still arguing. Still adamant. Still stubbornly sticking to their own convictions. Chris was silent. Still leaning on the desk where Nathan had seen him last.

The team leader turned his head to look at Nathan. His expression unreadable. Then he shot a look at Buck, almost as if he had simply been waiting for Nathan’s return. The look Buck gave back to Chris fairly bled frustration. Chris remained impassive. He unfolded his arms, stuck two fingers in his mouth and let loose a shrill whistle, earsplitting in the closeness of the small den.

The voices died. Five agents turned to stare at him. Buck lowered his head and walked away. To the sofa, taking a seat. His mouth drawn tight.

Chris looked at the floor for a moment. Then raised his head to face them, his expression circumspect. Carefully grounding his comments in practicality.

“We’re not getting anywhere,” he said.

“We just need more time,” J.D. said, his request dying out as Chris cut him off with an upraised hand.

“Could be there’s just nowhere to go,” he said impassively.

They stared at him now, silent. Nathan and Josiah caught each other’s frowns. Buck folded his arms and glowered at the floor.

“I don’t see any other feasible possibilities here,” Chris said. He shrugged. “Really, it’s going to come down to the directors and their decision.” He looked at each of them. Except Buck, Nathan noticed.

“It’s okay,” Chris said firmly.

They looked at him doubtfully.

One corner of his mouth twisted up in a small tight smile. He looked down at the floor before facing them once more. “It means a lot that you came here and tried,” he said, struggling to keep the emotion out of his voice, and succeeding as he said calmly, “I’m aware of the possible outcomes. And I’m prepared to face them.”

Buck’s head shot up.

Vin glared at Chris hotly.

Nathan took a deep breath. His turn. “I’m ready to face them, too,” he said.

Chris’s eyes flashed toward him. Penetrating.

Nathan pretended not to notice. “You might have given that guy your badge and gun. But you did not lead us into going AWOL. You did not set a poor ethical example. And you’re a damn fine leader. I’m proud to be a member of this team. But if they let you go, then I will quit.”

There, he said it.
When he risked a glance around the room, he was shocked to see Josiah’s blue eyes gleaming with an expression that looked like it might be pride. And Buck. Smiling. Smugly. Right at Chris.

J.D. stared at Nathan.

Ezra shrugged. “Well said, Mr. Jackson,” he said. He turned back to Chris. “Despite that rather—er—provocative conversation we had at my residence,” he said. “And your formidable powers of persuasion, you may just have to keep my letter of resignation handy after all. For all the reasons Mr. Jackson mentioned, of course.” He paused. Considered. Then added, “And a few others of my own.”

A gravelly Texas drawl added, “Me too, Cowboy,”

Josiah simply said, “Amen.”

Chris stared at them. Watching his team unravel. Right before his eyes.

J.D. must have felt it, too. He stared at his teammates. Men who had become like family. Looking at them, as if he had never seen them before. One at a time. And finally at Buck. Who raised his eyebrows.

The boy’s face wore his surprise and his wonder. Was it really that simple?

“Well, hell,” he said, facing Chris suddenly with a grin. “Count me in—er—out. Er whatever.” His face reddened. Not exactly eloquent. His eye caught Buck’s. The blue eyes sparkled back at him, as the tall agent gave him an approving nod. He could almost hear the words. *Ya done good, kid.*

Chris began to shake his head slowly. Staring at Buck. As if he expected him to stop this. To bring them to their senses.

“Don’t look at me, Stud,” Buck grinned. “I kept my plans to myself.”

In the back of the dark blue eyes, Chris saw it. The barest beginning. The far-off return of a twinkle.

Buck shrugged nonchalantly and looked at his teammates with mock apology. “Can’t help it. Where Chris goes, I go. It’s been a good plan so far. An’ I’m stickin’ to it.”

Larabee stared at them. As they looked at him expectantly. Like he was supposed to say something now. Approve this stupid idea. Christ, Nathan and Raine just bought their house. They were planning a wedding. J.D. never had two extra dimes to rub together. Most of Buck’s pay went into perfecting his classic truck. And “entertainment.” Josiah, well, Josiah gave all his money away anyway. And Vin, well hell, who knew what Vin did with his paycheck? It sure as hell didn’t go into rent on his shit-hole apartment in Purgatorio. Ezra was the only one Chris was reasonably sure had any financial sense whatsoever. Including himself. And his damn horse habit.

He swore.

Here he was, ready to chuck up his whole career and his reputation to boot to save them and they were just going to quit? And destroy the team? This was mutiny. Plain and simple. Stupid bastards.

He opened his mouth to tell them so. Then the dream slapped him upside the head.

Sarah. Crying because he had walked away from her. Without a thought.

He felt the blood drain from his face as the whole dream rose up before him. Overlaid over their
faces. His team. And he realized his first thought early that morning was wrong. He had done it. Exactly that. Only not to Sarah. To his team. To Buck. To Vin. To all of them. He had walked away from them when he ordered them out of that warehouse. Thinking he was probably going to die there. He had forgotten. Forgotten something important. Something only Sarah could have taught him. And she did. When you marry, you stop being an I. You become a we.

Ezra and J.D. had hit it right on the head. This was a team. He was part of it. A we. Not an I. And they were standing right here, telling him that he was part of that we. That they did not believe it existed without him.

He stared at them. His vision clearing. Were they right? They couldn’t be. They were supposed to go on without him. It was Josiah’s voice that prompted the next question to go echoing round his head. Some esoteric philosophical assertion that a person’s reality depends largely on what they believe. Does it matter if they’re right or wrong, if that’s what they believe?

He noticed suddenly that Buck was half out of his seat. Nathan was coming toward him with one arm outstretched. Shooting a worried glance at Josiah.

Chris shook his head. He opened his mouth. And shut it.

Vin squinted at him. Then suddenly grinned.

He elbowed Ezra, who seemed to catch the grin, drawling out, “I do believe our leader has been rendered speechless.”

“Shoot, Ezra,” J.D. said with a laugh. “Chris not talkin’ ain’t nothin’ new.”

“Just used up his quota for the day, that’s all,” Buck said, rising all the way from the sofa and hitching his thumbs nonchalantly into his belt.

“The day?” Vin snorted. “Hell, probably for the rest of the month.”

J.D. laughed giddily. “Guess Travis is out of luck then,” he said. He was rewarded with laughter from his teammates. They slapped him on the shoulder and pulled him in close among them. His head spun pleasantly at the warm feeling that filled his insides, as they slowly, unconsciously formed a half-circle around Chris.

Their leader ducked his head, his face turning slightly red. He cleared his throat. But didn’t look up. “You’re all fucking crazy,” he growled, his voice gravelly.

“It’s your own fault,” Buck said, with a dramatic, bored stretch. “You set a lousy example.”

Then suddenly, someone had him by the shirt front. They pulled him into the half circle and closed it around him briefly before Nathan swung his part of the circle open and propelled Chris toward the door.

“We’ll see ourselves out,” Jackson said. “It’s late.”

Chris looked at him exasperated.

“Go,” Buck said gleefully. “Dr. Raine says you need your beauty sleep.”

“Need a hell of a lotta that,” Vin snorted. The others laughed.

Tanner slipped out the door behind Chris, as the others dissolved into conversation. Neither man spoke, but at the foot of the stairs, Vin put a hand on Chris’s arm, stopping him.
“That was a shit-for-brains plan, Larabee,” he said.

“It’s still the best plan we came up with,” Chris countered.

“You know what I mean,” Vin said firmly, eyes narrowed.

Chris sighed. As close as Vin was going to get to an apology. Because he knew. Sure as he was standing here. Sure as his own heart was beating within his chest, Chris wasn’t sorry. He would have gone down for the team. Just like in Texas. Only this time, he couldn’t send them away. And Buck had forced him to tell the truth.

“Damn close, Cowboy,” Vin said finally.

Then he walked away. Leaving Chris to wonder exactly what he meant by that. Or if he really wanted to know.

Buck came out of the den, one arm around J.D. in half a headlock. He shot a glance up at Chris that so reminded Chris of his own father, that he found his feet moving instinctively up the stairs toward his room in a hurry.

“’Night, Chris,” J.D. said, his voice partly muffled by the arm around his neck.

Ezra flipped the ascending team leader a two finger salute and a nod. He smiled when Chris nodded back.

Alone in the den, Nathan watched Josiah thoughtfully finger a paper that poked out from his breast pocket. Again. The profiler’s expression was far away.

Nathan frowned, as curiosity finally got the best of him. “What the hell you got in that pocket?” he asked.

Josiah smiled at his friend. Benignly. Enigmatically. And gave the pocket a pat.

Nathan started suddenly. Remembering. “What did you mean the other day? When you said we’ve already survived.”

Josiah smiled the same quiet smile he had that day. A tinge of sadness ran through it. Suddenly. Fleetingly. Then it was gone. Replaced. With assurance. Or perhaps faith.

Josiah pulled a paper from his pocket. And opened it. It was a plain piece of notebook paper, but Nathan could see that it had been unfolded and refolded many times. It was soiled and had begun to tatter at the edges. He wondered how long Josiah had been carrying it around.

He refolded the paper, and looked Nathan in the eye as he put it back in his pocket and answered the question. “We survived the worst,” Josiah said. “No matter what the directors do or decide, we still have our brother.”

Nathan shook his head at the floor. Momentarily unable to speak. Finally raising his head, his voice took on an accusing note. “That why you’ve been so damn calm all week?”

“It’s all a matter of perspective, Brother,” Josiah replied sagely.

Nathan gave him a sour look. Perspective. While the rest of them were going crazy, there was Josiah. Cool. Collected. The realization sank in. He could be calm. Because the worst that could happen was behind them. All punishments would pale in comparison.
Nathan felt a smile suddenly break his exasperated frown. “Ya coulda shared some of that ‘perspective’,” he growled.

Josiah slung a long arm across his younger friend’s shoulder. “Perspective grows,” he replied. “It cannot be bestowed.”

Nathan looked up at the profiler. “You still didn’t tell me what’s on that piece of paper,” he reminded him.

“Ah,” Josiah replied. “That’s where the perspective comes from.”

He turned his head to face Nathan. “It was going to be my notes for Chris’s memorial service.” His smile widened. “Now it’s a reminder.”

Nathan frowned. Grim.

Josiah jostled him. “A reminder,” he continued, “of what I still have. Of my blessings, so to speak.”

The frown turned slowly to a smile. Not a bad idea that. Counting one’s blessings. Raine’s beautiful face popped into his head. And he sighed. He still had some problems to deal with at home. Depending on what the directors decided.

Josiah watched his friend’s smile turn downward slightly. He gave Nathan’s shoulder a squeeze. “Perspective,” he said.

Nathan sighed. He wondered what Raine would have to say to that.

Buck saw the last of his teammates out the door. Then he went up to check on Chris.

He found him sitting on the edge of his bed. The green eyes flicked toward him, but he could see that the blond had been far away at that moment.

“Care to share?” Buck asked, plopping down beside him, and stretching his long legs out in front of him.

A tiny smile quirked up the corners of Chris’s mouth. “Nope,” he replied.

He looked up at Buck. The smile melted. Turned serious. “Thank you,” he said quietly.

Buck shrugged. “Don’t,” he said.

But Chris wouldn’t let him get away with it. “I mean it,” the blond said.

Buck looked at the serious green eyes. The face, still pale. Still too thin. He patted his friend’s leg. “I mean it, too.”

He got up and moved toward the door. “I’ll set the night alarm, on my way out,” he said.

“How you getting home?” Chris asked suddenly.

“J.D.’s waiting outside,” Buck replied.

Chris nodded. *Of course.*

He was still sitting on the edge of the bed. Gone back to thinking. Buck left him that way. He set the alarm, locked and bolted the door, and took a deep breath of the night air before descending the
porch, giving the place a quick check as he did so.

*Damn fool,* he thought as he climbed into the driver’s seat of his beloved truck. *Thank you,* Buck snorted in disbelief as the words echoed in his head. *Where the hell you get off thanking me, Stud?* he asked silently. *First off, I got you into this mess. Second,* he paused in his thought. *Nearly laughed.* There was no second. He had simply done what needed to be done. Chris needed it. He got it.

He wondered when Chris would catch on. Would finally learn. Figure out how this worked. Realize his importance. He had known Chris more than twenty years now. More than likely, he’d never get it. Josiah had once said it might be the Lord’s way of keeping Larabee humble. Buck snorted and started the engine.

He realized suddenly that J.D. was leaning against the passenger side window, watching him. Waiting for Buck to make the usual cracks about J.D. driving his truck.

Buck smiled to himself, turning on the headlights and swinging the truck around smoothly. But he didn’t speak to J.D. Instead he spoke to the truck. He had already apologized to her and was expressing his sincere hope that J.D.’s driving hadn’t frightened her too badly before J.D. caught on. A moment later, Buck was rewarded with an irate protest and a set of smart retorts from the seat beside him. He grinned to himself. Relaxing in the moment.

Tomorrow would come soon enough. Right now? Right now they were okay. They were seven. And that was enough for him.

* * *

It was late. And J.D. knew he should be sleeping. But Buck was keeping him awake. That wasn’t exactly correct. The man was a floor away, sawing wood to beat the band. Dead asl knock. Probably dreaming about women and smiling in his sleep, damn him, while J.D. lay downstairs in his own room with Buck’s words keeping him awake. Rolling around in his head. *If you let yourself believe the myth, you might miss out on the man.*

He realized now what Buck was trying to tell him.

It was the myth that had ordered them out of the Texas warehouse to face down a hundred blazing guns on his own. The myth that hauled himself out of a hospital bed to help Richter capture the militia assassins and then, dazed and bleeding, took down Team Four’s Jimmy Pirelli. The myth that burst into a directorial board of inquiry uninvited and stood between them and the directors. It was the myth that planned to go down for his team. The myth in the office all week. Curt, angry, strategizing, hell-bent, playing them all. Impervious to pain, hunger, and lack of sleep. The myth that had made him give up Buck as the supervisor of an unauthorized surveillance mission.

J.D. had been so focused on what was happening to him, to the team, first on his belief that everything would go back to normal and then on his anger at what he was being forced to do. Betrayed. And so angry that he couldn’t see what was right in front of his nose. But tonight he did. Tonight he finally got it.

It was the man who came to get him at the Saloon. Who drove him home. The man who had realized how this was all going to fall and was willing to give everything he had to prevent it. And it was the man, who succumbing finally to his fatigue, his injuries, and his fear, reached out, asking for their help. And, in the end, it was the man who stood resolutely before them and told them he could accept the coming consequences. The same lousy possibilities as before. So did that make the man and the myth the same?
He stared at the clock. He could feel the growing furrow between his brows.

No, he decided. There was just a place where the man and the myth crossed. Like Josiah said. Places where people who didn’t have enough information just filled in the blanks. For good or bad. The brass might fire the myth. But Nathan and Vin and Josiah and even Ezra had promised to follow the man. It was the myth that Buck Wilmington told stories about in the Saloon. But it was the man that Buck, the best man that J.D. had ever known, protected, stood beside, and would lay down his life and career for.

*And worried about,* J.D. thought suddenly. God, Buck had been worried. He just didn’t know that J.D. had known.

J.D. rolled over. Feeling suddenly cold. Had he been the last to see it? The real Chris Larabee. The human being. Imperfect as the rest of them. Or did the others sometimes lose sight of it, too? Even Buck had said he half believed parts of the myth. And if anyone would know better, it was Buck.

J.D.’s eye fell on his backpack. And half-shoved under the bed, a plastic bag where he had put all those condolence cards. Still unable to throw them away.

He had hid them from Buck. Remembering his reaction in the Texas hotel. His anger because he didn’t think those people had any business sending them. Because they didn’t really know Chris Larabee. J.D. understood the anger now.

But inside, J.D. also knew he had been right. Some of these cards were from people who had had a chance to see Chris Larabee for the man he was. Maybe only in the compassionate gesture of helping a co-worker wade through a pile of confusing insurance paperwork. Maybe just in caring enough to see that security escorted a late worker to her car. Maybe only in a traded jibe, a long-standing joke. Or a photo that innocently revealed something that Chris Larabee might have thought he had hidden. Those people had known some fragment of the man. And had realized that something important had been taken from Team Seven’s world.

J.D. sat up and threw off the covers. On his knees, he reached for the bag. Setting it on the quilt beside him.

The evening’s meeting playing again in his mind. Josiah’s words, *It’s happening again, and we still couldn’t see it.* He felt the chill again at the comparison. And again realized how accurate it was. Chris was forcing them out of harm’s way.

But this time, they had refused to go. And it seemed to him in a moment at the end there, when Chris went dead white, when Buck and Nathan both thought that he might pass out, in that moment, J.D. had seen something different in Chris’s face. An understanding. Perhaps a realization. J.D. didn’t know what. But he had a hope. He hoped Chris understood now, after all this, that he was too important to just let him go.

J.D.’s mind’s eye turned lazily to a funeral he had once attended. A friend of the family. Someone he hardly knew. But afterwards, his mother had gone to make a donation to the woman’s designated charity, her local library. And as they walked in and inquired how to go about making the donation, the clerk had glanced up at the wall clock. She told them how their friend had come in just about that time every day. And how at just that time every day, they felt her absence.

J.D. had never forgotten that. How many lives one touches—and changes—just in living every day.

*That’s what the cards are about,* he thought fingering the bag. People telling Team Seven that Chris had been important. That he would be missed. Something people never remembered to say except at
funerals. No wonder Josiah kept his memorial remarks. Too bad Chris would never see them. He might be surprised.

The thought drove J.D. bolt upright in the bed. An idea flashed into his head. Clear now, that thought that had been rolling indistinctly around in his head. Here was the answer.

_The hell with sleep_, he thought suddenly, snapping on the bedside lamp. _I’ve got work to do._ He slid off the bed and headed for his closet, rummaging around in the back until he found what he was looking for. Then he cleared a work space on his desk beside his computer, turned on the overhead light and set to work.

* * *

Buck entered the kitchen at his usual time, just a hair’s breadth under the wire, just in time to pour coffee and scoot out the door if he were to have any hope of getting to work on time, to find J.D. finished with breakfast and pulling on his jacket and helmet. Driving his motorcycle today.

Buck looked at him curiously.

“Gotta run some errands after work,” J.D. said.

Buck nodded. The kid still looked tired. But not the same tired. Not beat down. A little frayed at the edges to be sure, but juiced. Hyperfocused. The way you look after an all-night bachelor party, when it becomes a point of pride to arrive at work the next day as if nothing had happened.

“Sleep okay?” Buck asked dryly.

J.D. grinned. “Nope,” he said cheerfully. “Had some work to do.”

He fastened his helmet and went out the door without further explanation.

Buck shook his head and poured his coffee. He let it slide. Sooner or later he would know what it was. J.D. always told him everything—sooner or later.

He met Chris coming up in the elevator. They rode up two flights together, just the two of them.

Buck studied his friend’s profile, the ramrod straight posture. And when Chris turned to him as the elevator announced their floor, the cool, calm almost smirk that sent a gleam up into the green eyes. Buck grinned back.

“You ready?” Chris asked the second before the door opened.

“I was born ready,” Buck said, cockily, preceding him into the hall. “Like you needed to ask,” he scoffed.

He didn’t return the question. He could see it. Chris was ready. Hell, high water, mortar rounds. Whatever. The time had arrived. And Chris was ready. Like always.

Vin was at his desk, when they entered the bullpen. Old leather cowboy boots propped up on the edge of his desk, his coffee mug in his hand. He glanced up and met Chris’s eye.

Chris inclined his head toward his office and Vin sent back a smart-ass smirk. He took his feet down slowly, raised his coffee mug to Buck in silent greeting, and lazily rose to his feet. In no particular hurry he glided into Chris’s office and slouched into a chair. Buck shook his head. _Ornery Texan._

“Want some coffee ‘fore you get started?” Buck asked.
“Nope,” Chris smirked. He hung his jacket on the back of his office door and shut it with a click.

Vin came out again in less than 45 minutes, smirking and glowering at the same time. He went back to his desk.

Chris appeared in the doorway. He surveyed the bullpen. Then disappeared into the kitchenette. He came out again with his coffee and his arrogant, lazy, long-legged stride.

“My office, Tanner,” he said curtly, passing the desk without even a pause. “Now.”

Vin glared at him darkly. But went back in.

The door shut behind them. A ten-minute argument ensued. Low, growled out. Punctuated by swear words or a hand slammed against a desk. Gravelly voices. Tense. Short. Angry.

Unfortunately, as there was no actual shouting, none of the five men gathered near the door was able to hear exactly what was being said. Therefore no one could tell who had won. They were all back at their desks or searching diligently through the filing cabinets before the last insult—or more likely, the last threat—had died on the office air.

Vin yanked open the door, muttering swear words under his breath. He straightened his shirt front, cracked his neck, rolled his cuffs back down, and stalked over to his desk.

The only discernible word was the “dumb ass,” he mumbled darkly under his breath, dropping into his seat with a scowl. He fell silent.

They pretended not to notice.

“Feel better?” Buck said, without looking up.

“Yup,” the sharpshooter replied.

Buck grinned and craned his neck to see inside the office. Chris was leaning back in his desk chair, Hands crossed behind his head. He met Buck’s eyes with a half-lidded gaze. And a tiny smirk flashed across his face so quickly that Buck almost didn’t see it.

Buck shook his head. And laughed silently into his coffee. One hell of a morning, he thought happily.

They had a long meeting in the conference room. Discussed the progress of the briefings with Team Eight. The intended directions. Some new angles that came to light. Chris made notes and suggestions. Indicated his satisfaction so far. And made no mention of last night. Or of today. Of coming events.

So they kept their silence, too. Despite J.D.’s jiggling. Despite Ezra’s incessant fixing and refixing of his cuffs. Despite Nathan’s third cup of coffee before eleven A.M.

The leader closed the meeting and stood up. Sending them back to their work. Buck remained.

“Let’s do this,” Chris said quietly to his second in command, and J.D., exiting the room, caught a shadow of the trademark cocky grin.

Buck nodded, grinned back suddenly, then assumed his serious face.

Chris followed him into his office. One hand on his shoulder. They closed the door. Buck took his seat. They both took a deep breath, and Chris started the recorder.
When it was over, after he had followed the game plan to the letter, no changes, no detours, Buck left the office door closed behind him. His summons had already come while he was in with Chris. He went straight up to Travis.

Introductions were short. Curt. Not that Buck needed any. He remembered Hofstader from a few events. He remembered Costas from the original inquiry. They remembered him, he was sure, as the agent who took his team AWOL.

The game began. Hardball. And Buck played. Like a master. He only wished Chris could have seen it.

Especially at the end. After two hours, when Costas, frustrated, irritated cracked first. “Tell me, Agent Wilmington, why it is that you acted with impunity in violation of orders, direct and implied, broke bureau rules and regulations with complete disregard, and yet you obeyed the order to walk away and leave your Team Leader to die. Explain that to me. Why was that the order you chose to obey?”

He refused to give in to the sucker punch. Had seen it coming and dodged the blow by refusing to get involved in the question. He could do that because the answer was so obviously easy. It was all he could do to keep the smile off his face as he answered.

He did not entirely succeed. Travis saw it. In the shadow of his mustache. Sitting there. The barest hint of a smirk. And he felt his own nerves rise up in anticipation of the answer. Although he already knew what it would be.

“Because that order came from Chris Larabee,” Buck said.

And even though Travis knew that Buck could not have driven the nail more firmly into the coffin built of directorship paranoia and suspicion, he could not help the echoing smirk he felt twitch up his lips. He hid it quickly, looking stern, as if the smile had never existed. But he knew that Agent Wilmington had seen.

* * *

Chris delivered his tapes to IA. He stayed to answer another half hour’s worth of questions from the steely-eyed, suspicious agent handling the case. Someone he didn’t know. Someone without a grudge to settle. He was glad about that. Travis’s doing, he was certain.

He promised that he and his agents would remain available to answer any and all questions.

The investigating agent meant to be intimidating when he added that Agent Larabee should not leave town until the investigation was complete and settled, even if he found himself unemployed in the interim. He got a calm assurance delivered with an icy smile. He was glad to see the man leave.

They had lunch in the bullpen. Around the conference table. Seven of them against fifteen containers of take out Chinese. It was not a fair fight. If Chris noticed that Nathan, Buck, and Vin were all silently watching to see if and what he ate, he did not let on. Instead he listened to the banter, smiling at the familiar sound that had been conspicuous by its absence. And even laughed at a couple of smart remarks from his sharpshooter.

The conference room phone rang. They fell silent. It blinked Chris’s extension. He picked up. And tersely told whoever was calling that he would be right up.

He turned back to his men. Straightened his tie. “Show time,” he said. Then one eyebrow shot up. So much like Ezra, J.D. nearly choked on his lo mein. Buck thumped the young agent hard on the
back. And Chris was gone before J.D. could even sputter out “Good luck.”

* * *

He took his seat calmly, crossing one ankle over his other knee and folding his hands in his lap. His entire body was still. Quiet. Almost relaxed. Except for the eyes. Only the eyes were alive, sparking, crackling in the pale, hollow face. Already Travis could tell that Larabee was fighting to keep that damn cocky smirk off his face. The one that would send Costas over the edge. It was certain to appear before the interview was over, he knew, but at least it wouldn’t happen before they even got started.

Hofstader looked Larabee over closely. If possible, Larabee actually looked worse than he had when he had dismissed himself from the hospital to show up unexpectedly at the initial inquiry. Black suit, black shirt, even a black tie. Seemed a poor choice. He looked skinny and dead pale in all that black. Circles under his eyes showed plainly in the dim light of the room. The entire picture reminding Hofstader of tattered graveclothes clinging to a skeleton in some nightmarish comic drawing. The senior director shot a frown at Travis.

Travis responded the most appropriate way he knew how. He pretended not to notice. Either the frown or the gaunt frame of the agent before him. He himself was actually relieved. Larabee looked better than he had in days. Today was the first day in more than a week that Travis didn’t feel like going down to Team Seven’s bullpen and having Chris thrown out of the building and into a hospital room. He was surprised it took Wilmington until yesterday to pull Chris out of the game.

He realized suddenly that the interview had begun. And he hid his expression as he heard Costas start easy. Apparently making amends for the nasty tone of this morning’s interview with Agent Wilmington.

Travis wasn’t sure how much Chris knew about the other interviews, but he didn’t seem to be in the mood to have amends made. Or more than likely, he was being his usual diplomatic self. His answers were terse and to the point, bordering on abrupt. Seemingly uninterested in the impression he made, oblivious to the idea that his career might depend on the good opinion of the directors before him. Typical, Travis thought with exasperation.

It didn’t take Costas or Hofstader very long to put aside the soft line of questioning and settle into what they really wanted to know. Travis was not surprised. They had heard the tapes. Done their research. Heard from the rest of the team and read Ryan Kelly’s reports. They had a pretty complete picture of how things had gone. They were just giving Chris enough rope to hang himself or save himself. Whichever he chose. Travis shifted uneasily at the thought.

“Why did you disobey the orders of the mission commander?” Hofstader asked.

“The positions he wanted my team to take gave us insufficient cover,” Larabee replied.

“He turned down your proposal to assume different positions, correct?” Costas asked.

“Correct,” Chris agreed, his tone flat.

“Yet you positioned your team as you had proposed in violation of the commander’s order,” Hofstader prompted.

“Correct again,” Chris said, the first glimmer of the smirk twitching in the corner of his mouth. Travis winced. Now was not a good time for Larabee to reveal his smart-ass side.
“Why?” Hofstader asked, keeping his voice even. And Travis was grateful.

Larabee looked at him impassively. “Because I could accomplish the mission commander’s objectives with a minimum of exposure to my team.”

Hofstader pursed his lips. “But you didn’t accomplish the objectives,” he countered.

The smirk twitched up a little higher. “No,” Chris replied. “Seems intelligence understated the amount of resistance we would encounter.”

Costas consulted his notes and conceded the point. The estimation had been way off.

“How is that?” Hofstader asked. Sounding almost curious. “What do you believe you possessed that made your own judgment superior to the judgment of the Texas law enforcement experts that worked cooperatively to plan the operation?”

“Combat experience,” Chris shrugged. He leaned slightly forward in his chair. “I understand mission objectives. And I know an open flank when I see one.” He narrowed his eyes. “I’ve lost enough men under fire to learn to look for options that don’t needlessly throw away lives. My men are not cannon fodder.”

Costas frowned. “How can you be so sure that you were right? That the mission might not have gone successfully, without injury to yourself or your team, if you had just obeyed the orders?”

Chris frowned back at him, as if he didn’t even understand how Costas would ask. Perhaps he didn’t, because his tone told the three senior officers in the room that the answer was obvious. “I positioned my men to accomplish the mission commander’s objectives as efficiently as possible with a minimum of risk,” he repeated slowly, deliberately. “I took the remaining position, as originally assigned.” He tilted his head to one side and looked at them. Veiled sarcasm in his added reminder, “My position was the one that got overrun.”

Hofstader pursed his lips and exhaled.

Costas clenched his jaw. Decided against pointing out to a former military officer that when he changed the positions of the team he changed the dynamic inside the warehouse. Larabee knew that, obviously. Costas had no desire to jump into a lengthy discussion of tactics—either theoretical or practical. He had spent the last several days looking at this agent’s records. Even if he hadn’t, the last two answers would have told him that Larabee had tactical combat experience that he did not. He had been a SEAL, for God’s sake. Wilmington had been a SEAL. Tanner had been a Ranger. Jackson and Sanchez had also been soldiers. These men knew something about operations, tactics, infighting, combat. To a man, they had adamantly insisted that it was Larabee’s decision that they
trusted. And for the first time it crossed Costas’s mind that it might just be possible that Larabee did know what he was doing when he repositioned his team.

Costas let Hofstader finish his line of questioning and moved on, asking Agent Larabee to describe the events following the order to retreat. Travis marveled at the team leader’s ability to convey so much detail in so few words.

“I stayed down looking for an opening. They started to break ranks and I thought I could run for the exit, assuming their confusion could keep them from preventing my escape. The crates I was using as cover blocked my view to the west. I didn’t see the man approach until he pointed his gun at my head and demanded my badge and gun.”

Costas interrupted. “He took you completely by surprise?”

Larabee looked at him with thinly veiled exasperation. “Between the crates, the mass confusion of the militia, the noise inside the warehouse, and trying not to pass out, I didn’t happen to notice him.”

“Please continue,” Hofstader said smoothly. “What did you do after he asked for your badge and gun?”

Chris sat back, shifting position, and refolding his hands. “I refused,” he replied, eyes glinting under lowered lids. “Impolitely.”

Costas looked at him curiously.

Chris waited.

And Travis shook his head. Knowing his agent was deliberately answering only what was asked of him. Passive aggressive insubordination is what he would call it. And Chris was a master at it. Point of fact, Chris Larabee was the only man Travis had ever known who could remain perfectly professional, and even agreeable in words, tone, and demeanor, yet leave you with the unmistakable impression, well after the conversation was over, that somewhere, at some point, he had politely and agreeably told you to fuck off. Travis had seen it happen more than once. He’d been on the receiving end more than once, too. He just hoped he wasn’t about to see it again.

“Then what happened?” Costas asked impatiently. Talking to Larabee was like trying to squeeze blood from a stone.

“He hauled me up by the collar, cracked my head against the nearest wall, and slammed me back down onto the concrete. Then he stuck his gun in my ear, and rifled my pockets. He took my badge and gun. Rolled me over, took my vest and jacket. Then he changed into them and left his stuff on the floor.”

“Did you try to stop him?” Costas asked.

“Hell, no,” Chris said scornfully.

Travis closed his eyes and swore silently. Both Costas and Hofstader jerked forward in their chairs.

“First I had to wait for the stars to stop dancing in front of my face and then I just plain couldn’t move. The guy was muttering about a rocket launcher. Everyone was running for the doors. The goddamn gun was out of bullets anyway. I laid there and hoped he’d hurry up, so I could work up enough steam to drag my sorry ass off the floor and get the hell out of there.”

Travis glared daggers at him. By that time, Larabee was likely the only agent left in the entire
warehouse. He was bleeding from two bullet wounds, when he was mugged at gunpoint by a desperate militiaman. Lying on the cold concrete and seeing stars while the guy rolled him for his badge, gun, and vest. While a rocket launcher approached and more than a hundred frantic militia soldiers fled for their lives around him. A story like that and he hadn’t even tried. Goddamn hardheaded idiot wouldn’t know how to play the sympathy card if it came to him with instructions.

He didn’t seem to notice the hot glance Travis sent his way. Or perhaps he just didn’t care.

“Nevertheless, you did somehow manage to drag ‘your sorry ass’ up ‘off the floor’, put on the militiaman’s discarded jacket and get yourself to safety,” Hofstader commented. In another set of circumstances it would have been almost comical to see the hard-eyed, old-school ATF director mimic Chris’s choice turn of phrase. But there was nothing funny in his tone.

A minute ago, Chris had their sympathy, perhaps even their respect. It had taken him only one short narrative, the very one that should have made him look like a gold-plated hero, to turn the tide against him. They didn’t like his attitude.

Travis suppressed a groan and reminded himself that they’d never liked his attitude. Perhaps this would not seem at all out of the ordinary. Not only that, maybe it wouldn’t even register after the earful of attitude they got from Agent Tanner yesterday.

He thought a little harder. Sanchez had been slightly contemptuous. Dunne and Jackson angry. Standish more than a little impertinent. And Wilmington almost smug. So why would Larabee’s attitude surprise them? His whole team acted that way. Or perhaps why would they be surprised at the team’s insubordination when the Team Leader apparently provided such a fine example of it?

Travis glared harder. Sent waves of anger at his agent. And waited for the moment he knew now would eventually arrive. The part of the interview when Chris was going to stick his foot in it. And remind them all that he alone had been responsible for the performance of his team. He set the tone. He set the standards. For their work. And their professionalism. And somewhere between the end of this inquiry and the 32 seconds it was going to take the directorship to decide to fire him, Travis was going to put both hands around Chris Larabee’s throat and wring his neck for not having the sense to even try to save himself.

At least in Texas he had made a run for the door. Travis stopped suddenly as it dawned on him. By that time, his men had already been out of danger.

Travis narrowed his eyes and looked beneath the resentment and the smug self-assurance. And realized that Larabee was fighting like hell to save his team. He would in fact stick his foot in it. Right up to the hip. He would do his damnedest to prove that he was, by default, responsible for his team going AWOL. That Buck Wilmington had acted according to standards that Chris had allowed and even fostered through his own long-insinuated insubordination and now documented penchant for breaking rules and violating orders. He would make the directors focus on him. Believe him to be the problem.

Chris knew that the directors didn’t trust him. They were paranoid about his maverick style. They feared it would create a maverick team. And their fears had proven to be at least somewhat justified.

The part that made Travis’s stomach go cold was that it was going to work. The fool was going string himself up on precedent. They had allowed him to set policy and discipline. If they had agreed that he was responsible for the actions of his team before this, then they could hardly change their minds now. Except to try to go around him. And Chris would never stand for that. He’d raise a stink, internally at least. And the directors would balk at the attention. It’d be easier to just throw Larabee out. They could contain the fallout on punishing just one agent.
Or so they think, Travis thought gloomily, reasonably certain that if Chris got fired, the other members of Team Seven would not sit still for it. First there’d be the problem of putting in another team leader, since it obviously couldn’t be Wilmington. They’d already been through that nightmare. And there would likely be some rather public, and embarrassing resignations, including the one that Chris and Travis had just barely managed to prevent. How public? he wondered, thinking suddenly of his daughter-in-law the reporter. He swore silently, repeatedly. If they fired Chris, things were going to get damn ugly.

He realized he had lost track of the inquiry. He refocused, surprised to find Chris looking at him intently. He frowned. Somewhere in the half-lidded, almost disinterested gaze, he saw a challenge. No, he amended. Not a challenge. A question. How do you plan to play this?

Strange, Travis thought. It’s an odd time for Chris to be thinking about that. Except, Travis thought with another chill, this had implications for him, too. Decisions he had not yet made. About his own role. Was he the AD who was ignorant of the internal workings of his own teams? That made him either dangerously oblivious or deliberately obtuse. Which was better? Another option presented itself. Perhaps he was the AD who knew Team Seven was a disaster waiting to happen, but kept the lid on it because the success rate looked good. Like Rivers, he thought, more than a little uncomfortably and reminded himself that Chris Larabee and Matt Richter were not made of the same material any more than he and Rivers.

Chris was still looking at him. Waiting.

Travis thought suddenly about moving up his timetable a bit and just strangling Chris right now. Save the ATF the trouble and paperwork. Not that he hadn’t known he’d have to take his own lumps. It just would have been nice to have known that Chris had a plan. Of course, he noted, he did know Chris had a plan. After all, he was the best damn tactician Travis had ever known. Travis just hadn’t wanted to look for it, lest the inquiry seem tainted.

And he knew now why Chris was sending him the silent question. It was time to take the step. He just wanted to finish getting all the innocent bystanders out of the way before his career imploded.

Travis bristled. He was not among the innocent. And he didn’t need Chris to protect him. Larabee believed that the leader’s job is to serve his team. Protect them. He was right. Team Seven was Travis’s team. Chris Larabee was Travis’s agent.

He stared hard at Chris. The question dissolved under a strange, sad half-smile. Then Larabee turned an impassive face back to Costas and Hofstader. To answer the question that Hofstader had posed. Cool. Deliberate. Wearing the smirk.

“Surprised? Not really. They’re a good team. And a good team runs itself in the leader’s absence, in the same manner as if the leader were there.”

Larabee’s philosophy of leadership. It fell into the room like a hammer falling on an anvil. Travis closed his eyes for a moment. Heard the voice again, as clearly as if the interview were only a day ago, “Lots of things might put the leader out of a job. The team will still finish theirs.” He thought again of Team Seven, willing to risk everything to find justice for Chris’s death. Preserving his memory. Refusing to accept new leaders. Sealing up his office like it was the pharaoh’s tomb, burial treasures still inside.

He remembered suddenly how long it took Mary and Evie, widow and mother to get around to packing up Steven’s clothing after he had been killed in the line of duty. Team Seven wasn’t trying to preserve Chris’s memory. They were just trying to hold onto him. Just a little longer.
Stonefaced, Travis felt his eyes prickle at the thought of his murdered son. Watched the directors wrap up the inquiry. Saw Chris give them each a nod, and then send a longer look tinged with equal parts resolve and regret, in Travis’s direction. The ball was in Travis’s court now. He would do his best to see it carried properly. He rose from his chair, catching Chris’s eye and sending his very best and clearest silent Trust me to the team leader. He thought he saw a tiny flicker of a smile. Then Chris was gone.

The directors exhaled. And suggested postponing a look at their notes and transcripts until Monday. Travis agreed. He could use the time to finally decide which of the strategies he had been mulling over to use.

* * *

The six agents looked up when Chris entered the bullpen. The clock had passed quitting time twenty minutes ago. But they were waiting. Silent. Expectant. He had had every intention of walking in here cocksure and telling them that things had gone pretty much as expected. That would have been sufficiently vague. But after last night, and the earful that Tanner had given him this morning, he owed them his honesty.

Truth to tell, his ears were still ringing far more from Tanner’s tirade than from anything the directorship had insinuated so far. And Tanner was right. He had played them. Manipulated them. For their own good, maybe, but that wasn’t reason enough. He was tempted to point out to the sharpshooter that he could have called him on it instead of playing along. But he didn’t. Because Vin was too loyal for that. And he knew they had no better plan. Which was really what bothered the sharpshooter anyway. Instead they had a real good argument and called each other a lot of nasty names. Following which Tanner felt a lot better.

Chris realized suddenly that while he had been musing, Buck and Ezra were both making a show of eyeing him up and down. He glared at the undercover agent. Since glaring at Buck would be useless.

Buck turned to Ezra in puzzlement. “Seems to be in one piece,” he said.

“Yes,” Ezra drawled. He looked back up at Chris. “You would think that falling on one’s sword would leave a mark.”

Chris glared harder.

“How did it go?” J.D. finally asked, nervously.

“As planned,” Chris replied tersely, still glowering at Ezra.

He didn’t miss Tanner’s hot glare. “Gonna take me all damn day to type my resignation,” he muttered.

“Well,” Ezra said with a self-satisfied smile. “I am well ahead of you in that regard. Mine is already signed, sealed, and delivered.”

A smile snaked suddenly across Chris’s face. As if the team leader actually found Ezra’s comment genuinely funny.

He disappeared into his office and came back with a manila file folder.

“Thanks for the reminder,” Chris said. “I meant to give this back to you.” He held the folder out to Standish, and coughed suspiciously into his hand, as he said, “I stamped it declined and initialed in the corner.”
He turned and went back into his office.

Ezra stared after him puzzled. Then he opened the folder. It took him a moment to figure out what he was looking at. Then he shook his head in disbelief.

True to his word, Chris had, in fact, stamped the paper and initialed in the corner. Very neatly, too. Right after he had apparently pinned the fine linen stationery to a target and emptied an entire clip into it for practice.

Ezra noticed his teammates staring, as he pulled the tattered, shredded, holey, powder-burnt paper out from the folder, and held it up between two fingers for general inspection.

“Nice pattern, Mr. Larabee,” he commented dryly, turning back toward the office. “Did you want me to file this, or just use it as a doily?”

Buck held his straight face just long enough to tell Ezra how nice it would look under his coffee cup.

Josiah and Nathan had their heads down, hiding their own laughter.

Vin and J.D. didn’t even try. Seated next to each other, both were soon holding their ribs and leaning helplessly against each other. Especially after Ezra sighed dramatically and slid the paper under his coffee cup as suggested.

They left shortly afterwards. J.D. was first, jumping up suddenly and grabbing his backpack and helmet.

“’Night, Chris,” he said with a grin.

“Good night, J.D.,” Chris said, looking up from the briefing paperwork. A genuine smile sat on the youthful agent’s face. He couldn’t help smiling back.

“Gonna leave soon?” the young agent asked.

Chris’s smile broadened. “Soon, J.D.,” he said.


Josiah and Nathan left next.

Then Ezra.

They all paused in his doorway. They all said good night. But it was what they didn’t say that Chris heard loud and clear. It was written fiercely in their faces. And he appreciated it.

Vin and Buck arrived in his doorway together as he was powering down his computer.

“Drink, Cowboy?” Vin asked with a sly grin.

“I’m not allowed,” Chris said, giving them a sour look. Raine had made him promise to take some kind of painkiller. Since he refused to take the ones the doctor prescribed, he chose aspirin. And she had told him quite clearly what would happen to him if he mixed the aspirin with alcohol—most of which had very little to do with actual clinical side effects.

“We’ll buy you a so-dee-pop,” Buck said with a smirk.
“An’ a sandwich,” Vin added.

Chris shrugged. “So long as you’re buying,” he replied with a grin, getting his coat.

He walked out between them. A virtual prisoner, he noted as Buck slung one long arm across his shoulders and herded him toward the elevator. Hovering. Again. And for the first time in a very long time, he really didn’t mind.

* * *

Monday was murky and grey to match Assistant Director Travis’s mood. He glowered his way through his morning drive and cursed the decaf coffee that Evie insisted on serving him. Although he knew his present mood had precious little to do with the coffee or with his lack of sleep this weekend. Evie had come downstairs twice last night to turn off the TV and tell him to go to bed. Both times he knew she had expected to find him asleep in his chair. Both times he had been pacing the living room floor. The same way he paced his office. She had gone back upstairs without a word. She knew the general topic occupying his mind and knew that he would share none of the details. Forty years of marriage had taught her when to pry and when to leave him alone. The thunderclouds gathering in his gray brows this morning signaled her to leave him alone. A brief reprieve, he knew. He would be expected to come clean very soon. Flowers would probably also help. The only problem was, he couldn’t see into the future. And he didn’t know what he would have to confess.

Still grumbling to himself, he deserted the parking garage for an extra large coffee from the Starbuck’s around the corner, grateful not to encounter anyone he knew very well. Then he made his way back to the elevator. By his watch he should have just enough time to check his calendar and workload for today and review his game plan before he had to sit down in Hofstader’s conference room along with the two directors and go over the notes and transcripts from last week.

He had sat with the reports this weekend. His stomach turning over and over, as he read the story in order. From end to end. The picture slowly coming into sharper focus. He had gone for the scotch about the time he realized how close Team Seven had really come to losing their leader. And how many times. In one single screwed up mission.

Two bullets and a rocket launcher had not killed his agent. But the parking lot assault at the hands of two law enforcement officers had nearly done the trick. The EMTs who had treated him estimated that he would have been dead inside of a half an hour if the detective had not interrupted the beating and an ambulance had not been nearby. Following that... Travis shuddered.

He wasn’t even sure Team Seven knew how close it had been. They had headed home probably at the same time that an ambulance crew was rushing Chris to the hospital in police custody, believing he was one of the few surviving members of the militia that had destroyed a warehouse and part of the building next door. Along with the lives of hundreds of families. They had not been there for the beating, the intubation, surgery, infection, mishandling, or the first part of the shootout with militia assassins.

Richter’s official reports called for another stiff drink, while Travis felt the steam coming out of his ears. The report was sketchy at best regarding Chris’s involvement in the firefight with the militia assassins that had come to kill the unconscious ATF agent who had been dangled in front of them as bait. The Team Four leader proved himself as adept at walking the fine line as at manipulating the truth to serve his own ends. He had to include Chris’s actions to make his case that Chris had agreed to participate. But too much information might give away details Richter would prefer were left undiscovered and uninvestigated. Near as Travis could piece together from various reports, including Chris’s own infuriatingly vague account of what had happened, Richter had somehow convinced Chris to participate in his ambitious plan, and then Chris, true to form, had decided to follow his own
agenda. The report became even more vague when it came to Larabee’s involvement in the gunfight. But it appeared that Chris had been instrumental in taking down at least one of the assassins.

More than his sketchy description of events—more due to intention than the confused lack of memory the man claimed, the AD was sure—it burned Travis that Larabee had then tied his hands regarding Richter and Pirelli. At his agent’s request, Travis had agreed not to press charges or dig up the missing police report. And he knew better than to ask Chris why. There was enough trouble on both of their plates right now without borrowing more. He let it lie.

So, Travis summed up bitterly before clapping the file folders closed and going to bed to stare at his ceiling. Larabee had survived bullets, a rocket, a brutal beating, substandard care, and an infection that had no doubt begun to set in as he lay bleeding among the garbage dumpsters in his makeshift bunker, and another gun battle and fistfight to come back to them. And then on Friday, he tied the rope around his own neck and jumped right off the platform of his career. Leaving Travis to try to catch him or at least cut the rope before it broke his neck.

This morning, Travis found himself hoping that whatever guardian angels had been watching over Chris Larabee up until now had not yet headed out for a much needed vacation. He might still need more than just Travis to save his career.

Hofstader was his grim self. Concerned about potential black eyes for the Denver ATF as an organization. But trying to weigh evidence in light of the circumstances. Costas, sympathetic, but as rule bound as ever. Exasperated by the lack of respect shown by the most senior members of Team Seven in general. Irritated by their cavalier attitude toward disobeying orders and regulations in particular. Anxious to keep good agents on the right track.

Despite the fact that the directors had evidently spent part of their weekends reviewing their notes, too, hashing through the evidence again still took most of the day, as they stopped to compare notes and impressions and reread reports. Both Costas and Hofstader asked to review the surveillance videos yet again. They compared the initial tactical plans to the actual surveillance footage. But they had little to go on inside the warehouse. Hofstader wanted to hear and compare the audios from the Texas ATF teams inside the warehouse to Team Seven’s audio.

*Dear God,* Travis thought, running a hand down his face. *Not again.* He could still see J.D. Dunne sitting in the interview chair, the hot seat, struggling to keep his emotions at bay. And this time, when the screaming started, he could very nearly pick out each man’s voice. He ran his hands back through his hair again and noticed both directors watching him. He tried not to glare when he looked back up at them.

After lunch, they began to sift through the testimony from each member of Team Seven. Comparing statements. Answers to the same questions. Examining details. Looking for discrepancies. Looking for similarities.

The afternoon wore on.

It was after eight o’clock when Travis finally finished returning phone calls and answering e-mails, so he could head home. Home to look forward to choking down supper with an antacid for dessert. And then spending the rest of the evening pacing in his den and planning out a strategy to defend Chris Larabee. Defend him from the fact that his team had gone AWOL and conducted an unauthorized, illegal surveillance operation on a known arms dealer when he wasn’t even there. When for all the ATF and Team Seven knew, Chris was dead. Travis swore. A man shouldn’t have to defend himself from something that he wasn’t even technically involved in.

He swore again in terms that would have shocked his assistant, had she not already gone home two
hours ago. Then he called Chris Larabee a half a dozen of the worst names he could think of off the top of his head. The man had used his own goddamn stubborn, hardheaded insistence that his team’s actions were his responsibility to pander to directorship insecurities and string himself up by his own autonomy. Only Larabee could possibly have twisted this around so badly that he could be held ultimately responsible for an illegal action in which he did not actually participate.

* * *

By that logic, the directors might as well hold me responsible, Travis thought bitterly. A second later he carried the idea to its absurd conclusion. “By that logic,” he muttered, “the directors should hold themselves responsible.”

He froze suddenly, fingers poised above his keyboard, as the thought went spinning round his brain. Then he ran it around one more time, slowly, as a smile born of pure audacity began to form on his lips. Scant minutes later, AD Travis had hustled from his office, notes in hand, grabbing a hand held voice recorder from his assistant’s desk on his way and speaking rapidly into the tape all the way down in the elevator.

* * *

Tuesday morning, he read through requested status reports from Chris Larabee and Ryan Kelly regarding the briefings with Team Eight. According to Kelly’s comments on an unofficial post it, “Team Seven’s casework has been very thorough and the team has been more than accommodating.” He scowled. He knew all that. Did Kelly think he needed to be reminded that Team Seven was a good team? As if he had forgotten. They were his team. He knew they were a good team—even if they were all a bunch of stubborn, hardheaded, fools and idiots.

He condemned them universally. There was not one of them that had not given him more than their fair share of headaches. There was not one of them that he had not personally wanted to strangle at some point. But he left them to Larabee to handle. And somehow he always did. God alone knew how, but he did. They never blew up in his face. He was turning that thought over blackly in his head when his assistant reminded him that he was due in Hofstader’s office in five minutes.

More notes. More transcripts. More blame, he thought bitterly, as he thanked her for the reminder.

He gathered his briefcase and moved toward his door, swearing as he thought of his troublesome septet. God damn grandstanders, cowboys, adrenaline jockeys…

“If you think this part is tough,” he interrupted himself angrily, as if speaking to the grandstanding cowboys in question. “Just wait until the board of inquiry meets to decide on a ‘course of action’,” he growled.

Two passing file clerks moved hurriedly aside, stepping into an alcove to let him pass. But he didn’t pause or apologize. He just continued with his tense stride. And the angry rant in his head.

He could hear the directors now, asking the same shocked question they always asked about Team Seven. The same question that Grayson Mueller had growled out, before Travis made the decision that he did not have quite the right temperament to deal with Team Seven. And if he went willingly and immediately, there’d be no damage to his reputation and no one would mention that he had actually tried to strangle one of his new agents. The inevitable question that came up again and again and again. “Who the hell do they think they are?”

They ought to know by now, he snorted. And if he weren’t so damn mad at the lot of them, directors, agents, team leaders, all of them, he might have smirked at the answer he would have given: “They are quite likely the best team in the entire Western region.” Because if they weren’t, Travis thought, stabbing at the elevator buttons viciously, the directors would have reined them in, or disbanded
them, a long time ago.

Now they would probably try, he thought spitefully. If only in a last ditch attempt to avoid a messy firing. But now it was too late. Larabee had already said once that he would quit if they tampered with his autonomy in discipline. No doubt he would. After all, he seemed more than willing to let them fire him over this. A scowl further darkened the AD’s face as Travis realized, although he would never know exactly how the man did it, that in the end, Larabee usually got his way.

Hofstader’s assistant looked up to greet the entering AD. But the cheerful words died on his lips, as he noticed the black, angry expression. “Go right in, please,” was the best the man could muster. The AD gave a curt nod and bit out a “Thank you.” The assistant made sure the conference room door closed completely, and was again relieved that he had chosen to make his living doing administrative work, not as an agent. Even meetings seemed somewhat dangerous around here. Then again, he reasoned, considering the tension of the past weeks, coupled with the amount of firepower these agents carried around, perhaps there were no “safe” jobs in Denver ATF.

In the afternoon, Hofstader and Costas indicated a desire to present a uniform front to the remaining inquiring directors. There was a long argument. Costas and Hofstader versus Orin Travis. Trying to bring him around. To make him see sense. But their strategy broke down on the points on which the two directors could not agree either.

Travis, seething now, fought to control his temper.

“Team Seven is under my command,” he replied. “And as such I will present their side to the board.”

They glared at him exasperated.

He stared back at them, unmoved by their logic.

Costas shook his head. “Might I suggest, again,” he said patiently, “that it would be sensible to consider your own career. You must be well aware that to some degree, your own reputation is also on the line here.” He kept his voice even, but he was clearly trying to bore some sense into the Assistant Director’s head by the sheer intensity of his gaze.

“I am aware of that,” Travis replied tightly.

“Well, good,” Hofstader said shortly. “Because none of your agents seems to be aware of the trouble they are in.” He narrowed his eyes. “Or perhaps they just don’t care.”

“They know. And they care,” Travis answered, trying not to grind his teeth together.

Costas grunted sarcastically. “You couldn’t prove it by their interviews,” he snapped. “We came prepared to give them every chance. The benefit of every doubt. But neither Larabee nor Wilmington seemed particularly interested in putting their own actions in the best possible light. They didn’t even try.”

Travis’s jaw clenched involuntarily. But he did not hold back his words. “Shouldn’t they get some credit for that?” he grated. “For not trying to pull the wool over our eyes. They did what they did. No member of Team Seven has tried to deny what happened. Nor have they made excuses for themselves.”

“We understand that,” Hofstader said evenly.

“No you don’t,” Travis snapped back. “They didn’t even come in here and plead that they exercised poor judgment because they were distraught at losing a member of their team. Their leader, for God’s
sake. If it had been another team that might have been taken into consideration.”

“What are you saying?” Costas replied, lowering his tone.

“I’m saying this is a witch hunt,” Travis said, the words flying out as conceived. He did not stop to sugar coat it or be politic. “If you want to punish Larabee for disobeying orders or letting an aggressor have his badge and gun, that’s a viable issue. But you want to punish the whole team for their approach to law enforcement. You want to punish them for a style that you’ve all tacitly agreed to as long as you got the results you wanted.”

Both directors were eyeing him silently, frowning, but he didn’t stop.

”Texas ATF got a black eye because they mishandled their own bust. So they want to spread the blame around. And Denver ATF is perfectly willing to go along with it. What’s Texas doing to punish their intelligence teams for their faulty information? For their part in this fiasco?” He bit his words off before the names Richter and Team Four came off his tongue.

Hofstader narrowed his eyes.

“Be careful, Orin,” Costas warned.

The AD took a breath. Seemed to rein himself in. But his reply signaled that any attempt to come to consensus had now come to an end.

“Team Seven is under my command,” Travis said evenly, resolutely. “And as such, I will present their side to the board.”

* * *

Senior Agent Larabee slammed down his phone with undisguised irritation and got up from his chair. Doug Stone scooted his visitor’s chair backward with gratifying speed. Larabee’s gaze cooled slightly as he looked at Stone and the agent beside him, evidently making an effort to put the hot glare back into its holster. Larabee flicked his glance over at Agent Standish and pursed his lips into a smile that looked slightly insane and apologized for cutting the meeting short.

Then he left. With no further explanation. Or further instructions. Leaving Team Eight’s Agent Stone alone with Ezra Standish in the Team Leader’s office.

Stone eyed Standish, who gave him a congenial smile that revealed his gold tooth. “Shall we remove ourselves to the conference room?” he drawled, as if Larabee left him standing flat-footed in the middle of a briefing every day. And this was nothing new. Then again, perhaps it wasn’t.

He followed Standish through Team Seven’s bullpen. He didn’t often come down here. Mainly because he didn’t care to be hit with stray paper wads like the ones that Larabee’s second in command was currently lobbing at Dunne, the computer expert whom Kirk had quietly dubbed “the boy genius.” Dunne was firing back with expert speed but a bit less accuracy. Forced to pass the paperstorm to get to the conference room, Standish simply held the manila folder containing his notes up alongside of his head to deflect any stray projectiles, talking congenially all the while as he led Stone past the melee.

*How the hell do these clowns hold the regional record for closed cases?* Stone thought to himself. A second later, the giant Josiah Sanchez roared out a warning to both men to stop with the paper wads if they valued their lives. They actually laughed at the gigantic ex-soldier. Stone amended his thought and wondered instead. *How the hell do they not kill each other?*
Chris Larabee tallied up mentally the number of times he had made this trip to IA in the past two days. Since they insisted on speaking to him in person and not over the phone, whether it was a list of questions or just one question, and regardless of how superficial, inane, ridiculous or just plain stupid the question. But Travis had given him one clear order and one only in this entire debacle. That was to “cooperate with IA, goddammit.” Travis hadn’t added any promises about what would happen if he did not. But Larabee knew when to fight and when to give in. He gave in. He needed Travis to be on his side, now that he had pissed everyone else off.

He realized that the IA agent was talking. Again. Or maybe still. He sighed and pulled his attention back to the question at hand. Bautiste.

“Your agents used their surveillance equipment to supplant Bautiste’s own security system?”

“Yes,” Chris replied thinly.

“How did they do that?” the IA agent asked.

Chris glared at him, exasperated. Making an effort to be civil. Or at least not to swear at him. “I don’t know,” he said tersely. “I’m not a technician. And I wasn’t there.”

The IA agent tried to glare back. But he shuffled his feet under the desk.

“Did your agents gain access to the interior of the house?” he asked, his voice clinical, detached.

Larabee’s eyes narrowed. Had he not brought them six tapes that said just that? Had he not written up a summary containing this information?

“According to my agents, they did gain access to the interior of the house.”

The IA agent eyed him. Licked his lips.

“And you believe them?”

Larabee glared at the agent. “Yes,” he said tightly. He narrowed his eyes. His voice dripped sarcasm as he added, “Unless you think they were lying when they said they broke into Bautiste’s house and illegally interrogated him.”

The agent hesitated. He had begun avoiding the green glare.

“Did you investigate their claims?” he asked.

“Isn’t that your job?” Larabee asked.

The agent coughed quietly.

“Agent Larabee, I’d like to see the surveillance tapes they made.”

Chris inhaled. “Agent Dunne did not make any tapes,” he said slowly, and distinctly.

The IA agent scowled. Searched the pale face for signs of deception. Found only obvious signs of irritation.

He hesitated.

The agent shuffled his feet again, reminding the Team Seven Leader of his duty to tell the truth.
Chris gritted his teeth at the reminder and tried very hard not to notice the shuffling.

“When did you reestablish contact with your team? The first instance, please.”

“In the women’s clinic,” he answered. The IA agent tried not to notice the smirk, as the Team Leader added. “I’m a little fuzzy on the details.”

“You had had no contact with them since the rocket attack on the warehouse? None whatsoever.”

The Team Leader’s face broke into a smile that the IA agent found incongruous and just a bit scary. “Have you read my medical file?” Larabee asked, after a long moment.

The IA agent sighed, loudly, exasperatedly. And glanced up, afraid for a moment that the Team Leader in front of him would take offense. But the man sat calmly. Just the eyes were unpleasantly animated.

“How did you find out that Dowd sold the rockets to the militia?”

“Agent Wilmington told me.”

“And he got this information from Bautiste?”

Now the aggravation began to show in the Team Leader’s body language. “Agent Vogel,” he said quietly. “All of this is in my reports or my agents’ testimony. They conducted an illegal surveillance. They entered Bautiste’s house illegally and interrogated him. Bautiste fingered Dowd. I don’t know how they did it. They didn’t make any tapes. As for me, I spent two to three weeks watching the back of my eyelids. Then I apparently got into a gunfight involving Texas Team Four, whose reports you have, and assaulted a fellow ATF agent. So I’m told. I’m a little fuzzy on those details and there’s no report. As for yesterday’s questions, my cell phone was not recovered from the warehouse. I was issued a new one when I returned to Denver. I did give my badge and gun to a militia member at gunpoint. I didn’t catch the names of the people who assaulted me. I don’t remember much about it. And I don’t know how Agent Wilmington got his cracked ribs and black eye. He said he got into a fight. I didn’t investigate that further. You may do so at your convenience. Are we done?”

The IA agent swallowed. He opened his mouth.

“I know,” Larabee snapped, rising up out of his chair like a shadow climbing a wall. “That’s it for now.”

He left the same way he came in, like a storm wind blowing up the hall.

He held his smile until he was back in his team’s bullpen. And had checked that Agent Stone had concluded his visit. Only then did he send Buck a smirk.

Buck raised his eyebrows in silent question.

“They’re fishing,” Chris replied. And went into his office.

Buck exhaled. Softly. Didn’t want anyone else to know how he had been holding his breath for IA. But if IA was fishing now, it meant that the search would likely be called off soon. They just needed to hold on a bit longer.

He threw a surreptitious glance at his boss. Chris might not have changed his mind about how he would handle the inquiry. But something had changed after the team met the other night. It was
evident immediately in Chris’s posture. In his walk. He still looked like hell, but the tension that seemed to be pushing him down last week had eased off.

He knew the others had sensed it. The tension had eased off the team, too. Like their decision had freed them all. J.D. had begun to talk like it was all over and behind them already.

The word “acceptance” fluttered into Buck’s brain. But he couldn’t help but compare it to the peace that comes when a person has been granted time to put one’s affairs in order before dying. He saw suddenly that that was what they had been doing all week. Team Seven had stopped fighting against the coming storm and started to put their affairs in order. Filed all the paperwork. Finished their reports. Had even designated Team Eight the beneficiaries of their caseload. Just in case.

Josiah had jokingly gathered seven cardboard boxes in the kitchenette in case they had to clean out their desks. He had even labeled them, lest Buck not get a box big enough to house the collection of sports magazines and the rubber chicken he kept in his desk drawers.

Later in the day, the agents of Team Seven were called to IA to clarify their own testimony. Chris had expected it. Had called them into the conference room earlier and told them to mind their manners. He shot a particular glance at Tanner and Standish as he said so.

Ezra protested this uncalled-for impugning of his character. But he didn’t get all the way through his protest before he was silenced by a full-force glare so hot that it shut Tanner up, too, as collateral damage. And J.D. Dunne edged his chair away from both of them.

As Ezra’s chagrin faded, as he realized, with full consciousness of the irony, how oddly relieved he felt now that he had received his first full-strength Larabee glare in more than a month. He went to see IA still wearing his cocky gold-toothed grin.

* * *

On Wednesday, Travis met with Senior Agent Willamette, who had taken charge of the investigation into Team Seven’s unauthorized activities during their unauthorized absence. Travis held back from smiling as he recognized that IA was still very carefully terming the events “unauthorized.” No one yet had brought up the word “illegal.” He met with the Senior Agent behind closed doors. They were not to be interrupted. He wanted this report before he had to face the entire board of inquiry. He wanted to know the full extent of the damages he would need to mitigate.

Willamette’s face was grave. Stern. But his body language showed discomfort, as he shifted his long limbs in Travis’s guest chair. He pursed his lips as he considered possible ways to begin.

“Well,” he said with a sigh. “At best, I can say it’s complicated.”

Travis raised his eyebrows. “And worst?”

Willamette nearly smiled. “At worst, Team Seven did conduct an unauthorized surveillance, which may or may not have included breaking and entering and an illegal interrogation.”

“May or may not?” Travis asked, leaning forward over his desktop.

Willamette was a seasoned field veteran. Hardened by several years of working in the trenches, until a spectacular smashup during a high speed pursuit left his right legged pinned together from ankle to hip and had taken him off his team. For good. He had fought to come back. And had succeeded in becoming an investigator in Internal Affairs. He understood the pressures of field work. He had no axe to grind against men he respected as professionals. He was a realist. But he would hold them to the oath they took to uphold the law.
Travis trusted him.

“Evidence is a little sketchy,” Willamette replied. “There are several angles we could investigate further.”

The dark eyes that turned up to Travis were serious. “If the ATF believes it is worth the time, effort, and money it will take.”

Travis looked long and hard back at the senior agent.

“What do you have?” Travis asked.

Willamette placed the full report on Travis’s desk and began to walk him through the highlights.

“Misappropriation of surveillance equipment,” he began. “A given. Documents were signed. Their own testimony and your records tell us there was no relevant investigation.”

Travis nodded.

“Conducting an unauthorized surveillance.” He paused. “They all admitted to it, but the alarm company reports no unusual activity. Bautiste refuses to authorize the release of any security footage from his premises and the alarm company will not go against his wishes without a subpoena. Team Seven apparently did not make tapes either.”

Willamette shrugged. “They’re not stupid,” he said quietly.

Travis almost allowed himself a smile. Almost.

“What else?” he asked.

“Breaking and entering, and an illegal interrogation,” Willamette said. “Team Seven claims they bypassed the security system, gained access to the house and conducted an illegal interrogation.”

He leaned back in his chair and gave Travis a sudden grin. “You gotta admire their candor,” he said finally. “Cause hell if we can prove it without launching a full-scale investigation.”

Travis raised both eyebrows in question.

Willamette reached for the report and found the paragraphs he was referring to. “As I said, the security company reported no unusual activities. There is no police report. The victim, Bautiste, emphatically denies anything at all happened at his compound. He claims it is a rumor begun by disgruntled former employees to discredit him. And I gotta say,” Willamette added, “we’re not going to be able to crack him on that. The two men propagating the claim are former bodyguards who were in fact sacked that very day. Finally, the telephone company reports a cut line, but has been unsuccessful in finding out who did it. They’ve had a rash of vandalism lately after layoffs, including cut wires in various locations around the city. Also no witnesses have placed any members of Team Seven in the vicinity. And as stated before, Bautiste maintains that no one out of the ordinary was in the house. Add to that that the information allegedly received during this interrogation was available from other sources, as you know.”

“So what do we have?” Travis asked. “Give me the short summary.”

“We have a crime confessed to by the perpetrators and denied by the victim with very little outside corroborating evidence to say that it did happen. Unless the directors want to mount a full-scale fishing expedition.”
He looked up at Travis. “For the record, I’m against it.”
“What do you recommend?” Travis asked.

Willamette straightened as he replied, “I recommend that Team Seven be disciplined for conducting an unauthorized surveillance.” He looked at Travis as if to gauge his reaction. “They could have said nothing happened at all. And we would have been hard pressed to say otherwise. That ought to be taken into consideration. I recommend the most efficient way to handle this would be to take them at their word, as to what happened and how it happened, and discipline them accordingly.”

Travis nodded. Willamette watched the wheels turn in the Assistant Director’s head.

“Read my report,” Willamette replied. “The recommendations are there. See if you agree.”

Travis nodded and thanked the senior IA agent.

* * *

AD Travis closed the report some hours later. But he sat thinking for a long time. Turning the question over in his head. Why would Team Seven confess to a crime they could have gotten away with? He came up with a number of reasons. He would have to choose among them for the inquiry. Choose the ones that put the team in the best light. And be able to refute the ones that looked the most suspicious.

Not for the first time since the disaster in Texas, Travis found himself both relieved and furious at his wayward team. Relieved that Team Seven was on the right side of the law. And angry that they should ever have crossed the line.

He sighed deeply and looked at the clock, feeling his stomach churn. The board of inquiry was scheduled to meet tomorrow afternoon. Tonight he had to tell Evie that he planned to put his own reputation on the line beside Team Seven’s. It was a discussion he did not look forward to, and he had put it off too long.

* * *

Chris Larabee hung up his telephone, quietly this time, and glanced down at the loudly ticking Timex on his wrist. He unstrapped it and pushed it to the edge of his desk, feeling the headache returning in his temples. He ignored it, forcing it away from himself, and intercommed Buck.

There was a knock on his door almost immediately, as if Buck had been waiting for the call. He let himself in without waiting for an answer and slid into a visitor’s chair, plunking his big booted feet up on the corner of Chris’s desk.

Chris glowered at the boots. Then at the door.

Without a word, Buck reached over and pushed it shut. Noticing that a coat hook had finally been installed on the back. Improvements to the office, he thought sourly, not sure whether that was a good sign or not. Not that he believed in signs and omens. That was sort of Josiah’s job.

He looked at his leader expectantly.

“The board of inquiry is set to begin tomorrow afternoon,” Larabee said, his voice betraying no emotion. But the slight squint in his left eye told Buck that there was plenty going on in Chris’s mind.

Buck pulled his feet off the desk, set them firmly down in front of him and leaned forward, placing
his elbows on his knees.

“So when do you think we’ll know?” he asked.

The team leader snorted. “Don’t know. Could be real short. Could be several days.”

“Which is better?” Buck asked.

Chris shrugged. He’d given up trying to figure that out a long time ago.

Buck exhaled. “Well, I guess we’ll know when we know. Until then we keep our heads up and keep on working, right?”

Chris gave him a long, odd look, but didn’t answer.

“Right?” Buck prompted, frowning back at him.

Chris cocked his head over to the side and smiled tightly. “That,” he said, “Or we could just start drinking at the Saloon right now and not crawl back out again until the results are in.”

Buck stared at him for a long second before he burst out laughing. “My God,” he said. “Stoneface made a joke.”

“Shut up, Buck,” Chris snapped. He tried not to grin as he added, “And it wasn’t a joke.”

They went out into the office space together to inform the team.

“When can we expect the other shoe to drop?” Ezra asked.

“If you’re asking when we’ll have the results,” Buck answered with slight annoyance, “we’ll have them whenever they come to a conclusion. Could take hours. Could take days.”

“Are the IA results in yet?” Josiah asked.

Buck looked to Chris for that answer.

“Yes,” Chris replied. He held up his hand forestalling any questions about it. “Travis has it. And he’ll tell me what they found when he is ready.”

“But you don’t know?” J.D. asked anxiously.

Chris barely managed to keep his own frustration from showing as he looked back at his youngest agent. “I don’t,” he said evenly.

J.D. slumped in his chair. Nathan looked down at his hands clasped together on his desktop. Josiah shrugged indifferently, philosophically. Ezra looked up at the team leader and the second in command, his expression unreadable. And Vin slung one arm over the back of his chair and grinned his best shit-eating grin. As if to dare IA to come right up to the bullpen and get him.

It almost made Chris smile to see it.

Buck looked over at Chris again, and the team leader gave a slight nod.

“Until then, we work on finishing our briefings with Team Eight. And any other casework we have left to finish,” Buck said.

J.D. looked back up at them. But he didn’t say what was so plainly written on his face. If the
directors made them lose their jobs, they could deal with the unfinished paperwork themselves.

Ezra caught the look and read it. His smirk showed that he agreed with the sentiment.

Vin’s grin grew a little wider and a little meaner. Disdain all over his face. He didn’t give a rat’s ass about the paperwork.

Chris gave him an exasperated look.

Vin twitched a shoulder almost apologetically. He’d do whatever Chris ordered him to do, but he didn’t have to pretend to like it.

Chris glanced up at the bullpen clock. “Go home,” he said quietly. To be fair, he didn’t see the point of asking them to bust their tails to finish up paperwork. If they got fired—or quit—the paperwork was no longer their problem. If they kept their jobs, then there would be time to bust their tails later.

He watched them move slowly toward the bullpen door. As if the news had weighed them down momentarily. Stolen their cockiness. Their sarcastic humor. They talked quietly, angrily as they left, until, again, only Vin and Buck were left by his side.

Chris turned to both of them and frowned.

Neither spoke but they exchanged a glance.

Chris’s frown turned to a glower. Knowing what they wanted. “I’m old enough to eat dinner on my own,” he snapped.

Vin shrugged. “Reckon y’are,” he said. “We just want to see for ourselves.”

Chris flipped both of them a silent hand signal, of the kind that made Mueller go ballistic all those weeks ago.

Vin and Buck grinned at each other.

“We’re still buyin’,” Buck offered.

“Speak for yourself,” Vin muttered.

“No one asked you to,” Chris’s growled from inside his office.

“Okay,” Buck shrugged. “Then buy your own dinner. But we’re still gonna hang around and make sure you eat it.”

“And take your pills,” Vin added.

Chris reappeared from his office, still glowering. He locked his door.

“What are you gonna do for entertainment when they fire my ass?” he grumbled, but he knew there was no hope of escape.

Vin grinned widely. But did not bother to reply. For right now, he and Buck had the upper hand. And they meant to hang onto it for as long as they needed to.
Chapter 13

The sun had barely risen. Was still pink, the clouds blushing as they moved away from it, ranging low across the eastern hills. He stood with a cup of coffee in his hand, barely touched, staring up the driveway to the hill that rose up steeply on the left. Thinking, heedless of the fragrant steam rising up to his nostrils, feeling the slight breeze against his cheek.

His eyes slid over to the barn and to the horses, nickering quietly to each other in the early morning paddock, picking at the grass, and the two blacks that jostled each other irritatedly, both determined to occupy the same dewy patch of grass that would soon have fingers of morning sunlight stretched across it. The barn chores had been light this morning. They were done. And there was time, lots of time, left in the damp morning. With the clouds burning off above him, promising a blue spring sky and heat later. But the breeze was chill now and the shadows cool.

He put the cup of coffee down on the porch railing. And stepped off into the driveway. Walking. Slowly. Then picking up speed almost without him willing to, until his feet were pounding a hard jog toward the mailbox.

And then, there stood the hill, waiting, beckoning. An old nemesis. An old friend. He stared at it a moment as it rose up, looking like half a mountain today. Damn but that'll hurt, he thought, his lungs already protesting this much exertion this early. But his grin was wide. Too damn bad, his answering thought. Then the running shoes made the decision for him, and carried him up, steady, hard, and away.

Not that it was a very good run. Not that a good portion of it was a run at all. Half walk, half jog, he made it to the top of the hill, where he thought his heart might burst right out of his chest, but once at the top, there was no choice but to carry on. And he did. Across a short flat stretch, irritated at the burn in his side. God but it had been a long time.

He stood at the next corner, running in place, staring almost longingly down the road that would normally be the next leg of his morning run. Somewhat narrower, sheltered by overspreading trees that some person or some organization had planted here long before he ever thought to run on its shoulder. The limbs reached for each other across the road, heedless of power lines, and one day would join and make this a tunnel. Still all but untouched by daylight, the road wound dimly, crookedly down a gentle incline before rounding a curve onto the next uphill, the trees receding. Farther on, he would break into full daylight and run along the side of the hill, winding back, through a series of uphills and downhills until he broke back onto the highway, this highway, a mile back from where he started. Anticipating the last curve, where his own land, his house, his fields would heave into view from the trees, laid out before him as if for inspection. As it did every evening when he drove home in his truck. Slower on foot, he had time to think about what he saw before him.

There was a time, a long time, when he avoided the view. Couldn’t stand the burn of the thoughts and memories it brought him. The memory of what was no longer and the wife and child who would never again greet him when he finally reached his own front door. But slowly, slowly, as the months bled by, he began to use the view to note repairs that needed to be made, chores to be done, fences that needed to be mended, trees that ought to be cut, paint that needed to be applied. Until, almost without him noticing, his thoughts began to turn once more to his land, and his house and his future. Different to be sure. Never again would it be the haven it had been. But it was safe. And he had slowly begun to see the collection of buildings nestled snugly down the hilly pasture as his home again. And to see himself a part of it once more.

He traveled the road in his mind. Turned his thoughts on his home, coming around to the end of his
five miles. Full circle back to his door. Still jogging in place on the corner, staring at the roadside trees as the sunlight began to creep farther and farther forward under the green canopy.

He heaved a large sigh and turned his running shoes back toward the hill he had just come up. Across the level stretch again, and down again, slowly. Remembering how hard it was to control speed on a steep downhill. His legs were on fire by the time he reached the driveway. But he forced himself to keep jogging, to even out his gait, refusing to stumble. Pouring on speed until he had reached something resembling an actual run. A smooth pounding lope that would eat up miles. Relishing the familiar feel, until it ended suddenly at his front porch.

Gasping, panting, burning from the soles of his feet up, his lungs heaving, stretching like a balloon confined inside a cage of bone and muscle. He stretched, head down, feeling the blood and heat pour into his face. And he grinned. Took his time. Took extra. Before grabbing his cold coffee from the railing, and moving slowly into the house to begin the day in earnest.

Less than two hours later Senior Agent Chris Larabee was standing in the elevator, watching the numbers ticking up to the eleventh floor, conscious of Nathan Jackson, wearing his medic face, and looking him over from just behind his right shoulder. Chris grinned to himself, knowing the medic could not see. But he said nothing.

The elevator dinged softly to announce their arrival at the eleventh floor and the doors slid open. Chris was striding up the hallway before the doors had opened all the way. Much faster than Nathan was prepared to follow this morning.

Ahead of him, the lights came up in the bullpen automatically, as they sensed movement. Chris went into his office. Arriving several meters behind, Nathan heaved his briefcase onto his desk, and moved tiredly into the kitchenette, in search of the supplies to get the coffee started. Trying not to think about the board of inquiry that would meet this afternoon. The same board of inquiry he had tried not to think about as he lay awake for most of the night. The same board of inquiry that ruined what little sleep he actually got.

He sneaked a glance back at the team leader’s office. Through the open door, he could see Chris, reading the interoffice memo in his left hand, while he moved his mouse through the motions of logging onto his computer. Nathan glowered. It was unfair; that’s what it was. Why did he look so damn calm this morning?

But then Nathan knew Chris well enough to know that the Team Leader could keep an awful lot of stuff hidden away inside. Until it built up enough steam to explode. Or implode, as the case had been. Like it had the day they had come to the ranch to meet. To solve the problem. Only they hadn’t solved the problem. The solution was the same lousy solution they had started with. It hadn’t changed.

Yet something had changed in Chris.

Yeah, Nathan thought bitterly. He gave his stress to the rest of us, so now he can relax, while the rest of us worry.

A moment later he felt guilty for thinking it. But something about it stuck in his brain. Flipped over. Inverted itself.

Or, he thought to himself slowly, as the coffee finally began to drip into the carafe. Maybe we took our share of it back, so that he could do his job.
He was still allowing himself a self-deprecating smile at his fatigue-induced bitterness when Chris came in with his deformed coffee cup. He looked at Nathan curiously. But he didn’t ask. And Nathan was grateful not to have to explain what he had been thinking.

The team leader seated himself on the small table, holding his cup in both hands. They waited in silence for enough coffee to drip into the carafe to make a decent sized cup. In the silence Nathan could feel the calm, the acceptance wrap around him. Understanding there was no need for words.

He looked up at Chris, who gave him a small nod and the barest flicker of a smile. And suddenly in that expression and in the look in the green eyes, Nathan understood. It was out of their hands, that they would deal with whatever happened when it happened. And until then, there was no point beating their heads against the wall.

Nathan turned back to the coffee machine. Silent. Believing that Chris would know what to do when the time came. And he marveled at that, as the silence continued. Was this understanding what it felt like to be Vin? To need no words, to just understand by a look, by a nod? Or was this what it felt like to be J.D. or maybe Josiah? To not always understand, but to believe anyway?

Then suddenly Chris slid off the table. He emptied the half full carafe into both of their cups, giving Nathan a curious, enigmatic smile, as if he had read Nathan’s thoughts. Then he disappeared back into his office. Without a word.

Not long after, the others began to arrive. J.D. came in grousing at Buck about some minor violation of the rules regarding the use of hot water as it relates to roommates and showers. Buck’s reply was terse. And definite. Josiah was unusually contemplative. And Ezra had apparently given a hapless clerk at Starbuck’s the benefit of the full range of his vocabulary regarding what constitutes competent customer service in the food service industry. Vin arrived with a bag of donuts, and spoke only once. That was to tell J.D. in mid reach that if he attempted to steal one of his donuts, he would find his hand permanently attached to a region of his anatomy, which would prove to be both uncomfortable and incredibly inconvenient. Nathan grinned to himself. Childishly happy to see that his teammates were on edge, too.

* * *

Two floors away, Orin Travis downed another strong, black, cup of coffee and shuffled his notes. Nathan Jackson was not the only one who had been up most of the night. First there had been a long-overdue discussion with Evie, which had gone reasonably well considering its serious nature and how long he had kept it from her.

He rubbed his forehead. He could not blame her for being furious. When his work came home to affect their lives together, he was supposed to, by previous arrangement and long custom, either consult her, or if that was not possible, at least give her advance warning to prepare. In this case, he had had ample opportunity to do both and had chosen to do neither. Although she had accepted and trusted his judgment, it would be somewhat longer before she would forgive him for being a stubborn, old fool.

Truthfully, it was the “old” part of that description that had bothered him most. An unpleasant adjective that had only begun popping up in the last couple of years, and only when Evie was well and truly furious.

He pushed his guilt from his mind, forcing himself to concentrate one hundred percent on the task at hand. Defend Team Seven in the inquiry. As he had been rehearsing, visualizing, and practicing immediately after Evie had had the last word and on into the very early hours of the morning. He had his strategy ready. He could only hope it worked out.
Travis choked down as much lunch as he could get past his tight throat and the butterflies that fluttered in his gut. He returned to his office early, rifled the e-mails, memos, and messages that needed to be dealt with immediately. Then collected his briefcase and walked with purposeful dignity up the stairs to Director Cranston’s conference room. He arrived at roughly the same time as the assembled directors, the same group that had met once before, only to be interrupted by the astounding and unanticipated arrival of Senior Agent Larabee. Put on hold for nearly three weeks, they were prepared now to visit the question before them from a different angle.

Cranston’s assistant unlocked the large oak door, and they all moved into the room. The chairs were all arranged around the long table. Travis noted that one was set somewhat apart, at one end, back to the door, while the other six were ranged farther toward the opposite end. He said nothing. Took his seat as directed. And waited for the inquiry to begin.

Jefferson Cranston, in place at the head of his own conference table, faced Travis directly from the other end of the table, calmly, determinedly, but not hostile, Travis noted. The first good news of his day.

Cranston introduced the other directors again, the same group as before, Ramirez, LaForce, Costas, Hofstader, and Benedetto. He tallied up their positions as he could recall them, which side they lined up on.

First there was Ramirez, who had stated at the original inquiry that he felt it was ridiculous to hold Larabee responsible for the actions undertaken by his team in his absence. But who had also made it clear that agents of the ATF need to adhere clearly to the rules and regulations set for them. Costas held similar concerns for rules and chains of command. Both directors felt they existed for a reason. Team Seven and Chris Larabee had shown a clear disregard for both. And LaForce counted into the same camp. He had clearly expressed his displeasure with the insubordinate attitude Larabee had displayed in the few moments that the original inquiry lasted.

In the other camp, he counted Hofstader, Benedetto, and Cranston himself. Hofstader, clear-eyed realist, field-hardened agent. Cranston politically savvy but also a product of the field. Their experiences as agents would help mitigate the emphasis they placed on the much of the behavior that Ramirez, LaForce, and even Costas found offensive. Benedetto was not a product of the field. He came into the bureau through administration and management. His concern was for the organization as a whole. Curiously silent throughout the intense debate following Larabee’s dismissal from the conference room in the original inquiry, he had nevertheless made one comment that gave Travis a place to gain a foothold, mentioning that it would be hard to justify reining the Team in now, since they had allowed the Team’s autonomy thus far.

Cranston completed his introductions and called the board to order. Travis listened as the slate-eyed director outlined the purpose of this inquiry. It sounded even worse to hear it delineated, set forth plainly for the first time. He forced himself to remain still as Cranston set forth their collective intention to raise and rule on the question of RMET Team Seven Team Leader, Senior Agent Chris Larabee’s professional conduct during their assistance of the militia raid in Texas, specifically with regard to his disobedience of direct orders from the mission commander and the surrender of his badge and gun to a known militant. That was the easy part.

Travis steeled himself for the second part, the related question centered on the unauthorized activities of Team Seven following the raid. Larabee had gotten his way, again. The first time they met it was a board of inquiry into the actions of his team. But the senior agent had put himself right in their path, blocking access to his team, and unbelievably enough, the wheels of bureaucracy had given way. IA had been chosen to deal with the team’s actions and discipline would be rendered through the team’s usual chains of command.
The board of inquiry had instead found a new focus: the question of whether Larabee’s leadership style and autonomy fostered insubordination and blatant disregard of rules and even laws—and worse yet, whether they were potentially dealing with a cult of personality. In short had Larabee created a maverick team that owed its allegiance to Larabee himself and not to the bureau they worked for, the laws they had sworn to uphold, or the public they had promised to serve? And if so, how would the board of inquiry propose to fix this problem?

The directors and Travis straightened their notepads before them. Poured themselves water from the pitchers on the table. Settled in for the duration. He had done his homework. Now Travis was ready to play the game, as Cranston turned toward him, indicating Hofstader and Costas, and declared the inquiry ready to begin.

Vincent Benedetto had not chosen to be a member of this board of inquiry. Rather, it had been asked of him, and he had consented. He knew that directors on a much lower level were scrambling to get their teeth into what they suspected was going to be a world-class pissing contest between a set of grizzled directors like Cranston and Hofstader, rising stars like Costas and Travis, and one hotheaded, troublemaking Senior Agent, who, if rumors were to be believed, could dig his feet in as if they were set in concrete and could give a pit bull a run for its money in plain, stubborn intractability once he got his teeth into an issue. Benedetto had no use for contests like these. They merely demeaned the men who got into them. Nevertheless, when asked by his own supervisor to take part, he could hardly refuse.

Once involved, however, he had to admit he was curious about Agent Larabee. And his reputation. Both among his fans and his detractors. Seen through the cold eye of reason, Larabee was not a director, not even an assistant director. He was a team leader, for God’s sake. Organizationally speaking, he should be easy to rein in. Yet he had proven to be anything but easy to control—especially with regard to chains of command and matters of discipline within his team. From what little Benedetto had seen, he wouldn’t characterize the man as an egomaniac or as particularly unethical, so there had to be a reason for his refusal to give even a little leeway in this matter. Even though he knew his team’s actions had been at best unauthorized and at worst illegal. Even though it could cost him his job or worse his career in law enforcement. Benedetto was curious to find out what Assistant Director Travis would reveal of his senior agent’s motivations.

He was also curious to see AD Travis in action. He knew the man had been a judge prior to becoming an AD with the Regional ATF office. Prior to that, Travis had been a successful lawyer with the District Attorney’s office. He knew his way around prosecution, and he knew his way around defense. Benedetto knew that Travis would be putting forth his best effort on behalf of his team leader. That alone spoke volumes about Agent Larabee, if the other directors had the sense to notice.

No, he hadn’t exactly volunteered for this assignment. And he hadn’t been particularly enthusiastic about accepting it. But now that he was here, he felt there was a great deal to be learned. Which was, of course, precisely why his supervisor had wanted him here.

* * *

Slouched into an extra chair in Team Seven’s conference room, Ryan Kelly pretended to look at the documents in front of him. Really he was staring at Chris Larabee, who was watching Ezra Standish talk Doug Stone through yet another set of reports. Apparently what these reports had to do with arms dealer Dowd was rather a convoluted story and difficult to grasp, based on the pained expression on Doug’s face. Kelly had long ago lost track of the twists and turns. And he found himself now wondering how Team Seven and their leader could be so damn focused on this briefing. As if handing over the files and caseload concerning Dowd for two years back wouldn’t be
unsettling enough, everyone who had paid the least amount of attention in the past week knew that up on the fourteenth floor, six directors and AD Travis were meeting to decide whether Larabee would still have a career in law enforcement come the end of the week. Yet Chris was calmly reading over documentation and throwing in a word or two edgewise to assist Standish, or perhaps to assist Stone. Standish had a vocabulary that could perplex Webster himself.

As for the rest of Team Seven, Standish looked faintly amused, which was not unusual. He generally looked faintly amused whenever he was called upon to explain something to someone else. Something which pissed off nearly everyone who came into contact with the man. Doug had already sworn that he was going to knock the man’s lights out. And Kelly had calmly reminded him that he didn’t have to work with Standish, just get his reports.

Buck Wilmington was in the corner of the conference table explaining something allegedly having to do with surveillance to Brett Jordan. It didn’t take longer than a glance to see that both men had gotten off the topic of the investigations at hand some time ago and were animatedly discussing something involving a lot of hand gestures. Kelly coughed slightly. His agent turned a slight shade of pink and resumed his serious face. Wilmington never missed a beat, or took a breath. He just kept right on talking, only now it was about established audio-video links in suspected warehouses. Larabee never looked up, yet Kelly could swear he saw a slight smile flicker across the man’s face.

Jackson and Sanchez were sitting together before an enormous stack of file folders with Kirk Gustin. J.D. Dunne sat at Gustin’s side, presumably offering interpretation and moral support. Presumably. But it didn’t seem like it was helping. Gustin looked like he had an enormous headache as all three members of Team Seven leaned in simultaneously to impress upon him something that was obviously of extreme importance. Gustin grimaced and looked up at his team leader. Kelly looked away. Gustin had insisted that he could meet with the three together. Let him figure it out.

He looked back up at Larabee, who was now watching him intently. Kelly’s eye wandered over to the clock on the wall. Wondering whether the clock had stopped or this was really the slowest afternoon on earth. As if he had read his mind, the corner of Larabee’s mouth quirked up in a tiny knowing smirk, and then he turned his attention back to his agents. Kelly shook his head. In five minutes, he was going to call a break. Before Stone throttled Standish and Gustin blew his own head off, taking the nearest member of Team Seven with him.

* * *

Benedetto shifted positions in his chair. Directly across the table from him, LaForce was getting hot under the collar. Again. Travis was unfazed.

“Larabee’s badge and gun were taken from him at gunpoint,” Travis said, almost as if he were tired of repeating something so obvious. “Your suggestion to suspend him for that is duly noted. And I will do so, if you want to send the message that the directors would rather said militant had killed him first, in which case the man would have taken the badge and gun anyway. But at least that would be an acceptable excuse.”

Hofstader suddenly felt the need to cough into his hand.

LaForce stumbled. “That’s not what we’re saying,” he replied, clearly irritated, trapped by his own words.

“That certainly sounds like what we’re saying,” Hofstader answered for Travis.

Costas had apparently grown tired of the entire badge and gun issue, which had gone on for much longer than Benedetto deemed necessary. “How about we just give him a warning on that? Tell him
it wasn’t a good idea and move onto the larger issues of disobeying orders and suborning disobedience in his team,” Costas suggested wearily, eyeing the clock. Benedetto could almost hear him wondering whether this inquiry was going to take up the rest of this week and the next one.

Cranston was apparently as tired of this topic as Benedetto and Costas. He jumped on the suggestion, gave it his support, and inquired whether any of the assembled directors needed more time or information on this topic. LaForce grumbled but let it drop.

Benedetto tried not to be amused. He knew as well as Travis did that LaForce felt that Larabee had not taken the issue seriously. And who could blame LaForce for thinking that based on Larabee’s own admission, quoted by Hofstader, with equal parts annoyance and relish? The man didn’t exactly sound repentant. But then again, by that point in the inquiry, one could have expected him to be a little perturbed. People generally did get defensive when having their actions second-guessed by other people who were not there when the fur was flying and decisions had to be made.

Travis had managed to spin attention away from Larabee’s cavalier attitude. And Benedetto admired his technique. He knew he would enjoy watching the AD when they got to the weightier, more difficult issues.

* * *

J.D. brushed past Ezra diving for the door and Josiah Sanchez’s heels, nearly knocking Ezra’s last cup of coffee—and an unusually late one at that—all over the well-dressed agent’s shirt front. Standish’s protest was lost on the young agent as he bolted out the door calling the profiler’s name.

“Well,” Ezra drawled indignanty, sopping up a stray drop with a napkin. “Mr. Dunne appears to be in an extraordinary hurry.” As usual, no one was listening to him. He watched with interest as Buck and Vin eyed the clocks on their computers and shared a glance across their desks.

Buck yawned and stretched dramatically. “Another work day done,” he said loudly.

Ezra had to hide a smile. Subtlety was not Wilmington’s strong suit.

Tanner’s eyes sparkled with mirth.

“What’s up for dinner, Tanner?” Buck asked, still too loudly.

“Oh I don’t know,” Vin drawled loudly and lazily. “Got a lot to do for my slave driver boss. Thought maybe I’d order in.”

“Now that’s a great idea!” Buck nearly shouted.

“God damn it,” the voice growled from the office. “Don’t you two ever give up?”

Buck turned and grinned at Ezra, throwing the southerner a conspiratorial wink.

“Ain’t tired,” Vin groused loudly back, “But I sure as hell am hungry.”

“How ‘bout it, Stud?” Buck said lazily, getting up from his desk.

“I have work to do, Buck,” the team leader said pointedly, his voice betraying his irritation.

“Oh that’s all right,” Buck said grinning broadly, “We’re ordering in.”

Ezra leaned back in his chair to see the Team Leader throwing a truly nasty look out the door at his second in command. Trapped. And he knew it.
Standish almost laughed at that. Until Larabee leveled that infamous glare at him.

“I see you have a new co-conspirator,” Chris drawled, unblinking.

Ezra feigned innocence.

“You mean, Ez?” Vin asked still looking at his computer. Suddenly he looked up at Ezra, his blue eyes alight with mischief. “It was his idea.”

Ezra stared back at Tanner and then turned back to Chris’s scathing glare.

“Mr. Tanner is lying,” he stated succinctly. “I am here to complete my reports for Team Eight. And that is all. Whatever Mr. Wilmington and Mr. Tanner have up their proverbial sleeves has been done without my knowledge, let alone involvement.”

“Sure, Ez,” Tanner whispered so loudly, they could have heard it in the hallway. “Good cover.”

“Coward,” Buck snorted.

Wilmington was laughing, but Chris knew he was deadly serious when he pulled out a file folder of menus from his desk. He brought the whole folder into Chris’s office and slapped it down on the desk.

Chris looked up at him exasperated. Buck plopped himself into a chair, heedless of his old friend’s irritation.

“I’m all right, Buck,” Chris said vehemently, but too quietly to be heard in the bullpen where Vin was attempting to goad Ezra into an argument.

Buck nodded his head. And opened the file folder, spreading the menus out for easier reading.

Chris glared at him.

Buck was impervious. Chris could glare at him until his hair caught on fire and his face melted, for all he cared. Raine had said take medicine, eat meals, and gain weight, and Buck aimed to see that Larabee did all three. Chris had more than used up his chances this round. And worse yet, he’d added more than his fair share of worry lines to Buck’s face in the last month. So now he had Buck to deal with. And Wilmington’s big foot would stay planted on Chris’s skinny tail until Buck was convinced that Chris was back, one hundred percent. Well.

And then, Buck fumed, then, they’d have a little talk about Chris’s idiot ideas about his own expendability.

Buck realized suddenly that Chris was looking at him and trying very hard not to laugh. And Buck discovered by the dull ache in his brow just how hard he had been glowering back at the Team Leader.

“What are you laughin’ at, Larabee?” Buck growled.

“You practice that glare in the mirror?” Chris asked with a grin, as he pushed a pizza menu toward Buck.

Buck made a face back at him and took the menu, pleased that Larabee was giving in.

Buck was pretty sure Chris would not stay docile for very long. He and Tanner had started making plans. But Chris had the devil beat for slippery.
Just ask the board of inquiry, Buck thought bitterly, leaving the office to phone the chosen pizzeria. Six directors were right now meeting to determine whether Chris should be held responsible for activities that had occurred without his knowledge or consent. No matter that for all practical purposes, Chris was dead at the time.

Buck’s jaw clenched. If Chris really had been killed, the whole question would have been ridiculous. Met with outrage. But somehow Chris had made the ludicrous seem plausible. Seemingly successful at diverting the blame back onto himself.

He went back to work after making the phone call. And ignored the pointed faces that Vin and Ezra both leveled at his head.

* * *

It took Nathan so long to get the idea that J.D. wanted to speak to Josiah in private, that J.D. feared he would actually have to ask his teammate to leave. Now he finally had Josiah’s attention. Alone. In the parking garage, and he felt so stupid about what he was going to say that he was having trouble stringing together a coherent sentence.

Josiah was looking impatient. And distracted.

“J.D., son,” he said finally. “To the Lord, a million years may seem like a mere second, but to a man my age, each one of those seconds starts takin’ a mighty big chunk outta the time I got left.”

J.D. stared at him, uncomprehendingly.

“Spit it out, son,” Josiah said shortly. “What do you want?”

J.D. looked at the garage floor. “It might not be my business,” he said. “An’ if it’s personal, it’s okay to just tell me…”

Josiah sighed in exasperation and interrupted him. “You’ve already mentioned that. Twice. I’ll be happy to let you know if you’ll just tell me what you want…”

J.D. exhaled in a rush. “I wanted to see that paper,” he said, nervously. “Your notes, you know, for the memorial service.”

He winced. God that was awkward.

Josiah peered at him. But he did not ask why. He simply reached into his shirt pocket and retrieved the folded paper. He held the paper out to J.D., but did not relinquish his hold.

“Some of it bears explaining,” the profiler said quietly.

J.D. blushed. He began to stammer out again that if it was too personal, Josiah should just say so.

Josiah cut him off. Not wanting to go there again. “I’m happy to share it with you, son, but it’s notes. My own notes. And some of it you might not understand.”

He did not bother to say now that some of it was not exactly complimentary. Or would not be seen to be complimentary were it actually said during a service. J.D. would see that soon enough.

What he wanted was the chance to explain how people get distorted through the lens of memory. How in our haste to expunge the sins of the dead, we expunge them of the personality that animated them in life. Josiah did not want that to happen to Chris. These were his notes. And this was how he
wanted to remember a man that had been such an integral force in his life. Whose faults made him no less important to his friends. And in some ways bound him more tightly to them.

He wanted a chance to explain that. He hoped J.D. would understand.

J.D. nodded. They were Josiah’s notes. He could agree to Josiah’s conditions. “Where should we go?”

Josiah smiled tightly. There seemed one place that was appropriate. He just hoped J.D. wouldn’t find it odd. “Follow me,” he said, tilting his head toward his Suburban.

J.D. nodded and mounted his motorcycle hurriedly.

* * *

Chris worked away in his office, utterly silent, until the security guard called Tanner to say that pizzas had arrived for them. At the sound of the conversation, Chris suddenly volunteered to go downstairs to get them.

Ezra laughed heartily at that. “I think your jailers would have other ideas,” Ezra said.

He grinned all the way down to the security desk. He knew it was childish, but he did so love to see someone else get the upper hand at Larabee’s expense. Perhaps none of this had really been Chris’s fault, but some small, shallow part of Ezra’s psyche was still convinced that Larabee had much to atone for in getting himself killed and now for risking getting himself fired. No one had asked him to do either one. And he had done both without even the decency to warn them in advance. Besides, he still looked terrible. Served him right to be at Tanner and Wilmington’s mercy. Ezra hoped they sat on him for a good long time.

* * *

If J.D. thought their destination was odd, he didn’t say. He simply dismounted from his motorcycle and followed Josiah up the steps in the dying light of early evening.

“St. Mark’s has been here more than one hundred years,” Josiah said.

J.D. made a noise that he hoped would indicate that he was appropriately impressed.

Josiah pulled open one of the massive front doors.

It took a moment for J.D.’s eyes to adjust to the darkness. He looked around. Saw the last rays of sunlight illuminating the bottom corners of leaded stained glass windows, as all the upper colors darkened into purple and black. Alcoves along the side aisles were lit with flickering devotional candles. Prayers. He remembered. It had been a long time since he had attended a service. But when he was small, his mother had made him go. The habits remained. He genuflected as he followed Josiah into a pew.

They sat in silence for a moment before the profiler said quietly, his voice rumbling in the tall, empty sanctuary, “It’s very beautiful in the daylight.”

J.D. nodded. And wondered if Josiah saw him.

Sanchez turned and looked at the youth beside him. “This is where we were going to hold the service,” he said calmly.

“It was Sarah’s church.” Josiah said with a sigh. “He married her here. And, well, you know how the story ends.”

An ache formed suddenly in J.D.’s throat. But he forgot it as a thought struck him. “Chris is Catholic?” he asked in wonder.

Josiah snorted. “I think he would say ‘was’ Catholic. Seems that he and God parted company many years ago. He was married in a church. Had his son baptized. And from what I gathered, let Sarah drag him here for Christmas services, but that’s about it.”

J.D. stared at the ornate altar and its crucifix. He wondered how Josiah had gotten that information. From Buck maybe. Or hell, for all he knew, maybe Chris actually talked to other people sometimes. He suddenly felt stupid. He was on the verge of calling it off, when Josiah reached into his pocket, and handed the paper over. Just like that.

J.D. took it. Hesitated.

Josiah nodded his head, and J.D. unfolded it carefully.

He was not surprised to feel the stinging in his eyes as he read. But he was surprised when halfway down the list he burst out laughing.

The young agent turned back to Josiah, tears unshed sparkling in the hazel eyes.

Josiah shrugged. “Perhaps I should explain now,” he said.

J.D. shook his head. Momentarily unable to speak he held up his hand. “No,” he said when he found his voice. “Don’t explain.”

He stared at the paper and then back up at Josiah in wonder. “Would you have said that at the service?” he asked.

Josiah shoved his large fists into his pockets and slouched his giant frame down in the pew. Eyes fixed on the altar, he didn’t seem to need to consider the question. Seemed like he had already considered it. “If it were just us, yes,” he said quietly, looking straight ahead. “Stuff like that’s not for the public, though,” he continued.

J.D. nodded. “Don’t think they’d understand,” he said. He couldn’t imagine how it would have played at some official service if someone stood up to give the eulogy and actually called the dearly departed obstinate, irascible, truculent, hotheaded, and harder to budge than two mules in a corn crib.

Josiah shrugged and smiled. “Don’t care if they’d understand,” he replied. “I just don’t think Chris would like us standing around talking about him to strangers.”

J.D. snorted. Truer words had never been spoken.

Josiah turned to the young agent. “I wanted to remember him the way he was.” He paused, wondering if the young agent would really understand. “The way I knew and loved him.”

J.D. nodded. “You mean before the legend takes over?” he asked almost bitterly.


J.D. winced.
But Josiah only nodded to himself. “I like that better,” he said quietly. “I was thinking that nostalgia would rub off all the hard edges and we’d be left with some soft, fuzzy, watered down Chris Larabee to talk about.” He grinned. “But a legend, now that might be a different story.” He mused. “Sort of blow all his bad points and good points way out of proportion.” The profiler smiled. Satisfied.

J.D. couldn’t help but smile, too, as he turned back to the list.

Josiah watched him curiously as he finished reading, and stared thoughtfully at the flickering votives in the alcove. He folded the paper and handed it back to Josiah.

“Thanks,” he said quietly.

“You’re welcome,” Josiah nodded. He looked at the young agent. “Did I miss anything?”

J.D. looked back up at his teammate. Flattered that the older man would ask. “I’ll think on it,” he said.

Josiah smiled toothily at the promise. And hoped that J.D. meant to keep it. He put an arm across the young agent’s shoulder. “Did you find what you were looking for?” he asked.

J.D. nodded absently. “Yeah,” he said.

They sat silently for a few more moments. Then Josiah got up and put money in the poor box and lit a candle. They moved out into the night-darkened streets again.

As they descended the steps, Josiah heard the sexton locking the door behind them. Last penitents of the night, Josiah grimaced. Wondered how the Lord felt about the churches closing up at night. Turned his thoughts to Father Eli. And felt perhaps he owed the man a call. Tell him things had turned out better than he thought.

* * *

In the first pearly gray rays of dawn, the hill rose up, still in shadow, glowering down on the driveway like some primeval gatekeeper. Looking even steeper in gray shadows. But Chris was ready. This morning would be better than yesterday morning. Because this morning he had a plan.

200 steps jogging, 50 walking. 200 jogging. 50 walking. As far as he felt he could go before he would have to turn around.

And he had plenty of time, he realized, smiling, as he mounted the foot of the hill. Run first. Then the barn. Just in case. Buck had promised that one of them would be out to help with barn chores this morning. Chris hoped they’d change their minds. Or forget. But he wasn’t about to lay odds on that.

Both of them seemed plenty determined. Vin was about as stubborn as a person can get, and Buck, well Buck had a one-track mind. It usually ran to women and sex, but lately he seemed to have made Chris Larabee his personal pet project. Chris grimaced. He knew he was being unfair. But he didn’t want to entertain any of the reasons why Buck was sticking so close on this. He just hoped his friend would eventually lose interest and drift on back to women.

In the meantime, he was running this damn hill. And no one needed to know. The sooner he got back into condition the better. And the faster he could schedule his requalification tests. Assuming of course, he had a job to requalify for.

Roughly thirty minutes later he stood head down on his porch. Successful. Hill conquered. More run than walked this time. Much more. In fact he had stopped counting on the way back. And had achieved something resembling a real run on his way back down the monster hill. Which, of course,
he realized now had been a mistake, as he considered whether he could unlock the door in time to lose his medication and the water he drank in the proper porcelain receptacle. Or whether he should just heave into the bushes and have done with it.

The decision was made for him. Razor sharp instincts for danger caused him to lift his head and see the car up the right hand slope just rounding the curve. About to see the ranch in full panorama. He knew instantly that it was Tanner’s jeep. Arriving early.

Chris swore violently, fumbled open the front door and slammed it behind him. He staggered up the stairs toward his room. Breathing hard. He ended up in the master bathroom. Where, as predicted, he lost his pills, and the water. Still swearing, he kicked the bedroom door shut and sank down onto the floor. Pulse pounding, heat pouring off of him, sweating on the hardwood. Trying to calm his breathing, without feeling like the left side of his chest might explode. And waiting to find out if he had been caught.

As he heard the front door open, he realized he ought to take off the running shoes. And probably his soaking wet sweatshirt. He could fling them all into the closet. Of course he would be hard pressed to explain the rest of his soaking wet clothes. Or his red face.

“Goddammit, Larabee,” he muttered to himself. “Look at you. You’re hiding in your room. From Vin, for God’s sake. How pathetic can you get?”

“How much buys my silence?” he asked. Chris didn’t say a word, but his reply was crystal clear, nevertheless.

Vin laughed as Chris went to pull on chore clothes.

“Was it a good run?” the sharpshooter asked cheerfully, leaning against the wall outside the door. The grunt he received in reply was noncommittal. Depends on what you call good, don’t it? Vin thought in answer to his own question.

“You take on that hill yet?” the sharpshooter asked, sly grin still plastered on his face.

“I’ll take that as a yes,” Vin thought. He smirked. “Gonna cost you to keep this from Nathan.”

Chris smirked back at him.
And Vin read the thought loud and clear. *Go right ahead, but the next time you get hurt, your ass is mine.*

He shot Chris a dirty look. *Damn ornery Cowboy.* “Oughta know by now ya play dirty,” he grumbled, pushing off from the wall.

Sharpshooter silenced, Chris’s smirk settled into more of a self-satisfied smile. Dressed for barn work now, he came out into the hall.

Vin held up a brown paper bag. “I brought bagels,” he said with a smile. “Ya want ‘em now or after chores?”

Chris grinned back. “You eat yet?” he asked.


“I’ll bet,” Chris laughed. Tanner was a bottomless pit.

He led the way to the kitchen. At least if they ate first, he could take another round of aspirin. To make up for the ones he’d lost.

Vin didn’t say anything else about food, medication, or exercise. And for that Chris was grateful. In fact, he was grateful that it was Vin who showed up this morning and not Buck. Not that Vin was any easier to shake than Buck. He wasn’t. The sharpshooter just seemed to understand when to stick close and when to back off. But then Vin would understand. He and Chris were alike in that regard. Both preferred to be left alone when sick or hurt.

Buck and J.D. liked to complain. Liked to be worried over, comforted, mothered practically. And Chris couldn’t handle it. When it came to colds, flu, and the irritating little illnesses in life, he was a rotten nurse with a lousy bedside manner. According to Buck anyway. Sarah had thought otherwise. But then, things were always different when it came to Sarah. For one thing she didn’t whine. It was downright embarrassing, for God’s sake, how a simple cold could turn a full-fledged, tough-as-nails federal agent with a license to carry and fire a weapon into a quivering, whimpering, blob of jelly, curled under an afghan. And Chris had seen it enough times to know.

Injuries were a different story, apparently. He knew, because he’d been groused at, cussed out, made fun of, and even called “mother” behind his back, that when one of his teammates was down, his full-on, protective instinct went into high gear. It was not one of the traits he liked best about himself. But he couldn’t help himself. Any more than Buck could help it now.

He sighed. You’d think twenty-odd years of friendship and loyalty would buy the man a little patience and gratitude. Particularly if Chris would stop to think about all that Buck had been through on his account—which he wouldn’t. He sighed again. Pettiness was also not one of his better traits.

He poured himself a glass of orange juice, swallowed it with his aspirin and remaining medication and settled into a chair, watching Vin slide bagel halves into the toaster.

* * *

AD Travis arrived at his office early. Hoping to get work done before the inquiry consumed the remainder of his day. He found a status report from Larabee regarding the progress of briefing Team Eight. He grunted sardonically to read it. Efficient as usual. Terse as always. A string of less pleasant adjectives also flowed through his head as he pictured Team Seven’s stubborn leader. He shook his head.
“If you weren’t worth it, Larabee, I’d have kicked you out on your ear a long time ago,” he grumbled.

And scowled.

Because the man was worth it. Had proven it a long time ago and more times since than the AD cared to count. He was damn good at his job. And Team Seven was a damn fine team made up of a damn fine group of agents. And none of that would be worth a lick if he didn’t somehow show that this mess was not entirely the team’s or Agent Larabee’s fault.

It would have been easy to get Chris off. Play the “dead” card. He wasn’t there. He had no knowledge. Ramirez had said that from day one.

The problem was, Chris had gone to a lot of trouble to somehow make it his fault. If Travis tried to undo it, responsibility would fall back on the team, thus earning Travis the number one spot on Larabee’s shit list. Not that he was worried about that. After all, he was the one in charge, here. And Larabee had been pissed with him before. But never had there been a breach of trust. And to undo Larabee’s politically suicidal, crazy, ludicrous wish to take the blame for his team would constitute a serious breach of trust.

So Travis had to take the hard road. Take a cue from Larabee and keep rolling the blame up the chain of command. He was pretty sure he could roll it off of Larabee’s shoulders. The only problem was if he didn’t succeed at rolling it far enough, or if the directors refused to accept the handoff, he would be the one left holding the bag. And he hadn’t yet made up his mind if he was ready to accept that.

He sighed. And realized he had better make up his mind. There were only three options. Leave Chris with the blame. Give it to the directors. Or take it himself. Only one of those options was completely out of the question. Although he had no doubts about Chris’s willingness to let the blame rest with him, Travis could not see how, in all good conscience, he could do any less for his Team Leader than the Team Leader had done for his team.

Naturally, given that it was Larabee and Team Seven he was talking about, he could do only one thing. Choose the boldest, brassiest, most audacious, outside the box strategy he could come up with. Blindside the whole board of inquiry. And then somehow end up standing when the ceiling fell in. He almost smiled at that. No wonder Team Seven was a damn legend. And the fools didn’t even know it.

* * *

Occasionally, the wheels of bureaucracy could move with amazing efficiency, Director Benedetto reflected over top of his very large coffee cup. In this case, it was hardly nine fifteen A.M. and the board of inquiry had gotten right to the meat and potatoes of the matter at hand. Disobedience. His eyes flicked down to AD Travis at the foot of the table, watching him scribble notes and try to control his own facial expression, as Costas neatly outlined the situation, as expressed during the interviews.

“There is no doubt,” Costas explained succinctly, “that Agent Larabee knew Mission Commander’s Thackeray’s final decision. And that he also deliberately chose to disregard clear orders and deploy his team in a manner he deemed, upon his own authority, to be preferable. No evidence or opinions were offered to the contrary.”

All eyes turned down toward Travis. To hear the other point of view, Benedetto noted, with a suppressed smile. Already the directors had accepted the rhythm that Travis was there, not as the AD
who would be offering discipline along with them, but almost as Team Seven’s lawyer. And Travis was working both sides of the table very hard to make sure it didn’t become adversarial.

“That is correct,” Travis replied.

Benedetto found it a lot harder to suppress his smile when Ramirez and LaForce actually relaxed at hearing Travis’s agreement.

Cranston flicked a glance at Hofstader, who shifted in his chair.

Travis noted the shifting. He added to his statement. “However, it should be noted that it was the original positions for the Team that were overrun when unexpected reinforcements arrived for the militia.”

Hofstader shifted again, still under Cranston’s gaze. “Correct,” he agreed.

Benedetto sipped his coffee.

“But,” Costas demurred. “We don’t know that the position would have been overrun if Team Seven had occupied it in full force.”

Travis turned a baleful glance at Costas. “Can’t we be pretty sure?” he asked. “Reports from Texas indicate that at least 50 and probably twice that number of unreported troops entered the warehouse before the retreat was ordered.”

Cranston flicked his glance back to Hofstader, who nodded. “That’s correct,” he concurred. “According to Texas ATF’s own reports.”

Benedetto looked over at Costas and Hofstader. “Just curious,” he said smoothly, in a voice that clearly indicated that his question would be more than just idle curiosity. “Is Texas ATF taking any responsibility for the error in intelligence?”

Costas shook his head. “They admit their information was flawed,” he said, with no small sarcasm, “But preliminary investigations reveal no breakdowns in their intelligence gathering process.”

It was all Benedetto could do not to roll his eyes toward the ceiling. No small irony, there. Texas was covering its agents’ asses. And he wondered whether Denver was smart or stupid not to follow the example.

“They do admit to a communications error when calling the retreat,” Hofstader offered.

The other directors looked up at him curiously.

A sour expression turned down the corners of his lips. “When they gave the order the first time, they forgot to broadcast to Team Seven.”

Ramirez’s head snapped up. “Forgot?” he asked, his voice showing his appalled disbelief.

“They remedied that within seconds, however,” Hofstader replied blandly.

Cranston shook his head. “Seconds,” he muttered to himself and shared a look with Hofstader.

“Are they taking any responsibility for that?” Benedetto asked.

Hofstader shrugged. “Communication error,” he said with a tight, unhappy smile. “Could have happened to anyone.”
The directors all shifted uncomfortably, irritatedly in their chairs.

Benedetto grunted, changed course. “What reasons did Larabee give for blatantly ignoring the chain of command?”

He aimed his question at Travis. Not sure why he was suddenly taking such perverse pleasure in playing into the illusion that Travis was responsible for explaining away Team Seven’s transgressions. Seemed that was the way the man wanted it to look, and it might turn out to be a damn good strategy if the AD could lull the directors into falling into a rhythm that offered him a last word and a rebuttal for every charge levied against his Team Leader. It was a hell of an idea. The least Benedetto could do was show his respect for it by playing along.

He waited for Travis’s answer and was not disappointed, when he consulted his investigation notes, pointed his finger to the correct lines, and said, as if he were quoting an indisputable expert in the field, “The assigned position gave his agents insufficient cover. He repositioned his team to accomplish the mission commander’s objectives with a minimum of exposure to his team.”

Benedetto tapped the end of his pencil on the tabletop, gazing thoughtfully at the Assistant Director.

Travis cleared his throat. His first sign of hesitation. “Agent Larabee took one of the original positions.”

“Hmm,” Benedetto grunted, leaning back in his chair. He eyed Ramirez and LaForce. Then turned back to Travis. “If the positions were so exposed, why did he take it?”

“He believed it was necessary in order to accomplish the mission objectives,” Travis answered.

Ramirez frowned. “So would I be correct in interpreting this testimony to mean that Agent Larabee himself recognized that Mission Commander Thackeray’s original orders were in fact necessary to accomplish the mission?”

Travis fought to control his own frown. “I don’t think Agent Larabee ever disputed that Commander Thackeray’s orders would have accomplished the mission objectives. He preferred to accomplish those objectives with minimum of risk to his team.”

It was Benedetto’s turn to frown. “Is there a chance,” he asked, “that the mission could have been accomplished more efficiently from the original positions, thus mitigating the problem of the extra militants?”

Hofstader and Cranston both turned toward him and looked at him as if he had just fallen out of the sky.

That’s what I thought, Benedetto thought, keeping the tight little smile carefully off his face. He didn’t need to wait for the answer.

“With all due respect,” Hofstader said quietly but with an odd intensity in his voice, “I doubt any efficiency could mitigate fifty to a hundred extra militants.”

He leaned back and took a breath. “Also,” he said with a bit more detachment. “We can’t forget there were two Texas teams in the warehouse who were also unable to accomplish the mission objectives. Team Seven’s primary objective was to preserve the weapons cache for recovery and, if possible, separate the leadership from the troops. It wasn’t their job to watch the doors.”

“Oh,” Benedetto said evenly. “So the extra militants proved to be more than the other two teams could handle. Thus the order to retreat.”
“Thus no one was watching Team Seven’s back, to paraphrase Agent Standish,” Travis replied.

Hofstader smirked as he interjected, “What Agent Standish actually said was a good deal more colorful and long winded.”

Travis barely restrained his irritated glance at Hofstader.

Benedetto watched with mild amusement, as Travis added, “But the essence of his statement was that backup was inadequate, to say the least.”

He noted suddenly that the AD had turned partially hooded gray eyes in his direction. Benedetto was careful to allow nothing whatsoever to show on his face.

“In any case,” Travis added smoothly. “As I indicated previously, it was Agent Larabee’s position that was overrun when the additional militia troops entered the area.”

There was silence while the directors scribbled notes.

Costas shifted in his chair. “It is clear,” he said, “that Agent Larabee showed a complete disregard for orders and chains of command,” he said. “But it should also be considered that the entire team might have been overrun if he had not redeployed them.”

Cranston and the other directors looked at Costas with generally pained expressions.

“Perhaps,” LaForce conceded. “But this isn’t the first time Agent Larabee has violated orders and regulations in preference for his own methods and decisions.” He turned toward Travis and pointedly asked, “Is it?”

Travis’s mouth formed a perfect straight line. “No,” he replied.

Benedetto sensed the AD’s effort to restrain himself from adding something else. He stared, curious what it was that Travis wasn’t saying.

LaForce seemed not to notice. Having made his point, he added, “Thus the reason we are holding this inquiry.”

Ramirez nodded his head grimly. In agreement.

So the man disdains the rules, Benedetto thought, scribbling on the corner of his notepad. He wondered how Travis felt about rules and regulations. It was clear that the AD had never asked for help in reining in a maverick. Was that because he didn’t consider Larabee’s attitudes and decisions to be a problem? Or was that because he didn’t want to admit that he couldn’t handle his men? He eyed Travis, pretty certain that the man could hold his own in any test of wills. He made a note to himself in the margin and turned back to the table.

Hofstader was rubbing his forehead with one knuckle. The body language of indecision.

Cranston was watching him. Then flicked his gaze back up to the clock on the wall.

He suggested a fifteen minute break, and there was a collective sigh of relief, as the directors secured their notes and rose from the table. Eager to get out of the room, and almost desperate to talk about some innocuous everyday topic. Preferably one that did not incite any strong feelings whatsoever.

They disappeared in different directions. Presumably to check in with assistants and other staff. After all, how could the ATF still be running with so many directors away from their desks? Benedetto
thought sardonically. Dutifully, he pulled out his own cell phone and checked in with his boss.

* * *

At ten A.M., Ryan Kelly called on Larabee’s line and asked to borrow Team Seven for backup. He was apologetic. And careful. He could almost hear Larabee’s teeth grinding over the phone. But he had no choice. They were the only ones currently unassigned. Any word from IA was still pending, so technically, they were on duty, even if Travis had only given them deskwork. Besides, they knew the storefront neighborhood where Team Eight had set up their sting. They were the best option for backup. And Travis had given it a terse nod via e-mail.

“I don’t need all of them,” Kelly offered, when Chris’s end of the line was still silent. “I can leave you a couple at the office.”

He grimaced to himself. Nothing like rubbing it in, he thought. Chris was still not cleared for field duty. Still not cleared to fire his weapon. Travis had made that clear also. Larabee would be staying at his desk.

He knew because he kept his ear to the ground, that the Team Seven Leader was still not cleared to take his qualifying fitness tests. Although Kelly had seen him at the firing range. And was pretty sure that Larabee had already taken one of the required tests. He wondered if Travis was withholding permission to score it. And why?

Chris swore so quietly that Ryan thought he must have actually covered the phone.

“You can have as many as you need,” Larabee said evenly. “I’ll send them over to be briefed.”

Kelly winced. It was evident that Larabee was making an effort to be cooperative, polite even. But he still requested the whole team. If Larabee didn’t need ‘em, he could sure use the help.

“I’ll send them,” Chris replied. Trying, but not succeeding at keeping the edge out of his voice.

Chris hung up the phone. “Buck!” he hollered a lot louder than was necessary for the small office. His hands went reflexively to his own forehead, where there was still a dull ache that had set in this morning somewhere between his run and losing his first dose of aspirin. And had refused to go away. He pulled his hand back instinctively before Buck entered the office.

“Take the team to Team Eight’s conference room for a briefing. They need you to back them up on a bust.”

Buck stared at him. “Are we clear for that?” he asked.

Mistake, he realized as a burning green-eyed glare shot from his Team Leader’s face. He didn’t wait for another word. Let alone to be told that if Chris was ordering it, it needed to be done. But Chris’s voice stopped him at the door.

It carried with it a strange note. Fierce. A warning. Perhaps a threat. He wasn’t sure. “You’re the leader,” he said. “Remember that.”

Buck felt his face flush. Had this been another time or place he would have gone back in and punched him for the cheap shot. Instead he snarled his retort under his breath. But quiet as it was, he knew that Chris had heard it. From experience he also knew better than to expect either an excuse or an apology. He simply continued into the bullpen and gathered the troops.

From his office, Chris watched them leave. And thirty minutes later he watched them return to gather
their equipment. Buzzing. Stoked up. It wasn’t going to be much of a party, playing backup to Team Eight, but it was easy to see in their excitement how badly they needed to get out from behind their desks and out of the office.

He found himself leaning on his doorway, arms crossed. Clenched across his chest.

His eyes fell on Buck. Directing the traffic. He grimaced. His comment had been a cheap shot. He hadn’t even realized what it sounded like until it was out. It took Buck’s retort to make him realize that maybe just maybe, in part, that was what he meant. It was even a cheaper shot because he knew Buck felt bad about this whole fiasco. It took a great effort not to run a hand over his face. Two months ago, he probably would have gone back into his office and forgotten the entire conversation had ever happened. Because Buck would have let him. And now he couldn’t even let himself.

He swore to himself. God damn the whole fiasco. He had tried so hard to make it seem like nothing whatsoever had changed. That “the incident” never happened. It shouldn’t have been so damn hard. After all, it was plain as day that he wasn’t dead. And was standing here calling the shots. But he couldn’t do it. Couldn’t get them to let go, shrug it off, get back to business.

At least once a day, some comment or look from J.D. showed him where some of the kid’s cockiness had chipped away. Rattled. Chris knew the signs. And he knew it would take time back in the field to restore the boy’s faith in his good luck, skill, and possible immortality. Standish and Jackson were both angry. Both simmering under the surface. Standish didn’t even know he was sending Chris black looks pledging retribution for something. Tanner was a whole lot less subtle. Irritatingly cheerful as hell, but with a lot more bite under his comments. Every one of them a warning. Sanchez, saint-like, in what Chris knew was forbearance plain and simple. And Buck. Smothering him. He swore to himself again. And repeated the list of expletives for good measure. He had heard more than he ever wanted to hear, think about, or believe about how Buck had taken the news of his death. And what he had done afterward.

He swore again. Out loud. And apparently with enough violence and creativity that the team stopped and turned. Looked at him. Six pairs of eyes. Expectant.

“Buck,” he said, uncrossing his arms and pushing away from the doorway. Biting the bullet. “I’d like to see you before you leave,” he said. It was an order. But he didn’t phrase it that way. Not in front of the team. Not while Wilmington was in charge.

Buck nodded.

He’d be in when he had a chance, Chris knew. But he was going to have to wait. And Buck made him wait, all right. In fact, he sent the team out before he came in. They hurried out, without a word. J.D. looked like he wanted to say something, but Buck moved him along. Chris nearly grinned. Wilmington knew how to make a point, too.

Buck stood in the doorway. Waiting. Impatient to get going. And suddenly Chris didn’t know what he had wanted to say. Well, he did. But he didn’t know where or how to begin.

Buck stared at him until one corner of the mustached mouth twitched up with a smirk. “I think the phrase you’re searching for is ‘sorry for takin’ a cheap shot at ya,’ Pard,” he said.

Chris’s attempt at a return smile didn’t reach his eyes. Same old Buck. Let me off easy. Stupid fool.

He looked hard at his oldest friend. “Come back safe,” he said firmly. The rest of it stuck in his throat. He hoped Buck could read it in his face.
The other corner of Buck’s mouth twitched up. Not exactly an apology. Not even an acknowledgement of the low blow. Well, not exactly. Not unless you knew how to listen. *Same old Chris. Stubborn ass.*

Buck only nodded. Did not say that he got the message. Hell if he’d let Chris off the hook that easy. And moved off into the hallway with the team.

Chris watched him go, glowering. Buck’s words echoing in his head.

*No,* he thought slowly. *I think the phrase I wanted was ‘take care of them’.* His mouth tightened grimly. *That and ‘don’t get hurt’.*

Not for the first time in his life he wondered what was wrong with him that he couldn’t ever manage to get the right words out at the right time. It didn’t help that he would now get to spend the next hours torturing himself over what was happening out there with Team Eight, while he was stuck here in an empty bullpen, unable to call and check on them.

Not that he didn’t trust Buck. He did. Otherwise he wouldn’t be the second in command. Although he’d just blown a real good opportunity to let him know that.

*There’ll be other opportunities,* he thought.

A cold chill hit him hard. Right in the stomach. And the thought rose up in his brain unbidden, unwelcome, choking off his air supply until he couldn’t breathe. *What if there aren’t? What if you lose him today and that was your last shot?*

He could have run screaming from the office, from the floor, from the parking garage, from the whole damn building. Except that he was hyperventilating, white-knuckled against his desk, trying to tell himself to get a grip. *It’s a back up job. Team Eight are pros. And a thousand other good reasons why there was nothing to worry about.*

*Except bad intelligence maybe. Bad luck. It’s happened before...*

He swore.

*Calm down boy. It's nerves. They haven’t been out of your sight in a while. That’s all. Buck’ll get the job done.*

He tried embarrassing himself into pulling it together, telling himself he was reacting like Sarah the first time they left Adam with a babysitter.

Of course, you could call a babysitter when you got worried. And you didn’t have to worry about blowing their cover. Or giving away their position. Or distracting them when they need to concentrate on avoiding bullets being sprayed at their head.

*Not helpful, Larabee,* he snapped. *Just breathe. Get a grip.*

He let go of the desk and put his head between his knees.

*I should be there...*

The accumulation of carbon dioxide slowly began to quiet his breathing. Rational thought returned. He nearly laughed.

*God help me if the boys find out I had a full-on panic attack over them going on a simple backup job*
without me.

…I hate this fucking job.

* * *

The directors reconvened in exactly twenty minutes. Seated. Ready to proceed. That was one of the nice things about working with directors, Benedetto considered, pouring a glass of water from the pitchers in the center of the conference table. They know the value of time. Their own and that of other people.

Without further ado, they jumped right back into the problem they left off with. Larabee’s track record on obeying rules and regulations.

Benedetto regarded AD Travis from the corner of his eye. This was going to be a hard one to spin. Everyone at the table already knew that Larabee liked things his way. And was prone to just ignoring other suggestions, regardless of how iron-clad, or time-honored the reasons, or the rank of the person making the suggestion. But, he was curious to know, how much of that reputation was earned on solid facts and how much was just plain fiction.

Cranston reiterated the question before them and the directors all turned to Travis.

The gray-haired AD cleared his throat. “I concede that Agent Larabee does have a tendency to bend the rules.”

Hofstader ducked his head to avoid smiling at the obvious understatement.

“And I admit,” Travis continued, “that we have not always been vigilant in seeing that infractions are appropriately dealt with.”

We, Benedetto noted with interest. Meaning: I am not solely to blame here. But ambiguous enough to let the directors draw their own conclusions as to who else was responsible.

Travis gave a keen glance to each director at the table. ‘Perhaps we have to ask ourselves why that is. And whether our own willingness to look the other way has sent the wrong message.’

LaForce, Costas, and Ramirez all flinched. The other directors and AD Travis all altered position slightly in their chairs. Benedetto did not let his smile show. An unexpected chess move. Blame the directors. Although, he gave Travis kudos for including himself. As if to say, “See, although you were in charge, I am willing to shoulder the blame with you.” The directors’ sudden discomfort in their padded chairs showed that at least subconsciously, Travis’s words had hit a nerve.

A second later, curiously, Travis passed up the opportunity to drive the point home. He switched gears instead.

“We should also recall that RMET Seven’s mandate for existence was somewhat different from that of our other ATF Teams. Experimental,” Travis reminded them.

Costas nodded suddenly. Consulted his notes. As if he remembered.

Hofstader stroked his chin. “We did purposely leave some ambiguity in the rules and regulations that governed their performance of duty. Some leeway was allowed in the accomplishment of sensitive missions and the release of sensitive information.”

“But not in adherence to overall policies,” Costas replied.
“And certainly not in obedience to federal, state, and local ordinances,” LaForce added.

Travis nodded, seemingly unfazed by the argument. He paused. Looked at Hofstader. “I don’t believe it has been insinuated that Agent Larabee had violated any federal, state, or local ordinances during the mission under consideration.”

“No,” Ramirez replied. “But his team did.”

Travis nodded thoughtfully. Looked up at Cranston. “Would now be an appropriate time to refer to the IA report and recommendations?”

Benedetto nearly grinned. Damn but Travis was good at switching directions. *So Larabee is, in fact, something of a loose cannon,* he thought, *but let’s not talk about that. Let’s talk about the Team. And clearly, Travis believes that IA report is going to help him make his case.* Benedetto forced down his tactical appreciation and made sure he was wearing his sternest mask, as he took a copy of the report and passed the stack on to the next person.

Cranston called for another brief time out for everyone to read the report thoroughly. So they could all be on the same page, as it were, when they began to discuss it. Two directors took the opportunity to leave, to find somewhere quiet to read, where they wouldn’t be elbow to elbow with someone else. Benedetto spread his on the table, pencil in hand. Staying. Hoping he’d get a chance to hear any on-the-spot commentary from the directors gathered around him. He knew Travis was hoping for the same thing. A chance to gauge the opposition.

* * *

Chris went to the cafeteria for lunch. He had never actually been to the cafeteria. In the whole time he had worked in the building, he had never even set foot in the place. But he was getting damn sick of the four walls of his office and the utter silence of his bullpen. He was prevented from doing much work by the urge to fling himself out of his chair and pace, brought on by unpleasant worries that kept grabbing at his insides until he wanted to hurl everything in his office through the plate glass window behind him. All right, he conceded that was a bit of an exaggeration. But damn wouldn’t it feel good?

The problem was, no matter which direction he turned his brain, there was something unpleasant waiting for him. The directors and the board of inquiry. AD Travis and the board of inquiry. Requalifications. Back to the board of inquiry. Buck. His stupid cheap shot, his bad attitude in general, and of course the board of inquiry. Team Eight and Dowd, back to the board of inquiry. In fact, no matter what he tried to consider, everything came back to and hinged on that damn board of inquiry.

So he decided to leave the room. Get a change of scenery. But not too far. Since the team might have to call. The cafeteria seemed a good choice. Completely new. Unexplored. Virgin territory. Surely that would offer some distraction.

He took his cell phone. He took the elevator. He read the menu and knew he was not going to be able to squeeze anything past that big irrational knot in his stomach. Plus, there were agents, some he actually knew and some whose faces bore a vague familiarity, who kept glancing at him sideways and over their shoulders. Indicating him with a head nod. Talking together in quiet tones. Or worse. The ones who came up and spoke to him. About the damn board of inquiry. He swore he might strangle the next well-meaning bastard who offered him words of encouragement.

He looked around at the various offerings in the various stations. And realized that there was nothing whatsoever that appealed to him in any way. So he chose what Nathan would have chosen for him.
Thinking he sort of owed it to the medic for all the shit he’d put up with the past month. Not that Nathan would know.

He paid, and fled back to his office. To eat at his desk. After all, they might have to call.

All the while telling himself what an idiot he was being. And had been. And in so many ways.

* * *

“Does anyone disagree with IA’s recommendation not to pursue a full-scale investigation?” Cranston asked wearily. It had taken them all some time to wade through the full report and then return to discuss it.

In Benedetto’s opinion, the brief digression into a much less speculative matter was a welcome change. The question before them was concrete. Here is what Team Seven did. Here is the evidence we have that proves it. Here is our recommendation for further action. Cut. Dried.

No one disagreed. And Benedetto was grateful. There was precious little to go on. No doubt an investigation would turn up something. After all, he was pretty sure if IA investigated anything long enough, hard enough, and with enough money and equipment to back it up, they’d find some skeletons in anyone’s closets. Nobody’s perfect. Least of all when they’re stressed out, angry, or under fire. All of which Team Seven had been in the time preceding their unauthorized mission. In his opinion a full-scale investigation with so little evidence to warrant it seemed a waste of resources better spent fighting real bad guys.

Cranston nodded. Scribbled a signature on a final copy of the report. He flipped through to the next pages of recommendations. Looking grim.

Benedetto skimmed through the list again and cleared his throat. “I recommend we table a discussion of disciplinary measures until the conclusion of this board of inquiry,” he suggested.

The other directors looked at him, considering. Benedetto looked back at them impassively. “If we are giving consideration to Agent Larabee’s influence in the Team’s activities, then the amount of that influence should be taken into account in determining the disciplinary measures. Correct?”

Costas and Ramirez both shrugged. Seemed to make sense.

Plus, thought Benedetto grimly, our decisions may change the matter of who is around to do the disciplining.

The other directors muttered either their assent or their indifference.

“Suggestion taken,” Cranston said, putting the report aside.

* * *

The successful completion of a successful bust would normally have brought Buck Wilmington a pleasant end to his adrenaline rush, including wisecracking, high fiving, and generally stupid behavior, which Chris would have ignored, had he been here. Partly because he would have been busy getting everything stowed, cleaned up, and otherwise secured. But Chris wasn’t here. So the stowing, cleaning up, and securing was Buck’s job. Plus supervising.

J.D. was doing some giddy and hilarious touchdown dance in the left hand alley, where Vin was still sitting among the garbage cans where he took out the last fleeing member of their little counterfeiting group, on a world-class flying tackle that painted six straight inches of road rash on his left elbow
Nathan was cleaning the injury. He probably would have been a whole lot gentler on his patient if the sharpshooter hadn’t started in with the usual complaining shit. Josiah and Ezra loaded the last prisoner into an ambulance with a guard from the DPD.

Seems the man broke his arm being tackled by a flying Texan. There’d have to be a report on that. No use of exceptional force, and so on. Buck knew the drill.

He turned back to Ryan Kelly, who was talking to him. Still. He’d lost the train of thought twice now. He only hoped Kelly couldn’t tell. Notes for reports. Quantities of false weapons licenses, dealer licenses, and import licenses secured. Number of prisoners. Positions. And another lead to one of those cases that Team Seven was so generously handing over. He grimaced as Kelly walked away.

“J.D.,” Buck hollered. “Knock off the damn touchdown dance, and get the van secured.”

Doug Stone and Brett Jordan turned in mid conversation and stared at him.

What’re you lookin’ at? Buck groused silently. All you had to do was catch ‘em and turn ‘em in. I gotta get this bunch back and get about a half a dozen reports started.

J.D. left off the dance and came back to the van, but he threw Buck a dark look.

All right. So I didn’t have to shout it down the whole road, but Jesus kid, there’s four million dollars worth of equipment in there. It’s your job to take care of her.

He stalked back to the alley to see how Nathan was faring. He had put that off until his heart stopped beating in his mouth. He had drawn a bead on the fleeing counterfeiter and ordered him to stop. He swore the kid had reached for a gun. Then suddenly, this blur came out of a street level window, like some damn wild animal leaping out of a tree. Buck almost dropped his gun in his hurry to let go of the trigger.

Running into the alley, he lit into Vin but good. Right there. Within hearing of all the neighbors. Like he was some goddamn rookie. “What the hell was that? You never cross someone’s line of fire!”

But Vin only grinned at him, over his shoulder, astride the wriggling, howling, bucking piece of trash, held up his cuffs and said. “Could ya maybe help me out here.”

And to Buck’s great chagrin, as he clamped his teeth together, all he could think was Wait ‘till Chris hears what you did. What was he? Eight? Tattling? Worse yet, given Chris’s parting shot, it wouldn’t help him out much to tell Larabee that he almost shot Vin.

He looked now at the long-haired sharpshooter, grousing at the medic.

You got way too much faith in your team’s reflexes, Buck thought at the young agent. Shaking his head. And he knew he’d have to tell Chris. They couldn’t afford to let anyone get sloppy.

Nathan finished up and closed up his med kit. Crabby now. Thanks to Vin.

Buck turned back toward the van to see Josiah, Ezra, and J.D. talking together. Casual.

Kelly returned from securing his men and his team’s equipment. He shook Buck’s hand. “Thanks for the backup. Good work.”

“Any time,” Buck said with a cocky smile. “Only next time make it more of a challenge.”
Kelly grinned and laughed. Piled his agents into a vehicle and they were gone.

Buck sauntered slowly over to Team Seven’s van.

“Van’s secured,” J.D. said.

“Bad guys off to jail,” Josiah grinned.

“Stubborn fools fixed,” Nathan grumbled, arriving with Vin.

“Stubborn, flying fools,” J.D. snickered.

Buck gave him a look.

And he sighed. He knew that look that J.D. gave back to him. He’d given it to Chris often enough. The words in J.D.’s head were probably different, but the meaning was the same. Don’t know what bug you got up your ass, but leave me out of it.

Christ, but leading this bunch had been easier in Texas. He was immediately ashamed for thinking it.

“Let’s get back to the office,” he said, and climbed into the passenger side of the van.

Josiah climbed into the driver’s seat.

A moment later, they were all settled into the van. And the chatter started up. The post-bust, still-got-my-adrenaline-running, we’re-all-here, nobody’s-goin’-to-the-hospital, we’re-invincible chatter. He leaned his head back against the headrest and listened. Grateful. After what Chris said. He clamped down on a shudder just in time. Refusing to imagine Chris’s face if he were sending someone to the hospital. He tuned back into the high spirits in the back.

“God Vin, you stink!”

“Mr. Tanner, kindly move your malodorous person to the other side of the van.”

“Stop playing with the tape. It’s there to hold the gauze down. Now knock it off.”

“Where the hell’d you put those Twinkies? I’m starvin’?”

Josiah was quietly humming to himself. Everything was perfectly normal. He stared out the window, noticing for the first time what a nice day it was outside.

“Hey Buck?” J.D.’s voice piped up.

“What?” he asked.

“You call Chris?”

Buck turned and looked back at the four agents behind him. “No,” he said, slowly. “We’ll be back at the office in fifteen more minutes.”

There was a pause. Then a quiet, mutter in a Texas accent. Nonchalant. “Prob’ly climbin’ the walls by now.”

Buck swore. Fifteen minutes, dammit! But I gotta check in because ol’ hardhead’s probably having
kittens. But even so, he knew he wasn’t being fair. Especially since on every single bust he had had to sit out for, he had made Chris promise to call him and let him know everything was all right. And every time Chris had said solemnly “I will,” all the while looking at him as if to say “Do you really need to ask?”

Okay, so the simple truth was he forgot. With everything he had to keep track of, he just forgot. Okay?

He pulled out his cell phone and dialed.

“All done,” Buck said cheerfully, as if reporting from the dentist’s office. “Everything went fine.”

“Good,” Chris replied.

Buck rolled his eyes. Sure as hell didn’t sound like a man who was having kittens. But that was Chris. Could be falling apart on the inside, but hell if he was gonna let anyone know.

“We should be back in the bullpen in about fifteen minutes.” Buck reported dutifully.

There was a pause. He could almost see the grim smile on his leader’s face as he said. “You’ll probably want to take a detour through some fast food drive-thru. Unless you want to listen to Vin and J.D. complain.”

He checked his watch again. Chris was right. It was well past lunch and no one had eaten. Except the counterfeiters who were sitting down to lunch when Team Eight burst in.

Buck tuned into the backseat chatter long enough to hear that his two youngest agents were now fighting over a box of Twinkies. The van stash. Which they pretended not to know about, and Chris pretended not to see, although everyone who had to work in the confined space, spent a good deal of time kicking the damn box around, trying to get it out from underfoot.

Buck said a terse goodbye and looked at Josiah. ”McDonald’s,” he said quietly.

Not quietly enough.

Forcing them all to endure Nathan’s diatribe on eating healthy and spending money wisely and Ezra’s plain old pain-in-the-ass whining about the low quality of fast food in general and this reprehensible chain in particular.

“How have a goddamn salad, Nathan,” Buck finally roared out. “And Ezra, either eat or starve. Your choice. Now shutup.”

There was a full second of silence.

It was broken by that damn quiet, Texas drawl. ”Didn’t see ya there, Larabee. When’d ya grow the mustache?”

J.D. didn’t stop laughing until they actually pulled into the drive-thru lane and he had to start thinking about what to order.

Buck hoped Vin realized how lucky he was that Buck couldn’t actually turn all the way around and reach him.
The bullpen was silent as a tomb. They must have felt the silence seeping out into the hall. It stifled the chatter. And they came creeping in like bad little boys out past curfew. Pausing before crossing his door. And then hurrying along to their desks. It almost made Chris smile. But he kept right on working, consulting the set of reports next to his desk. Consolidating and cross-referencing the important information, as the remembered details of each bust played across his mind. Some carrying smiles. Some more like nightmares.

He looked up, as Buck’s lanky frame took up residence in his doorway. Filling it. Both arms out and pressed against the frames.

“How’d it go?” Chris asked.

“Okay,” Buck shrugged. He smiled mockingly. “Were you worried?”

“Nope,” Chris replied.

“Where’s Vin?” he asked a moment later. And Buck grinned. He knew he’d ask. Knew that he had taken stock of each of his agents as they entered the bullpen.

“Showers,” Buck answered. “He had a wrestling match in a pile of garbage.”

“Oh” was all the team leader replied. Simply. But he saw something else in Buck’s eye. He put down the pen in his hand and scanned his old friend’s face. Finding a question. Unvoiced and unasked.

Chris nodded toward one of the chairs opposite him.

Buck pushed the door shut and took a seat and a deep breath before giving his boss a rundown of the day’s bust.

Beyond an occasional nod or noncommittal grunt just to show he was listening, Chris displayed very little reaction to Buck’s narrative. And he said even less.

Buck told him everything. Left nothing out. Despite the fact that no incident had actually occurred, and therefore no incident would appear in the official report, he still detailed to Chris, behind the closed office door, how Vin had crossed his line of fire. And how very nearly Buck had almost shot him. He fought down his fury at remembering the young agent’s cavalier response.

Larabee did not go ballistic.

He could surprise you that way, Buck reflected suddenly, watching him lean back in his chair, lace his hands behind his head and stretch his long legs out under his desk.

“That’s a problem,” Chris said quietly. Agreeing with words unspoken.

He regarded Buck through lazy, half-lidded eyes.

To anyone else, the whole picture would have looked like casual disregard. Apathy. Or worse, callous indifference. His whole body saying, this isn’t my problem. But Buck knew better. The lowered lids, the long, stretched frame, utterly still in the chair, all heralded the process of deep consideration.

Buck waited.
“What did you do about it?” Chris asked finally.

Buck winced. And told him how he had shouted at Vin like the sharpshooter was a rookie who didn’t know how to do his job. And how Vin had been completely impervious.

Chris just nodded.

Buck hadn’t really expected Chris to be surprised at the news. Vin’s attitude problem was nearly as legendary as Chris’s. But neither did the second in command expect what the team leader said next. Quietly. And seriously.

“How do you plan to handle it?”

Buck stared for a long moment, unsure what to say. Chris was right, of course; it needed to be handled. But this seemed somehow all wrong.

The barest hint of a smile played across Larabee’s lips, as he noted Buck’s hesitation. “You started it,” he said calmly. “You finish it.”

Buck frowned.

Chris tilted his head, the corners of his mouth twitching upward. “I’ll help if you need it,” he said quietly. And the smile ticked up a little more as he added, “But only if you need it.”

Then he gave a nod. A prompt. And Buck knew he had been dismissed. Dismissed with orders. Finish the mission.

He glanced back over his shoulder as he left the office. And suppressed a grin. He knew Larabee too well to expect him to apologize for his remarks. For his bad behavior. For his vindictive streak. For pettiness. Apologies from Chris Larabee were rare creatures. Elusive. Almost mythical.

But Buck could easily accept what he got instead: Chris’s statement of faith. Go handle it. I’ll back you.

Then Buck’s eye fell on the dirty paper plate and crumpled napkin. Standing there on the corner of the team leader’s immaculate desk. He turned away and this time broke into a grin.

Wrong again, he thought. Lunch had been Chris’s apology. The statement of faith was free of charge.

Buck passed close to Nathan’s desk on a roundabout trip to the kitchenette. He eyed the medic’s own salad. Now open on his desk. Carefully dressed.

“Looks like the cafeteria’s serving salad today, too,” Buck said to the medic as he passed, just loudly enough for his words to carry back to the office.

A secret, satisfied smile lit Nathan’s face.

Still grinning to himself, Buck returned to his desk with a cup of nice, hot, fresh coffee. As he sat down, he saw Chris sweep the debris, plate, napkin, plastic fork into his wastebasket with the back of his hand. His eyes caught Buck’s, carrying the slightest of gleams.

Buck shook his head.

You’re welcome, Larabee, he thought with fond exasperation. After all, Stud, if you’re gonna actually apologize, you oughta at least make sure the message gets delivered.
The board of inquiry must have recessed for the day. That or reached an impasse and gone up in flames. Or, possibly…

Chris barred the thought from his mind and looked up at AD Travis, darkening his doorway. He looked dour, but he didn’t look like he was weighed down with bad news. Nor did he look particularly livid. He just looked businesslike. And tired.

Chris put his pencil down and waved his boss toward a visitor’s chair.

The AD sat down as if he had walked a mile in too-tight shoes. And Chris was sorry for what the board of inquiry was costing the man. Costing the team. Costing everyone.

But Travis hadn’t come to talk about the inquiry. Or he would have shut the door.

So Chris waited until the AD got settled.

“I came to check in about Team Eight’s bust,” Travis said. He sounded relaxed—or perhaps just relieved to talk about something routine. Something normal.

Chris eyed him, expression guarded. But his voice was even as he replied. “Fine,” he said. “But I’m not the best person to ask. Seeing as I wasn’t there.”

Travis looked exasperated.

Chris inclined his head toward the door. And the bullpen beyond. Toward Buck. “There’s your leader,” he said pointedly.

Travis narrowed his eyes. But Chris refused to bite. Or budge.

“I’ve already been briefed,” he said calmly, picking up his pen once again.

Travis rose from his chair, slowly, and gave Larabee a long, appraising look before he turned toward the door and Agent Wilmington, working at his desk only a few yards away. If the mustached agent had overheard the conversation, he gave no sign.

Travis moved toward the door. But on impulse he stopped. Turned back. The thoughts chasing each other around his brain.

Neither man had mentioned the inquiry. One because he had nothing yet to report. The other because he simply wouldn’t. Would never ask. But he had to be wondering. Wouldn’t be human not to be concerned.

“Don’t give up,” Travis said quietly. Hoping to provide some sort of assurance to questions unentertained, fears unacknowledged.

Chris flashed him a cocky, vaguely threatening smile. That one. The famous one. It was gone in an instant, lasting only long enough for Larabee to reply just as quietly, “I never give up.”

Then he went back to work.

Travis felt a grin split his face for the first time in two days.
Chapter 14

By the time Vin returned from the showers in the basement of the federal building, wearing a change of clothes he kept stashed in his locker down there for emergencies, smelling like soap now instead of rotting trash, the boys were all at work. Busy. The bullpen filled with the hum of report writing.

Well not all of them, he realized as he entered. J.D. was standing at his Josiah’s desk performing what could only be his interpretation of Vin’s takedown of the fleeing perp. Vin scowled. And J.D. must have caught a warning signal from Josiah, because he turned swiftly toward the bullpen door to see Vin standing there. Sleeve rolled up. Road rash clearly visible across his elbow. J.D. turned bright red. Cleared his throat, muttering to Josiah to excuse him and returned to his own desk.

Vin could almost feel Larabee’s eyes behind him, taking stock of his elbow. The man said nothing, although he had seen Vin come in. And in fact had been silently watching J.D.’s hysterical dramatization. Without a single word.

Vin stubbornly said nothing in return. He knew he was going to catch hell as soon as Buck told Larabee how he had crossed Wilmington’s line of fire. Without checking. Without thinking about it. He knew it had been stupid. Hell, he had realized that immediately after he had left the windowsill, but by then it was too late to stop. Besides if Larabee was going to light into him about it, too, then Chris was in for an earful of his own. ‘Cause if they gave out awards for stupid behavior that can get you fuckin’ killed, then Larabee’d be sittin’ in there holdin’ the grand prize trophy right now. He was still scowling as he slid into his desk and entered his password to start writing his report.

The afternoon wore on. And Chris said not one word to him about the incident except a passing suggestion that Nathan put a bandage on his oozing arm. Vin sent the team leader a nasty look as the medic started in on him, still cranky. Chris didn’t seem to notice. And Vin’s scowl got deeper the farther on the afternoon went. Slowly cursing Chris out in his head. For dragging it out. Knock off the mind-game shit, you bastard. Just call me into the office, holler at me, and get it done with already.

He finished his report, last again. Except for Buck, who had to file extra ones on account of the busted arm Vin gave that last guy. But the team leader always had to file extra reports, Vin thought. He flicked a glance toward Chris’s office door, a strange unpleasant feeling settling into his stomach. He shook it impatiently away, and took his printout over to Chris’s office.

Chris glanced over it. Gave a nod. Put it in his outbox. Vin waited. Normally, once the draft was approved, he took it out to one of the typists on the floor to make a final copy. Chris looked up at him, questioningly. And Vin knew the draft was going to stay in the outbox. In fact there were several papers in the outbox. And Vin realized with a start that at least some of them were reports from today’s bust. He gave Chris a questioning look of his own. But the return glance told him to head back to his own desk unless he had something he wanted to say. Which he didn’t. Wouldn’t give Larabee the satisfaction. It was almost 5:30. The others had gone. ‘Bout time for him to head on home, too.

It didn’t work out that way.

“You an’ me gotta talk about today,” the voice said softly, firmly.

And Vin frowned at the speaker. The wrong speaker. The wrong face. The wrong voice. And the wrong pair of eyes holding his. Serious, regretful, and more than a touch angry.
“It’s quittin’ time,” Vin returned just as quietly.

“In the conference room,” Buck replied. Still soft, still firm, ignoring Vin’s challenge.

Vin turned instinctively to look back toward Chris’s office. The blond continued to work away at his computer without a glance their way although Vin was damn sure he had heard. Larabee heard everything that happened in the bullpen. Especially when you didn’t want him to.

Vin narrowed his eyes. But he followed Buck to the conference room.

He took a seat across from the door. Buck took one nearby.

And Vin realized that Chris was not going to be the one to ream him out for today’s bust. Buck was. For a second, Vin felt like someone had just thrown a jug of ice water in his face. A moment later, he was just plain mad.

Buck had gotten halfway through a very calm, rational explanation of why he knew Tanner knew that what he had done was careless and stupid. He had started in on why it was extra important to stay sharp right now, when he saw the fuse light. Ignite. Spark up into the sky blue eyes. Tanner’s whole face flushed. And his whole upper body went rigid. Fists clenched on the table top.

His voice was soft and deadly. “I know how to do my god damn job.”

“Then act like it,” Buck shot back.

Vin’s eyes blazed. “Fuck you, Wilmington, you’re not my boss.”

The dark blue eyes went hard. “I am when I’m leading an operation,” he snarled back.

Vin’s hot retort died suddenly as he glanced up over Buck’s shoulder toward the door and saw Chris. Standing there. Silent. And one look at the set of his jaw and the look in his eye told him he didn’t have a leg to stand on. Chris was backing Buck.

Vin’s left eye twitched slightly. Buck saw the glance over his shoulder. He did not turn to look. 

Damn you, Larabee, I don’t need your help, he thought savagely, expecting an interruption. There was none.

Like a shadow in black, Chris moved out of the doorway like he had never been there at all.

“I know you know better than to cross a line of fire,” Buck said, starting again, regaining his calm with an impressive effort. “My problem is with your attitude.”

Apparently Vin had no intention of following Buck’s lead in remaining calm. His eyes blazed immediately at the comment. “You’re gonna tell me about my attitude?” he snapped in disbelief, his voice growing louder.

The next words left his mouth before he could even stop them. Hadn’t even really thought about ‘em. Just a pat smart-ass remark. Way overused. Not even very creative.

But Vin wished he’d thought about it. Just this once. And he knew his own face was a mirror of the cold shock on his teammate’s face as the words hung in the air between them. Repeating in the silence.

“Who died and left you in charge?”

Shit! Larabee thought, stopping dead in his tracks in his office door. He gripped the frame with both
hands, willing himself not to turn around. Not to go back. He forced himself into his office and down at his desk. Buck needed to handle this. He needed to know how to lead the team. They needed to recognize his authority. In case… Chris smiled grimly at the irony. But there was no escaping the truth, he decided, finishing his thought. In case Buck is left in charge when this is all over.

Yeah, he knew they all said they’d quit if he got fired. It was a nice gesture. But not one he’d hold them to.

The silence in the bullpen was deafening.

Christ, but Vin has a talent for hitting a nerve, Chris thought, closing his eyes momentarily and glad he couldn’t see Buck’s face.

It took all Vin’s will to force his stubborn jaw to move, to get his goddamn pride out of his own way and try to fix what he just did. “I didn’t mean that,” Vin said. Choked. Like it had been forced out of him.

Buck’s eyes were hooded. Dangerous. “You sure ‘bout that, Pard?” he asked. Real quiet. “’Cause it sounded like you meant it.”

Vin stared at him. Buck wasn’t going to let him off. Not this time. Not after his flip attitude at the bust. Not after his outright denial of Buck’s authority. Christ! What was he thinking? He knew Buck had been in charge. If Chris wasn’t in charge, Buck was. That was the rule. Same as it ever was. So why the hell was he so mad about it now?

The answer hit him like a lead weight dropping through his stomach.

Because it was Buck here disciplining him. Buck instead of Chris. The same as it might have been after Texas. Same as it still could be after the inquiry.

He reminded himself that he had promised to quit if they got rid of Chris.

It didn’t help.

He forced his dry tongue around his dry mouth, and found his voice. “I didn’t mean it,” he repeated firmly. He felt his face burn. And it wasn’t with anger this time. “I was out of line,” he said quietly.

He looked back up at the familiar blue eyes still holding his. Not backing down an inch. “Shit,” he said, unclenching his arms, his shoulders, his neck. Unclenching them all. “I was way out of line.”

Buck regarded the sharpshooter silently, the corners of his mouth tight.

Vin took another breath. God, the man was asking a lot! He swallowed his pride. Real hard this time. And it took more than one try to put himself back in his place. Back on the totem pole where he belonged.

“You were right,” he said, softly, one hand still gripping the table top too tightly. “Damn stupid way to get yerself killed. An’ I shouldn’t a flipped off on ya either.”

Buck cocked his head sideways and gave Vin a penetrating stare, looking so much like Larabee in that instant that Vin forced the thought aside to avoid cracking a smile. Or worse. Making some smart remark that would put him right back where he started. Rendering his apology null and void.

“And what else?” Buck asked, knowing he was pushing it now. But hell if he didn’t go all the way, then what happened to his authority next time? Next time. He didn’t want to think about next time.
Not after what Vin just said.

Vin licked his lips. Winced. “Hell, Buck,” he said, nearly squirming in his chair. “I know you were in charge. Guess I just forgot in the rush.”

Buck’s mouth twisted sourly. But his eyes stayed hard. “Next time you forget, you’re stayin’ home,” he said flatly. And he meant it. He didn’t need to ask if Vin understood.

The dark blue eyes bored into Vin’s sky blue ones.

Vin’s head bobbed once. He got it.

Buck got up and left the conference room, leaving Vin alone to feel that horrible sinking feeling coalesce and settle into his stomach like a big, cold rock.

*Guess you don’t got the market cornered on stupid, Larabee,* he thought. *Best move on over, ‘cause I’m down there in the doghouse with ya.*

Chris’s door was only half open. And through the opening he saw Buck leave the bullpen without a word, angry as hell. He could tell by the hunch of the shoulders.

Vin came out of the conference room a long time later. Moved slowly through the bullpen to get his jacket.

He lingered in his leader’s door.

Chris looked up. There was no anger. No reproach. Not even a smirk. As if he had not heard or seen a thing.

Vin recognized the invitation. And grabbed for it with both hands. “’Night Cowboy,” the sharpshooter said simply, managing even a small smile. “I’ll see you in the morning.”

“’Night Cowboy,” Chris returned with a small smile of his own, a tinge of affection coloring the way he said the nickname. “See you tomorrow.”

Vin shrugged into his jacket and left. Standing at the elevators, he mulled over his strange relief, marveling at the way the rock in his stomach had broken up at Chris’s quiet good night. Telling him without saying it that things would be all right. They just had to keep holding on until the next tomorrow.

The thought rolled into his head not for the first time how stupid people were about Chris. He was legendary for his lack of diplomacy. *Guess they ain’t seen ya lead a team,* Vin thought.

Buck returned, more than an hour later, a sixteen-inch sub tucked under his arm like a small torpedo. He sighed when he saw from the hall that Chris’s office light was on. Not that he was surprised. He wasn’t. Just disappointed that he wouldn’t have the chance to nurse his anger and his ego in peace.

He paused in the bullpen doorway, trying to determine what attitude to take as he crossed Chris’s door on the way to his desk. He was reminded again that he had never been much of an actor, as his confident walk halted itself and his feet carried him right to Chris’s doorway. He stood there looking in.

Chris’s computer was powered down. And the team leader was on the couch, head resting on the arm, one hand under his head, as he read. Buck couldn’t quite see the title of the book he held, but knowing Chris, if he was reading it in his office, it was probably some horrible tome intended to add
to his “professional development”.

Buck waited, standing silently. He knew Chris had seen him. And as he waited for the blond to look up, he realized suddenly how disappointed he would have been to find that Chris had left, that he was not here waiting for him. A smile quirked up the mustached agent’s lips unwillingly. He was in the process of searching for some smart comment to make about moms and waiting up at night, when Chris turned his keen green glance toward the doorway.

He sat up. And put the book down. Leaning forward until his elbows rested on his knees. And Buck came into the office. Passed the visitor chairs, plopped his sandwich down on the immaculate desk top and sat down next to his leader on the couch.

Chris ducked his head, turning it to look up at Buck, seated beside him. The green eyes questioning. “How’d that go?” he asked.

Buck blew out an angry breath. “You tell me,” he snapped. And Chris recognized the hard edge of self-reprimand in his voice.

The team leader’s lips twitched up as he leaned back against the back of the couch. He shrugged. “I’ll tell you what I think, after you tell me what you think,” he said.

Buck looked at him sourly. “I think you stay the god damn team leader and I’ll just follow your orders.”

Chris snorted. “Doesn’t work that way, Stud,” he replied.

Buck sighed. “Hell, Chris. I’m a good second in command. I know I am.”

Chris nodded. That was obvious. Otherwise he wouldn’t hold the position.

“But I don’t know if I’m cut out to be the team leader.”

Chris squinted. That should have been obvious, too. If he weren’t cut out to lead, Chris wouldn’t have made him second in command.

The blond blew out a breath, staring at Buck closely for a long moment. Silent. As if carefully measuring what he wanted to say next.

*Here it comes, Buck thought. Here’s where Chris tells me he knows it, too.*

“How don’t you’re cut out for it? Or don’t want it?” Chris asked finally.

Buck looked from Chris to his hands. Wasn’t that a good question? What the hell was his answer?

The silence stretched while Buck considered it. When he looked back up at Chris, the leader could see that his second had not yet figured out the answer.

*Good, Chris thought, with relief. Unsure he could deal with. Hell of a lot easier than trying to change Buck’s mind.*

“IT ain’t easy,” Chris said, shaking his head.

Buck stared at him as if that were the dumbest thing Chris had said this year.

Chris grinned.
He coughed, clearing his throat. “My opinion?” he asked.

Buck nearly smiled at that, realizing Chris was asking his permission to put in his opinion. Buck nodded his head.

“I think you handled it okay,” the team leader said. A corner of his mouth cocked up. “Not great,” he said, and Buck gave a rueful laugh. “But he was out of line. And you put him back.”

“You were standin’ in the door,” Buck replied.

Chris ducked his head. “For a second or two,” he admitted. “But you handled it. Not me.”

Buck regarded his friend silently.

Chris reached out and squeezed Buck’s knee, then reached past him to pick up the book he had discarded at the other end of the sofa.

He pressed the fat, oversized paperback into Buck’s hands. And Buck read the title. Fundamentals of Naval Leadership. He looked up at Chris with a pained expression.

Chris laughed. “You don’t have to read the whole thing. I marked some sections for you.”

Buck turned the book edgewise and saw the dog-eared pages, folded down, meticulously marking passages of particular relevance.

“My favorite sections,” Chris said with a sly grin, as Buck turned back to him.

Buck shook his head, fanning the pages and looking at the dense print. “Don’t suppose there’s much steamy sex in here, is there?”

Chris laughed. “No, but if you work real hard, maybe you can find some new theoretical applications for ‘small group dynamics’.”

Buck shook his head. “That’s stretchin’ it, Pard,” he said.

Chris stood up, extended his arms over his head and yawned. One shoulder popped satisfactorily, and he rolled his neck till it cracked.

Buck hefted the book experimentally in one hand. Solid. Deceptively heavy.

“Why now?” Buck asked quietly.

He wanted to hear Chris say it. That he thought the board would fire him. That he wouldn’t let the team quit. That he wanted Buck to stay and take charge. He wanted to hear Chris say it. Then he would deck him. For not believing in him. For thinking he could make Buck let him take the fall again.

The blue eyes blazed.

Chris looked at him curiously. He frowned and cleared his throat. “Going forward,” he said firmly, still trying and failing to figure out why Buck was looking at him like that. “We need to spend more time and effort on developing your leadership skills.” He paused a moment, then spoke again, his voice low, contemplative. “I think I’ve been remiss on that. I think that was part of the problem.”

Chris shifted his feet and leaned back on the desk. He looked back up at his oldest friend. Frankly. He owed Buck no less than the truth. “Why you took the team AWOL.”

Buck gritted his teeth. “Beats me how the hell you can take my stupidity and make it your fault,” he snapped. “You must have one hell of an ego.”

Chris’s mouth turned down at the corners, but he ignored the comment. “You told me you weren’t thinking about the team,” he said.

Buck’s eyes narrowed as he shot Chris a dirty look. “I wasn’t,” he snapped back.

“You’re going to learn to,” Chris replied. “You’re going to learn to think about the team. To put them first. Whether they like it or not.”

Buck glared at him.

Chris held the gaze unflinching. He knew damn well what he was saying. And furthermore he knew Buck did, too. *Put the team first. Like you did when I told you to get out of the warehouse. You just forgot it when you got back home.*

Buck did not reply. But he folded the book up against the inside of his wrist. And gave Chris a look. Anger. And remorse.

Chris’s stomach turned. He hated that look.

“When do we start?” Buck asked after a long moment, his voice carefully neutral.

“Two or three years ago would have been good,” Chris snorted, looking suddenly down at his shoes.

Buck exhaled quietly. Maybe it wasn’t all about what happened in Texas then. Or was it? Seemed like everyone on the team had realized an awful lot of things since that damn rocket exploded.

He eyed Chris curiously. Wondered what Chris was coming to realize, besides that he needed to train his second in command more thoroughly.

“So, you gonna send me my course syllabus?” Buck asked with a smirk he didn’t quite feel.

“Soon,” Chris said quietly. “But you can start reading anytime you want.”

Buck snorted.

Chris reached for his jacket on the back of the door, Sliding into it, arms outstretched.

And Buck noticed that there was no wince in the stretching of ribs. Nor had there been a moment ago, when Chris had reached toward the ceiling. Chris had stopped limping some time ago, too. And his face had even acquired some color.

“What?” Chris asked, suddenly uncomfortable under the stare.

“You look better,” Buck replied, appraisingly. “Still too damn skinny, though,” he added after a second.

Chris glowered at him. “I’ve always been too damn skinny,” he retorted. But he couldn’t stop the flush that climbed up his cheeks.

“Just sayin’,” Buck said with a small smile. He held up the book in a short salute as he left the office,
grabbing his sandwich from the desk.

He turned back on impulse. “Got a real big sub here. I could share.”

Chris looked at him in exasperation, knowing damn well he couldn’t eat half of that sub if he tried. Whatever Buck and Vin thought, he was not a bottomless pit. Gaining weight was going to take time. Even Raine had said so.

“I had a big lunch,” Chris offered. His excuse. Lame.

And he could see it in Buck’s face. He rolled his eyes toward the ceiling and slid his jacket back off again.

“I can’t possibly eat half of that…that…” words failed him as he caught a glimpse of the sheer size of the sub as Buck unrolled it from the paper. He broke out laughing. “But I’d pay money to see you eat the whole thing!”

Buck got a glimpse of it for the first time, unwrapped. “Damn!” he whistled, craning his head to take in the entire view. “No wonder it was so expensive.”

There must have been two pounds of cold cuts dripping off the edges. Plus all the other fixings. He hadn’t been paying attention when he ordered it. Probably nodded his head at everything the girl behind the counter had offered. He couldn’t remember. He had been too busy being mad. And reaming out Tanner in his head.

Chris was laughing so hard he broke out in a coughing fit.

Buck tried real hard not to notice.

Raine had warned him. Said that even healed, Chris’s injured lung was going to be a magnet for every cold, cough, and niggling little virus that came round next winter. Best thing he could do would be to start getting back into shape. But Buck didn’t tell Chris that. Nor did he tell Raine that Chris was already working on it.

Buck shrugged, shoved away the thought. “Haul out your wallet, Stud. ‘Cause here goes nothing,” he declared, picking up the first half and opening his jaw so wide it cracked. And Chris seated himself in Vin’s chair, watching in amusement. Wondering if he couldn’t manage just a bite or two himself.

* * *

Early morning again. Dawn turning the eastern sky pink. A few birds were making a racket in the trees by the house. A pair of robins flew in and out of the slender maple that stood near the end of the little plot where Sarah’s flower garden used to be. Chris listened to the sounds of the world waking up around him, as he stretched out and went over this morning’s attack plan for his run. Today he wanted to get past the hill. Wanted to start on that next leg through the tunnel of trees. So he needed enough wind to get to the downhill.

He was considering his walk run pattern, when motion on the road above the property caught his eye. Tanner’s jeep flashed into view, winking in and out behind the trees like a mirage, until it left the cover and turned onto the stretch of road offering a panoramic view of the ranch.

Chris frowned. It was way too early for Tanner to be here for barn chores. He hadn’t even had his run yet. And he sure as hell wasn’t about to put it off now that he was stretched out and had a plan. He watched the jeep come down the gravel drive.
He scowled. Barn help was nice, especially in light of the fact most of his teammates also had a horse boarded in his barn. Putting in barn time was supposed to be part of the deal. But if this was some ploy on Vin’s part to prevent him from getting in his run, Vin had another think coming. He didn’t need the help that bad. Didn’t really need it all, come to think of it. Not because he wasn’t up to it anyway.

He walked slowly out to the Jeep as Tanner braked it to a squealing stop. He jumped out. “Thought I mighta missed ya,” he said hurriedly, reaching into the back of the battered vehicle.

“Almost did,” Chris replied calmly. “And might yet.”

Vin apparently found what he was looking for, and held them up with a look of triumphant glee. His own pair of battered running shoes.

“Thought I’d run with ya, Pard,” Vin said.

“No,” Chris said flatly, and began moving up the driveway.

Vin grinned. He toed off the sneakers he had on and took his time lacing up his trainers, knowing he’d catch up with Chris in one good sprint.

Chris knew it, too. And wasn’t surprised to find Tanner suddenly jogging at his side. He gave him a glare.

“Don’t need a pacer, Vin,” he growled. “And you sure as hell aren’t here for the workout.”

“No,” Vin replied slyly. “But I was curious how an old man like you was gonna make it up that there hill with one bum lung.”

“Fuck you,” Chris said hotly. And picked up the pace. Throwing his whole attack plan right out the proverbial window.

He was gasping hard by the time he hit the top of the hill. But he didn’t stop, pause, or reverse direction. He was going down that winding road between the trees, come hell or high water. They could pick him out of the ditch if they had to, but he was sticking to the plan.

Tanner followed right at his heels.

They waited on a corner for a dump truck to rumble by.

Damn Chris could dig his heels in, Tanner thought irritatedly, listening to the hard, rasping breath. Larabee’s gray tee shirt was already damp with sweat.

Already Tanner regretted his smart ass-comment. Ought to know better than to throw a challenge in Chris’s face. ‘Specially when he’s down. Should tell Chris he doesn’t have anything to prove. Not to me. Not to anyone. But, hell, if anyone oughta know that, it was Chris, Tanner told himself. The man never went out of his way to impress anyone.

He realized suddenly he was jogging alone. Chris had crossed the street, while Vin had been thinking, and was now moving down the road. Unreasonable bastard, Vin grumbled, crossing over and starting on the gentle, winding downhill.

He watched the back of Chris’s tee-shirt. Chris was moving slow as hell, at least in comparison to normal. But Vin had to give him points for keeping a steady pace. Rock solid. Even after that beast of a hill, which had even taken Tanner by surprise.
Hell of a way to start out every morning, Cowboy, he thought. No wonder yer so damn cranky all the time.

Vin set himself a nice, easy pace. It didn’t take long to catch up.

Shoulder to shoulder. He matched his steps to Chris’s

“How far we goin’?” Vin asked, the road winding away ahead of them, twisting around corners like some giant drawing of a snake.

Chris glanced at him from the corner of his eye. “Why?” he asked mockingly. “You tired?”

“Just curious,” Vin shrugged.

“If you’re gonna run, then run, Tanner,” Chris replied irritatedly. Meaning shut up. He sure as hell didn’t have any extra breath left for conversation this morning. Christ, even Vin oughta know that.

Vin shut up. Grinned even. For a guy who had a reputation for not talking much, his teammates sure did tell him to shut up a lot.

He glanced back over at Chris. Still keeping his pace. And still breathing hard, but no longer harsh. Not like at the top of the hill.

Better know your limits, Larabee, Vin thought grouchily, as they rounded the next curve, side by side. I sure as hell ain’t carryin’ ya back.

* * *

Thirty-five minutes later, Chris was lying on his back in a patch of sunshine on his side deck, lazily stretching his hamstrings. Feeling his heartbeat slowing down again, a little at a time. And listening through the screen door as Tanner rifled the kitchen in search of cereal with a satisfactory sugar content. Eventually the sharpshooter gave up and came out, a cup of chocolate pudding in one hand and a spoon in the other.

Chris grinned up at him.

Tanner grinned back.

“I’m impressed, Chris,” the sharpshooter said around a mouthful of chocolate.


Vin glowered back at him, pointing his spoon. “That ain’t funny,” he said. “Besides,” he added, wounded pride showing in his face. “I was serious.”

Chris wrinkled his nose, trying not to look disgusted with himself. “I know you were,” he said, rolling to a sitting position, and rising to his feet. “That’s what makes it so pathetic.”

“It takes time,” Vin pointed out.

And Chris grimaced. “Do you have any idea how tired I am of hearing that?” he asked.

Vin shrugged. “Don’t make it any less true,” he commented.

“I know,” Chris sighed, pulling open the screen door.
He stopped, one foot still on the threshold, looking back at his friend. A man he trusted completely. With his life. And other things infinitely more important to him. “Not that I don’t appreciate you coming out here,” he said quietly.

Vin’s guffaw startled him, as the sharpshooter spit out a mouthful of pudding onto the grass.

“All right, fine,” Chris groused. Damn mind-reading sharpshooter. “I don’t appreciate it. But I was tryin’ to be polite.”

Vin snickered. “Don’t bother. It ain’t natural on ya.”

“Shut up,” Chris retorted but he couldn’t help smiling, as he turned and went back into the house.

Vin stayed in the chair, finished his pudding. Practically licked the cup clean. Then he went to join Chris at the barn, noting triumphantly that Chris had not told him not to come back tomorrow.

* * *

AD Travis rubbed his scratchy eyes with his palms. Reviewing his notes. And his tactics. Only two hours to go before they reconvened for what promised to be the most brutal day yet of this inquiry. Brutal, lengthy, and, no doubt, to be filled with rancor and discord, elbow deep in the thick of the thorniest issue. Disobedience. Insubordination. And general disregard for procedures and regulations.

And what was Travis supposed to say to that? He couldn’t exactly deny it. Larabee did indeed have a penchant for disregarding rules, regulations, procedures, and direct orders. It was well documented by the official reprimands in his personnel file. And backed by a number of unofficial reamings and reprimands as well.

But still, Travis could count on the fingers of one hand the number of times his loose-cannon team leader had actually been wrong. Worse yet, Larabee knew it, too. In fact, Travis had personally seen the agent sit through a dressing down from hell, biding his time until he could say coolly, struggling to keep the smirk off his face, “But I was right.”

Fact was, Larabee trusted his own judgment over set strategies and time-honored tactics. And especially over bureaucratic procedures. And Travis knew full well why. He had been a cop. But he wasn’t a cop. Not at heart. At the core, Larabee was a soldier. A tactical team leader heading up an elite squad. Like he’d never left the SEALs. Only now the war was against gunrunners, kidnappers, and a host of other criminals who preyed on innocent people, or viewed them as acceptable casualties in the drive for quick and easy money. And if Larabee had to break some rules to meet the mandate under which RMET Seven had been founded, he would. Better rules broken than lives lost. Or ruined. Those consequences Larabee could live with.

And up until now, the ATF had tacitly agreed. Given Chris his head. Until now. Until they got a glimpse of what Larabee’s legacy might be. Until they got scared. Thought maybe they had let Larabee and his team drift too far from their control.

The problem was, Travis knew deep down, that they were looking at the issue from the wrong angle. Like the optical illusions Travis had loved as a child. Is this a picture of two faces or of a vase? Do you see a beautiful young woman or an old hag? And it was up to Travis to turn the picture around for them. Make them see what he saw.

He sighed. Two hours before they reconvened. Two hours to keep endlessly rolling the evidence around his brain and looking for a way into the directors’ heads.

* * *
Vincent Benedetto chose a large, dark hot chocolate for his caffeine high this morning, topped with a mound of whipped cream. There’d be plenty of time for half-rancid ATF coffee during the all-day session of the inquiry, coming up in an hour and a half. He reviewed his notes. Considered the IA recommendations again. Drumming the fingers of his left hand, while holding his hot chocolate in his right hand, he assessed and re-assessed the evidence before him. Forming a picture of Team Seven. Fitting the patterns and pieces together and pulling them apart. Switching directions. Shifting facets. Changing perspectives, as the hour slipped by.

Then he packed up his papers and his notes, the ones he made during the inquiry sessions. And the ones he had scribbled this morning.

“Bound to be an interesting day,” Benedetto told his assistant with a grin as he passed.

She gave him a slight shake of her head and a smile. And returned to her work without comment.

* * *

They took their places at the long wooden table, quietly, with few greetings and even less discussion. Travis noted immediately that they all looked tired. Strained. Grave. Mirroring the tension he knew was evident in his own face.

Cranston brought the meeting to order with a brief review of the notes from the last meeting. Asking if there were any issues to be revisited. Or requests for clarification. Careful, Travis observed, to keep his summations objective, factual. As if they were meeting minutes. Probably were. Probably typed up late last night by an assistant earning some nice, fat overtime.

Travis took stock. On the issue of Agent Larabee giving his badge and gun to a known militant: Guilty as charged. Mitigated by issues of self defense. One down. On the issue of Team Seven going AWOL: Guilty as charged. Disciplinary action to be taken as a result: Tabled. On the issue of Larabee’s penchant for disobedience and insubordination: Guilty as charged. Might as well give that one up. The fallout of his maverick streak: Remaining to be judged.

By ten thirty, Benedetto noted, Director LaForce already had his hands clamped around his temples. He was glaring at Travis and talking between his teeth. “Might I ask, Assistant Director Travis, just how it is that a Senior Agent and Team Leader regards regulations and procedures with so little respect? That alone smacks of ingrained insubordination.”

“Sighed. “I would say that it is not an ingrained lack of respect, Director LaForce, but rather a belief that rules and procedures are not an end in themselves. They exist in service of the Bureau’s mission. And the mission should take priority over procedure.”

“Perhaps it is, but you’ve examined my agent’s record. Has he slipped off the line?” LaForce asked, his voice rising in disbelief.
“I call it vigilantism,” Ramirez muttered none too quietly.

“If you recall, Agent Larabee did not participate in that action,” Costas pointed out, making an effort to keep his voice even.

“But would his team have behaved that way had Larabee shown more of a regard for rank and procedures?” LaForce snapped back.

“Gentlemen, gentlemen,” Cranston said sternly, calling the directors back to order before they began shouting at each other.

“Surely we all agree that the attitudes and behaviors of the team are greatly influenced by the attitudes and behaviors of the team leader and his chain of command,” Benedetto said smoothly.

Heads bobbed in silent agreement around the table.

Ramirez tapped his pencil on the table top. “You would agree then,” he said thoughtfully, turning toward AD Travis, “that, as the team leader, Agent Larabee’s predilection for disregarding regulations and procedures and disdain for chains of command influenced his team to behave in the accustomed way in the team leader’s absence.”

Travis hedged, slowly replying, “It is Agent Larabee’s goal that his team run in his absence as efficiently as it would in his presence.”

At Benedetto’s right, Costas clamped his teeth together and quietly inhaled. Hofstader narrowed his eyes.

“In the same manner as if he were leading them?” LaForce clarified, paraphrasing Chris’s own statement.

“Ideally,” Travis answered, the corners of his mouth tight.

Ramirez put down his pencil and looked at Cranston. He turned back to Travis. “Therefore,” he said carefully, “In effect, Agent Larabee has trained his team by example to disregard regulations and chains of command that appear to interfere with getting the job done.”

“I’m not sure that was his intention, no.”

“Nevertheless, you must concede that it appears to be an outcome.”

“That’s one way to look at it,” the AD bit out.

Benedetto eyed Travis at the sharpness of the retort. And found himself willing the gray-eyed AD not to lose his cool now. He nearly smiled at himself for his lack of objectivity.

“One way to look at it?” LaForce asked, still hot. “Given Agent Larabee’s own adamant—and might I add startlingly arrogant—past assertions and demands, that he be allowed to set the standards for his team and that he alone enact discipline, then maybe he alone should be held responsible for their actions.”

By the looks on their faces, Ramirez and Costas seemed to be judging the merits of that suggestion. Hofstader was staring down through the table top.

Travis’s teeth clamped together, as he forced himself to calmly reply, “If that is the decision of this board of inquiry.”

He knew he was glaring at LaForce. He couldn’t help it. But really it was Chris he was glaring at. In
his mind’s eye. For forcing him to do this. To put him on the hook for the team’s actions. Now he had just had to figure out how to get him back down.

Cranston exhaled slowly, refusing to give in to the temptation to call a recess.

Benedetto looked at Travis curiously. “You said that was one way to look at it?” he repeated.

Travis blinked up at him. And saw the director give him a barely perceptible nod. “There are other ways to view the situation, of course,” he said, clearing his throat. He pulled himself up a little more authoritatively in his chair. “For example,” he began. “You make it sound like he led lambs to the slaughter.”

Costas and Hofstader were both eyeing him now.

“You could make the case that individually, the agents of Team Seven would be a discipline problem on any team.” He paused and looked around the table. “Or should I say on any other team.”

Cranston regarded him with interest. The senior director cracked a smile. “Would you be intimating that Larabee’s leadership strategy actually keeps his agents in line?”

Benedetto tried hard not to smile himself, as Cranston’s eyes flicked to him with an expression that rested halfway between amazement and indignation.

Travis seemed to sense the thin line he was walking on, but he forged on ahead. “Yes,” he said. “Not merely intimating, but saying it outright. That Agent Larabee may have his faults, but you can’t deny that he has control of his team.”

“So this departure from good solid police work is because Agent Larabee temporarily dropped the reins,” LaForce snapped back, unable to keep the sarcasm out of his voice.

”Had the reins pried from his cold, dead hand, is more like it,” Hofstader retorted.

This time the smile did flash across Travis’s face. So quickly that Benedetto figured he was the only one who saw it.

“Like it or not,” Travis said, trying to control the tension in his voice, “despite individual reprimands, the team’s records show that their work has been within the bounds of proper law enforcement. Considering the casework they have been assigned, their work has been very clean.”

Hofstader raised an eyebrow at Travis. “Within bounds perhaps,” he conceded, “But a better word to describe their work might be exuberant.”

Travis’s mouth formed a straight line. And Benedetto couldn’t be sure whether that was a grimace or an attempt to suppress a grin. From what Benedetto knew and from what he had been reading in preparation, exuberant was a damn good word to use in describing these agents’ approach to catching criminals.

“Nevertheless,” LaForce interjected trying to get his arguments back on track. “It gives me no comfort to think that RMET Seven is a loose cannon only being held back by the force of one man. That they esteem the personal agenda of one man more highly than the mandates of the entire organization that employs them or the rules and regulations that govern them.”

Ramirez looked from LaForce back to Travis. “I have to agree,” he said calmly. “Team Seven’s prevailing attitudes are reflective of Larabee’s. And their actions likewise showed a complete disdain for law enforcement procedures.”
For the first time, Travis’s cool exterior began to crack. Heat flamed up into his gray eyes. “And you won’t concede there were extenuating circumstances?”

Hofstader looked at Ramirez, who shifted in his chair and tried to use a conciliatory tone, replying, “Yes, I agree the circumstances here were a bit unusual.”

Costas stared at Ramirez. “Unusual?” he asked, his voice suddenly cold and brittle. “That’s an interesting word choice. I don’t suppose YOU have ever lost a comrade in an armed conflict.”

Hofstader actually reached down the table and laid a hand on Costas’s arm.

Ramirez stared at the unexpected interruption. “My point was,” he continued, struggling to return to his train of thought. “Our interest here is not in the unusual. It is in the question of whether the prevailing attitudes of the team are an ongoing problem. And is it the result of Agent Larabee’s continued leadership?”

Benedetto flicked a glance down to Travis and then back at Cranston.

Travis’s eyes narrowed. “So,” he said smoothly, a hard edge in his voice. “If I may paraphrase. Is RMET Seven a bunch of mavericks? And is Agent Larabee to blame for it?”

Ramirez flinched. “That’s not how I’d put it,” he returned.

Travis opened his mouth to let fly a retort worthy of Buck Wilmington, when Cranston stretched his hands across the tabletop, palm down.

“Gentlemen,” he intoned. His voice was neutral, but his glance held a warning. “Please remind yourselves of where you are and the purpose you serve.”

There was silence. The accusation was left hanging. No one took it back. No one denied it.

Benedetto crossed his arms over his chest and leaned back in his chair, stretching his legs out in front of him. *All the cards are on the table now,* he thought, regarding Travis through partly hooded eyes. *The die is cast. The Rubicon is crossed. How will you play this out?*

* * *

*Larabee’s got a headache. He must have. I know I do,* Doug Stone thought sourly. *That or the twitching in his left eye means he’s about to shoot those two idiots in the corner.*

He turned and regarded Wilmington and Dunne. Arguing.

“You’re saying I screwed up the surveillance!” Dunne shouted in outrage. “You were there, too.”

“I never said anything of the kind,” Buck snapped back. “I said we missed Falco’s exit on the left.”

“Right,” J.D. retorted hotly. “I heard what you said, but what you meant was J.D. missed it. He was watching the left.”

“I said ‘we’ kid. Not ‘you’. How the hell could you think ‘we’ means ‘you’?”

“By your tone of voice,” Dunne snapped. “And stop calling me kid.”

Brett turned to look helplessly at Doug.

Larabee’s hard gaze had been riveted on both men during the course of the entire argument.
Unbelievably, he said nothing. Didn’t move a muscle, except for that damn twitch in his left eye. Doug wondered whether he was going to have to shoot them himself. That would probably get a rise out of the Team Leader.

Larabee’s gaze flicked to Stone. And for an absurd, uncomfortable second, Doug thought maybe he had said that part out loud.

Wilmington leaned suddenly forward in his chair and took Dunne by both shoulders. And said something that no one in the room heard except J.D. Dunne. The kid glared daggers back at Wilmington but settled down into his chair. His face a mask. All business now except for the red flush and the black looks.

“Anyway,” Buck said smoothly to Doug and Brett, as if no argument had taken place. “Falco got away. We didn’t see him leave. We assume it was to the left outside our camera angle. The evidence left behind was inconclusive.”

In mid-nod, Doug noticed that Larabee was gone now, too. Just like Falco, he thought. No one had seen him go.

Twenty minutes passed before Doug’s cell phone rang. Gustin. Thank you, sweet Jesus. He answered it tersely. “What? I’m in a meeting.”

Brett looked at him curiously. Wilmington and Dunne looked perturbed at being interrupted. He held up a forefinger. A second later he reached for his pen and began scribbling.

“No kidding?” he asked. “Dumb shit. Tell Giordano to pick him right up. I’ll come down and sit on him till he gives up the answers.”

He hung up the phone and looked apologetically at Dunne and Wilmington. “Sorry,” he said. “Got a break in a pending case. Local DPD found our penny-ante witness. Boy’s in way over his head and don’t even know it.”

He looked over at Brett and then back at Wilmington. “Brett can stay,” he said.

Brett sent him dirty look.

Dunne looked from Brett to Buck and back.

“Why don’t we break for now,” Buck suggested.

Brett nodded.

Both agents from Team Eight grabbed their notes and pens and left, Stone in the lead, practically skipping as he headed for the elevators.

Predictably, Chris was leaning in his office doorway as his agents exited the conference room afterwards. He gestured to Buck with one hand.

Buck sighed. But did as he was bidden.

Plopping himself in the visitor’s chair he steeled himself to answer what the hell he thought he was doing getting into an actual argument with J.D. during a conference with another team. He supposed it wouldn’t fly to tell Chris that J.D. was the one doing all the arguing. Hell, it was only Team Eight. Like those boys don’t ever fight with each other in front of other teams. He glanced up as he realized Chris was still standing there, silent, with a flicker of a smile quirkling up the left side of his mouth.
He handed Buck a stack of six manila folders. One for each agent. Each containing the official reports from yesterday’s bust. Buck looked questioningly back up at Chris.

“They need to be read, approved, and signed off on,” Chris said, the smile growing wider.

Buck winced. “Ain’t that your job, Stud?”

Larabee’s expression grew into a grin. And not a nice one either. “Yes,” he said smoothly. “But seeing as we’re beginning your training in earnest, and seeing as you were the team leader on the operation, I thought this would be the perfect opportunity to get your feet wet.”


Chris grinned so wide it showed his dimples. “Welcome to my world, Stud,” he said.

Buck looked at him with a pained expression. And Chris almost felt sorry for him. Almost.

“It won’t be so bad,” Chris said. “I’ve already read them over. I made some notes for you.”

He paused and looked slyly at his second in command. “I’ll sit with you and talk you through the whole pile,” he offered.

“If?” Buck asked. He knew that offer wasn’t coming free.

“You buy the drinks,” Chris finished.

Buck shook his head. Grinned. But still shook his head. “No way. Raine’s one tough cookie, an’ I ain’t takin’ on her and Nathan. You don’t drink yet. Sorry.”


Shit! Buck thought. He knew the smile on his face mirrored Chris’s. Couldn’t help but catch that damn grin. He looked down at the stack of folders in his hands. “Where?” he heard himself ask.

“Johnny Ringo’s,” Chris answered.

Buck shook his head. Ringo’s. Hadn’t been there in a coon’s age. Not since Sarah and Adam died. Chris stopped going there. Didn’t want anyone he knew watching him try to drown his rage in whiskey. But the flames in his memory refused to be extinguished.

Buck peered back up at Chris. Obviously the team leader had been thinking it over. He raised his eyebrows. “Why Ringo’s in particular?”

Chris shrugged. Sly. “No one we know there knows anyone we know here.”

Buck shook his head. Damn, Larabee, he thought. You are one sneaky piece of work.

“Deal,” he said finally, console himself for giving in by remembering that he wouldn’t be suffering through the reports alone.

Chris’s voice stopped him as he neared the office door.

“You’re gonna have to stop arguing with him,” the voice said. Quietly.

Buck looked back over his shoulder. “I know,” he said regretfully. And he did know. Chris wasn’t talking about the meeting. That had been a mistake. One that he let continue a little too long. He
knew that.

What Chris was talking about was the daily arguing. The day to day crap that kept the whole damn bullpen entertained sometimes. Even Chris. Yep, arguing with J.D. was one of Buck’s favorite pastimes.

Like Buck used to argue with Chris back when they were partners on the DPD. Not that Chris had ever really participated much, now that Buck thought about it. But at least he had put up with it. Even instigated occasionally. Until Chris quit on him. Stopped cold. Couldn’t tolerate the teasing any longer.

It had happened in the blink of an eye. And Buck could name the day. The same day Chris stopped smiling. Stopped talking. Stopped eating. And stopped caring whether or not he lived to see tomorrow.

Buck shuddered. He knew this was different, but damn it, he wasn’t going to give up being who he was. If arguing with J.D. made him laugh, then hell if he was going to give it up. But how the hell was he going to figure out where to draw the lines?

He glanced back up.

Chris’s smile had melted away. Something flashed across his face, as he met Buck’s eye. Fleeting. Something Buck seldom saw there. It stayed only a moment, not long enough for Buck to put a name to it. Not until he was halfway back to his desk. Then he named it. Sympathy.

Buck plopped the folders into his lock drawer. On top of the book Chris had handed him. His mind mulling over this new direction. And not sure at all he wanted to go there.

* * *

Benedetto watched Travis, LaForce and Ramirez fighting hard not to lose their cool. Costas sat in his chair, eyes flicking back and forth between the directors and AD Travis, his face working through several expressions, conflicting each other, but each one darker than the last. Hofstader’s glances at Cranston were steadily growing in concern, as the voices around him grew steadily in volume. But Cranston’s attention was riveted on the AD at the other end of the table. And Benedetto followed his gaze.

Travis’s knuckles had turned white where he gripped the edge of the table, but his face remained composed.

“Just say what you’re afraid of,” Travis said, his voice quiet, holding a harsh edge.

LaForce paused in mid-sentence and blinked.

“What,” Travis repeated. “Say you’re afraid of a team that owes its loyalty to their leader.”

“That’s not...” Ramirez began, irritated.

Travis never raised his voice, but his words drowned him out, as if he had shouted. “You’re afraid of a team that isn’t loyal to you. And your chains of command. And your regulations.”

The AD’s grey eyes hardened with his voice. “You’re afraid of a team that doesn’t give a damn about policy or politics or you or all the brass in the whole damn world. You’re afraid. Because they’re loyal to Chris Larabee. They’d do just about anything for him. And that’s a threat to your superiority.”
“It’s a threat to the public safety,” LaForce bit out.

Benedetto saw the twitch in the corner of Travis’s lip. But the AD’s voice was calm and clinical. “In what way?”

LaForce practically spluttered, stabbing his finger down against the tabletop. “By Larabee’s admission, the team ran itself the same way it would have if he were there!”

Travis’s eyes narrowed slightly. “You believe that he would have taken his team AWOL?”

“In similar circumstances,” LaForce replied hotly. “Yes, I do.”

“As do I,” Ramirez agreed.

Benedetto’s eyes flicked to Costas. Now staring hard at the tabletop.

Travis’s lips twisted into a grimace. His palms flat against the tabletop. As if he were going to leap out of his chair. “You’ve got his records. So show me. Show me a similar circumstance. Show me where he took his team to conduct an unauthorized operation.”

He waited, while they shifted in their chairs.

Cranston’s voice floated down the table. “You know there are no similar circumstances,” he said softly.

Benedetto nearly snorted. Damn straight, he thought. Or this would’ve been one short inquiry.

“So you’ve suddenly got a problem with his ethics, then,” Travis snapped, sarcasm leaking through his voice. “Or are you just afraid of loyalty?”

Ramirez’s hand hit the tabletop. “You want to know what I’m afraid of?” He exploded. “Some half-cocked group of ATF-armed thugs exacting vengeance on whoever they want to in the name of what they interpret as their right!”

“It wasn’t a mission of vengeance!” Travis exploded. And realized, as six pairs of eyes jerked toward him, that he had said too much.

He caught his breath.

Cranston’s voice was hard now. “What would you call it?” he asked.

God damn it! Travis thought and fought his way up through the sudden wash of fear. Rocketing back to their faces. The week they came back. He should have known. Of all people, he should have realized what was about to happen. He had convinced himself that he had been too busy to notice. But now he knew. Some part of him had somehow deliberately cast a blind eye. He himself had given them the opportunity to go.

He forced himself to think straight. To follow his strategy. Heart pounding, and in it up to his waist now. Always had been. Just hadn’t shouldered his full share of the blame yet.

He was shocked to feel the corners of his lips unaccountably trying to twist upward. He fought it tooth and nail. Knowing if he threw the directors a smirk now they’d throw the book at all of them.

But some detached part of his brain wondered what that smirk would look like. Because from the inside for just a moment, he wondered if this was what it felt like to be Chris Larabee. He shook it away with dread. The last thing he needed right now was Larabee. The boy had gotten himself into
enough trouble. Problem was he was never any good at getting himself out of trouble. That, and Travis thought as a chill went up his spine, he never really wanted to find out what it felt like to be Chris Larabee.

He leaned forward in his chair as he answered the question, letting his eyes get hard. Letting the anger crackle through his softly spoken words. “They carried out an investigation already connected with the events in Texas. An investigation into a known arms dealer, whom they have had under investigation for more than two years, and whom they had reason to believe had knowledge of the sale of rocket launchers to the militia.”

“This so-called investigation was unauthorized!” LaForce roared, incredulous that they could argue so simple a point.

“Because you wouldn’t authorize it!” Travis roared back.

“It was vengeance! Plain and simple,” La Force countered.

Travis’s eyes blazed. “It wasn’t vengeance. It was a failure of leadership!”

“We agree on that,” Ramirez said quietly. Deadly.

The glare Travis turned on him would have made a lesser man run. Further comment died in Ramirez’s throat, and Benedetto wondered whether Ramirez was even aware of the sudden silence that filled the room. Like the instant of pause between the click of the detonator and the coming explosion.

“Your failure,” Travis replied, the words thundering into the conference room. “Yours and mine. We failed them.”

LaForce opened his mouth to speak. Benedetto sneakedit a glance over at Costas and Hofstader, both of whom watched with rapt fascination as the hard grey eyes turned to LaForce. And Travis continued speaking, as if LaForce were not even there.

“We failed them,” he repeated. “Buck Wilmington led them back here. Brought them home. Just like Chris Larabee would have. Brought them home and waited for us to lead them. And we refused.”

Costas stared at Travis. Eyes haunted. He licked dry lips and reached for his water glass. From the corner of his eye Benedetto saw the fingers tremble.

“We refused to hear their requests or their offers of assistance. We failed to recognize the leadership systems already in place. We failed to honor a good agent’s memory and tried to replace him over the heads and backs of his team. Without consulting them. Without giving them any regard whatsoever.”

“They needed to be brought under control,” LaForce countered.

“They were under control!” Travis snapped. His tone carrying more than just anger now. “We told them to come back. They came back. We told them to take a week off. They took a week off.” He paused. Swallowed. Stared hard at each of them. “We shut them out. Told them that information about Texas was on a need to know basis.”

The directors looked at each other in consternation. “That decision had nothing to do with Team Seven,” Hofstader replied calmly.

“Texas had everything to do with Team Seven!” Travis shot back. “From the minute they came back, all we did was send them the message that we didn’t trust them. And didn’t give a damn what
they wanted or what they thought.” His voice cracked. “Or what they felt.”

Travis glared at them. All of them, regardless of rank, role, or seniority. And found himself breathing hard. The only sound in the silence around the table.

He willed his voice to be steady. “And now you’re afraid you can’t control them.”

Benedetto watched the gray eyes narrow. The AD waited. Paused. Held their attention like a master. “And you can’t,” he bit off with utter finality.

A thin smile lifted the tight corners of Hofstader’s mouth.

Costas turned eyes toward Travis that focused a thousand miles away.

Ramirez and LaForce stared, questioning, waiting.

“You don’t control men like the agents of Team Seven,” Travis said, shaking his head sadly, as he saw the lack of understanding on Ramirez’s and LaForce’s faces. “You lead them.”

Ramirez shook his head in consternation. But he did not speak.

Benedetto smiled as thinly as Hofstader, flicking a glance toward the grizzled field veteran. “Like Agent Larabee?”

Travis looked up at him. “He brought them back here,” Travis replied firmly. “And they have owned up to everything they did. Doesn’t that speak volumes for his ethics? And the direction of his leadership?”

Benedetto did not answer. Instead he asked a question. “As directors,” he said calmly, his words belying his smile. “Do we not also have the right to lead them?”

Travis turned his glance to Benedetto. Eyed the thin smile and frowned. His shoulders twitched in a slight shrug. He gave the only answer he could. “I suppose that will be determined by this board.”

Benedetto inclined his head slightly toward the AD. His eyes allowing a flash of something that to AD Travis looked suspiciously like pride.

Long after the AD had left. Been dismissed and left the board to their deliberating, Benedetto pondered those last words. A brilliantly noncommital parry to his direct thrust. Deferentially leaving the decision to the board, yet rife with implications for the results of their decision.

When the board broke up for the evening, he returned to his office. It was already well after quitting time, when his director, his supervisor, and friend of many years appeared suddenly in Benedetto’s doorway like a gray shadow in his overcoat. Soundless. Wordless. Benedetto smiled to himself before looking up. With a gesture of his head, the man beckoned Benedetto to accompany him to his office, where Benedetto relaxed into a chair and began to fill his boss in on Travis’s final plays in the game of political chess and watched his boss’s expression glow his appreciation.

* * *

Buck waited anxiously by his stack of file folders, feeling somewhat foolish, as he gazed around the room. Already a half a dozen DPD officers had stopped by his table to offer exclamations of disbelief at seeing him. Here. Alone. Some of the offerings less friendly than others. He narrowed his eyes and eyed the door. Where the hell is Larabee? he asked himself for the third time.
The third time was the charm. The bell rang and in he came from the darkness outside. He had gone home to take care of the horses. He had changed his clothes but not his color scheme. Black jeans, black tee shirt, black windbreaker. Like a shadow that broke off of the night.

It took Chris a fraction of a second to spot Buck at a booth to the left of the door. He was stopped by the bartender, who stretched out both hands to him in an exclamation of delight that Buck could not quite catch due to the racket by the dartboard to his right. Chris’s own hand was lost in the bartender’s two-handed grip. The bartender called out to someone else, not letting go of Chris’s hand but pointing at him with the other. Buck craned his neck but could not see whom it was that Chris gave an embarrassed, almost shy wave to, before ducking further into the collar of his black jacket and moving hurriedly toward Buck.

Buck grinned into his beer mug.

A moment later a waitress appeared with a bottle of whiskey and two shot glasses.

Chris looked at her questioningly.

“It’s the good stuff,” she said with a smile and a wink.

Chris frowned at her. Buck frowned at Chris. Then he saw the bartender throw an OK sign in their direction.

“It’s on the house,” the waitress said with a shrug, eyeing Chris curiously.

Chris looked embarrassed as he thanked her. She bit her lip as she smiled back, then turned on her heel and strode away.

Buck grinned even wider, having an even harder time hiding it in his mug.

“Looks like I’m off the hook for the drinks,” Buck cracked, wiping the foam from his lip.

Chris gave him a mock glare. He admired the black label before pouring himself a neat shot. Before he could lift it from the table, a hand shot out and covered the top of the glass.

“You eat?” Buck said sternly.

Chris eyed his old friend, doing his best to hide his exasperation. “Yes,” he replied.

“All right then,” Buck responded, removing his hand from the top of the glass.

They waited until Chris had downed his shot. Slowly. In no particular hurry. Then he signaled to the bartender that it really was the good stuff, which made the pot-bellied old codger grin before returning to wiping down the long wooden bar.

Then Chris turned his attention to the stack of folders. Buck took out his pen and opened a pad of paper. They leaned over the reports together. Buck doing most of the talking and all of the writing.

They didn’t get quite as far as Buck had hoped. Chris didn’t even finish his second shot. He pushed it aside. And Buck could see from his eyes that it was because the blond was having trouble focusing.

Buck finally called it quits when Chris let loose a jaw-cracking yawn that he tried to hide by turning away. Buck shook his head and snorted.

“I’ll drive you home,” he said with a laugh.
“Sorry,” Chris apologized, looking down at the reports still left unreviewed.

“No as sorry as I am,” Buck muttered. It was meant to be a joke, but he saw the look that flitted across Chris’s exhausted face. He sighed and clapped his old friend on the back. “Come on.”

“What about my car?” Chris protested.

Buck shrugged into his own jacket. “We’ll pick it up tomorrow.”

Chris shook his head. “I can drive, Buck,” he said. “I didn’t have that much to drink.”

“I know,” Buck replied calmly. “But I don’t want you falling asleep at the wheel.”

Chris’s mouth tightened, but he didn’t offer any more excuses. Just jammed his hands into his pockets and followed Buck toward the door.

They stopped at the bar with the bottle. The bartender frowned. “Light night?” he asked.

“Excuse Chris,” Buck said with a grin. “He’s a bit of a lightweight tonight.”

Chris smiled down at the floor, as the bartender told him he’d save the bottle for their next visit. But the green eyes flashed up his gratitude, as Buck handed the man Chris’s keys.

They nearly got to the door, when suddenly it was blocked by a three-foot-wide wall of muscle.

Buck didn’t even let his eyes travel up to the face. He didn’t need to. It was like a bad dream repeating itself. Chris glanced over at Buck before giving a small sigh. He looked steadily at the floor, as if concentrating on the dust in the cracks between the floorboards. From the corner of his eye, Buck saw him shift his weight slightly.

“Well, well, well,” the man slurred. Swaying slightly.

Buck flicked a glance back to Chris. Chris said nothing. Still staring resolutely at the floor. He sighed and looked up at the red-faced man, knowing now that there would be no reasoning with him. He was drunk. And the drink had made him careless.

“Outta the way Wilmington,” the man growled. “I owe your pal there a new face.”

Buck looked back at Chris and grimaced.

Looking back, he liked to think that Diesel had had it coming to him that night. The last night he did his drinking and drowning at Ringo’s.

“Come on Jimbo,” Buck said quietly. “You don’t want to go there.”

“Jimbo” Todd had gained at least thirty pounds since Buck had last seen him, lying under a broken chair, writhing and holding his face. Chris sitting back against the wall of the now empty bar, staring at his hands, blood pouring from his nose and a cut above his eye. It had taken Buck nearly five minutes to convince Chris not to swing at him, too, before dragging his drunk friend out the door, peeling out of the driveway at the bartender’s insistence just ahead of the sirens wailing in the distance and coming closer each second.
In the middle of his reverie, Diesel reached out with a surprisingly swift backhand, catching Buck off guard and sending him staggering hard into the bar. Scattering barstools. Todd went after Chris, windmill arms swinging.

The instant he saw Buck hit the bar, ribs first, folding against the wood, Chris felt something inside him snap. He didn’t even know what happened until he saw Todd’s eyes, large, bulging above his collar, beneath him on a bench seat. His neck angled awkwardly against the wall, Chris on top of him, pinning him, one elbow across his throat, his right palm raised by his own ear. Poised. Stopped. An instant before he would have driven it right into Todd’s large ugly face. And probably killed the man.

He noticed the roar of his own hard breathing in his ears. And wondered vaguely what had made him stop. He regarded the frightened eyes. Heard the deafening silence of the bar. Felt Buck more than saw him. At his back.

He leaned into Todd’s face. “Don’t ever lay a hand on one of my men,” he whispered, the venom dripping from each syllable, his face close enough to smell the alcohol, the sweat, the smell of fear.

He felt Buck touch his shoulder. Lightly. And he knew what it meant. He paused only long enough to make sure he was understood. Then he removed the elbow. He scrubbed the raised hand back through his hair before shoving himself off of the man, off the seat. Away from the table. Without once removing his hard green gaze from Jimbo’s white face.

Chris shrugged his jacket back into place and moved toward the door. He looked up at the bartender, the regret written all over the fatigue lines in his face.

The bartender smiled tightly and shook his head. “He won’t be coming in here anymore,” he said solemnly, jerking his head at Diesel who was glaring at them both.

They climbed into Buck’s truck and locked both doors. Chris bent over double, arms wrapped around his middle and Buck had a long moment of panic before he heard the sound. Laughter. Hard. Choking.

Buck knew it was the stress of the last few weeks. The backlash to the sudden release of the pent up anger. The exhaustion. Medications and alcohol. But Chris’s laughter was as it always was for Buck. Utterly contagious.

The tears streamed helplessly down his cheeks and into his mustache, until they both were leaning back against the seats and struggling for breath. A second later, Diesel got hauled out the door by his big buddies, some of them cops Buck knew. Chris and Buck instantly ducked down behind Buck’s dashboard, all but holding their breaths while three men threw Diesel loudly and belligerently into the back seat of a big sedan and roared off into the night.

They raised their heads cautiously. Buck craned his head slowly around, pressing his face against the glass.

“They gone?” Chris asked. Almost whispered.

Buck nodded. And turned back.

They caught each other’s eye suddenly and in their guilty glances found the sudden ludicrous understanding of their own stupidity. Hiding in Buck’s truck like guilty twelve-year-olds.

It set them off again. They were out in the parking lot for another fifteen minutes, roaring with laughter and telling each other old stories about the good old days.
In the safe harbor of his own front hall, Chris closed the front door behind him and leaned back against it, a small smile still stuck to his face. He gave a sigh as he pushed off the door and went into the kitchen, flicking the kitchen light on. A plain brown paper grocery bag sat on the table where he had left it. He had found it on the porch when he got home earlier that evening.

For the second time he read the note taped to the top.

_Dear Chris,_

This is a little weird, but I thought you should have these. They belong to the team, I guess. At least they sent them to us. But I thought you should have them. If you don’t want them, I understand, and I’ll take it back.

J.D.

A self-conscious postscript clung to the very bottom of the paper.

_P.S. Either way, I’d rather you didn’t tell Buck._

He smiled to himself, carefully opening the bag, as he carried it up the stairs.

At first he didn’t understand what he was looking at. A small photo album with the odd title handwritten on the cover. Then he opened the cover to find the collection of cards. Each one carefully inserted with one side under the plastic sleeve on each page. So it could be opened and read.

He knew what the cards were the instant he’d laid eyes on them. He’d seen way too many. Sent too many. Received too many. Remembering the collection he had cast from his sight, but could not bring himself to throw away. They drifted into limbo in a box shoved somewhere in the back of a closet. Somewhere here in this house. And he refused to try to remember where.

He focused again on the album in his hands. He knew what they were, but he did not understand. Yet his fingers trembled as he slowly turned open the first pale pastel painted cover and read the words there. Uncomprehending he turned to the next card and the next, reading the names. _“To Team Seven”, “To Buck, Vin, Nathan, Josiah, Ezra, and J.D.” _All the same. Or a variation of the same.

Almost as if unable to stop himself, he began to read the words. Preprinted lines chosen in card stores. Or carefully handwritten. Words people chose to describe him. Or to say… What? That they were sorry? Sorry for what?

He choked. Seeing another set of cards. Another funeral. What good did “sorry” ever do?

He closed the cover suddenly. Cold. Staring but not seeing until the words on the cover sank unconsciously into his brain. _John 15:13._ J.D. had written it. He was sure. Chris knew what it was. All he had to do was go look it up.

But his eyes fell on J.D.’s note, stopping him. He could understand giving the cards away. After all, what do you do with them when it was all some terrible mistake? An awkward situation if ever there was one, he mused, thinking it over with irony. But he couldn’t wrap his brain around why J.D. would want them back. But there it was. _If you don’t want them, I’ll take it back._ Or why he shouldn’t tell Buck. Of all people, Buck would get the joke, and God knew, J.D. loved a joke.
He was in the master bath brushing his teeth when the thought carried itself to a conclusion. J.D. loved a joke. And he would have told it to all of them together. To have a larger audience. Then when they had all groaned and thrown whatever was handy on their desks at him, he would have pouted and insisted it was funny.

But it wasn’t a joke. At least it wasn’t meant to be. J.D. hadn’t presented it in front of the team. Although every page of it had been put together with care, he had wrapped it like rotgut liquor, like low-grade pornography, in a plain brown bag and left it on the porch when no one was around to witness. Left it with a note to explain. Like an abandoned baby. With instructions to give it back rather than discard it. And a furtive request not to tell Buck.

He didn’t know why exactly, but if the secret was important to the kid, he could keep it. He put the book on the rocking chair by the window. Staring at the cover. Reminding himself to look it up tomorrow. And wondering if he really would. Wondering if he owed it to the kid to read the whole thing through.

It was late. And damn he was tired. For a second, he thought of just throwing himself spread-eagled on top of the bed with the lights still blazing, but he managed to get into a pair of soft sweats and a tee shirt and to turn off the lights. And to crawl under the sheets.

A second later he checked his alarm. Wouldn’t do to be late to meet Tanner for that hill. He fell asleep before the grin even left his face.
“Bagel?”

“No.”


“No.”

Tanner’s cowboy boots echoed in the concrete cavern of the ATF parking garage, a staccato counterpart to the list of suggestions piling up against the stubborn refusals from the taller agent beside him.

“Tasteless Power Bar? I got it! Big ass cup of coffee?”

“Jesus, no.” This time the man actually blanched.

Vin opened his mouth one more time, but got cut off while still inhaling.

“No.”

“Yer supposed to eat,” The Texan grumbled.

Silence.

“Damn big hill takes a lot out of a man.”

More silence.

Vin scowled threateningly now. “Hard headed son of a bitch, I ain’t pickin’ ya up off the floor when ya pass out.”

“Fine,” the man in black snapped.

Tanner’s eyes narrowed, as he continued to mutter. “Leave ya there. Cover up the coffee stains.”

The green eyes turned on him then. “Get in the damn elevator and shut up.”

Lawrence Jameson and Brad Fraser from Team Five stood by the elevator doors and sourly watched the two men approach. Larabee, ramrod straight, striding down the corridor between the parked cars like he was freakin’ Moses. And his little Texas lap dog slouching along beside him. Arguing. At eight in the morning.

Fraser grimaced. What the hell was there to argue about at eight in the morning? He wasn’t even talking to Jameson this early. He eyed the man next to him. Hell, neither of them would be in this early except the boss had called an early meeting, on account of he was leaving early for a vacation and felt it would be better to inconvenience the whole damn team rather than sacrifice an hour of his precious vacation time.

Fraser turned to Jameson and watched the undercover agent watch the approaching agents from Team Seven.

“Jesus I hate those guys,” Jameson said finally, with a disgusted nod toward Larabee. “Look at him.
You’d think he doesn’t know that he’s gonna have his ass handed to him.”

Fraser scowled. “Please,” he muttered. “God’s gift to the ATF?”

Jameson snorted. “Maybe he figures he’s kissed enough of Travis’s butt to keep him safe.”

Fraser snorted outright at that one. “Doubt he could bend over far enough what with that big stick up his ass.”

He paused, adding thoughtfully, “Hope he lands on it when they toss him out of here.”

Jameson burst out laughing.

The two agents from Team Five were still snickering when the doors slid open. They stepped inside. Brad made an attempt to get the doors to close before the other two arrived, but it didn’t pan out. Larabee and Tanner arrived in the nick of time.

Neither of the two new arrivals said anything. They pressed the button for floor eleven and stood glowering straight ahead at the doors, identical scowls plastered on their faces.

Fraser craned his neck to catch Jameson’s eye, mouthing the words “Lovers’ quarrel” behind their backs.

Jameson ducked his head and covered his laugh with a cough. Fraser was an ass. Pleased with his own wit and at getting away with it, too, already Jameson could see him winding up for his next trick. You could always count on Fraser to turn a winning hand into a losing one. He was just going to keep pushing it until one or both of the two agents from Team Seven turned around and throttled him.

Jameson grinned to himself. That alone would almost make coming in early worth the trip.

Sure enough, Fraser sidled up on the other side of Tanner and looked crossways over at Larabee. “Hey, Jameson,” Fraser said idly.

Team Five’s undercover agent blanched. The twit wasn’t supposed to incriminate him. He clenched his teeth, but Brad didn’t even notice that his teammate didn’t reply. He just continued blithely on. “Heard they’re lookin’ for security guards at the mall. Know anyone who’ll be lookin’ for a job?”

Jameson watched Tanner’s shoulders drop straight down. Loose at the joints. Rolling his neck slightly. The Texan said nothing. And neither did Jameson.

Fraser leaned around Tanner. “How ‘bout you Larabee?”

Larabee appeared to have gone deaf, for not a muscle twitched to indicate that he had heard.

Not that Brad would notice his good luck.

And he didn’t.

*I’d shut up now if I were you, Fraser.* Jameson thought, fully aware of the warning inherent in the silence. But then Team Five’s sharpshooter had never really been all that good at reading the signs. At least not before the shooting actually started. Truth to tell, Jameson wondered that any of them had survived this long with Fraser watching their backs.

True to form, Fraser did not know when to quit. Hardly even able to contain his laughter, he bit out, “’Course when ya fill out the application, ya might wanna leave out that part about givin’ the guy
your gun while you run for cover.”

The laughter was short lived.

The elevator came suddenly to a screeching emergency halt. Red emergency lighting suddenly flowed down over them. Alarm bells started ringing somewhere beyond them. Jameson braced himself against the hand rail as the car jerked to a stop. Regaining his balance he glanced up at Brad, who was now braced against the wall, as well, assisted by both of Tanner’s fists in his collar.

“Wanna go Brad?” the Texan drawled softly, a maniacal grin widening across his face as he added, “I’m sure yer buddy here will tell yer boss why yer late.”

Jameson’s glance flicked to Chris Larabee. Was he going to say something? Do something? Apparently not. The whole damn elevator car lurched, stopped. Bells were going off for Christ’s sake, and the guy’s just standing there. Hands in his pockets. Still glaring at the doors. Like nothing in particular was going on.

Disgustedly, Jameson turned back to Brad and Tanner.

Brad swallowed, as the blue eyes drilled into him. He wondering vaguely if there was any truth to the rumor that Tanner knew ten ways to kill with just one finger. He glared at Jameson. Thanks for the backup, asshole!

Jameson was contemplating exactly how to explain to Senior Agent Terry Jakes that Fraser was late for their meeting because he had to gather up his scattered internal organs from the elevator shaft, when Larabee finally decided to react. About damn time, Jameson thought, as the tall blond slowly turned away from the door and looked over at Tanner and Fraser. Casually. Almost disinterestedly.

Then he turned back to the control panel and flicked the emergency stop switch back into place. The elevator started up. He put his hands back in his pockets. The bells stopped ringing. The red lights faded, restoring normal lighting to the elevator, as they began to rise.

Security came over the speaker asking if everything was all right.

Jameson didn’t say a word. Fraser still stood up against the wall, Tanner’s fists against his throat. Unable to speak even if he had wanted to.

“Sorry,” Larabee said smoothly to the voice. “Everything’s under control.”

Incredibly, the voice accepted the idiot’s word and disconnected the speaker.

“Leave it,” Larabee said quietly, a moment later, his gaze never shifting from the numbers flashing on the panel above the door. And for a moment Jameson wondered who he was talking to. Then Tanner’s hands unclenched from Fraser’s shirt. And the wiry little Texan backed off exactly one half step. And stood there motionless, still drilling Fraser with a murderous glare. Even Jameson felt sweat break out on his forehead.

Vin turned the glare suddenly on Jameson, who although he felt that he would be perfectly justified in pointing out that he had not said one single word, decided, however, not to speak at all. He turned slowly, discreetly away to face the other wall, leaving Brad to face his fate.

A soft ding announced their arrival at the tenth floor. The doors slid open. Never one to look a gift horse in the mouth, Jameson slipped out the doors, not even waiting for them to open all the way. He disappeared in the direction of his team’s bullpen, eyes fixed straight ahead.
Fraser’s eyes shifted nervously toward the open doors. Still held in space by the threat in Tanner’s blue eyes. He swallowed as the doors began to slide closed again.

Larabee inserted his right hand into the space between the doors, pushing the bumper. They slid open again, and Larabee smiled coldly.

This time Brad did not hesitate. He tore his eyes from Tanner’s face and sidled off the elevator. A trail of sweat trickled maddeningly down into his collar, but he did not give either of the men behind him the satisfaction of seeing him wipe it away. Instead, he hurried off, planning to redirect his anger at his bastard teammate who had abandoned him.

Tanner turned the glare back on his team leader.

Chris regarded Tanner from the corner of his eye, a little smirk escaping onto his lips, as he returned his gaze to the closing door. “Lotta paperwork for assaulting a federal agent,” he said with a shrug. “Know how ya hate paperwork.”

“Dumb ass,” the sharpshooter muttered.

Chris smiled tightly to himself, knowing damn well the Texan was no longer talking about Fraser.

The door opened onto the eleventh floor, and they strode side by side up the hall to their bullpen.

* * *

Fifteen minutes later, the doors slid apart again on the eleventh floor main corridor, spitting forth J.D. Dunne, propelled along by the long arm of Agent Buck Wilmington.

The young agent was still spluttering out some sort of response to something that had been said by someone who was now halfway to the twelfth floor without benefit of Dunne’s reply.

“Bastard!” J.D. shouted at the chrome doors, flinging his jacket against them.

Wilmington didn’t blink. He picked up the jacket and thrust it back into his teammate’s hands, turning the youth toward the bullpen doors.

J.D. stared at him incredulous. “How could you just stand there?”

Buck sighed. “I’ve heard worse.” He walked faster toward the bullpen, hoping to force Dunne to keep up with him.

J.D. was spluttering at him now.

Buck stopped and came back two steps, forcing himself not to roll his eyes. “Kid…” he said.

“Don’t call me kid!” the youth snapped back, eyes flashing.

“Fine,” Buck replied, vowing to himself for the third or fourth time this morning that he was not going to raise his voice. Not going to shout, or holler or growl, snarl, or snap. And he was most definitely not going to hit anyone. Not today. Today he would be calm, cool, and in control. Stoic. Steady as a rock.

He lowered his voice and leaned in toward J.D. Keeping it even. “Every slug who’s ever had a grudge against Chris, or you, or any other member of this team is gonna come crawlin’ out from under their rock today to take a poke at you. So unless you want to spend your whole damn day thinking up snappy comebacks or smacking idiots in the mouth, you’d better just make up your mind
to ignore ‘em.”

J.D. glared at him, furious. He stalked away without another word.

Buck rolled his eyes toward the ceiling and took a deep breath, willing himself to think happy thoughts. The face of Jimbo Todd came to mind, last seen the night before at Johnny Ringo’s, sprawled over the bench seat, Chris Larabee’s elbow in his neck. That did the trick. His composure restored, the tall mustached agent continued on toward the bullpen. Now, he reflected, if only he could just fix the hard, cold lump that had taken up residence in his stomach.

Vin was at his desk when J.D. entered the bullpen. That did not surprise him. He had seen the beat-up Jeep down in the parking garage. But he was not quite prepared to see Chris. Of course Buck had mentioned something that morning about leaving Chris’s truck at some bar last night. But J.D. hadn’t really listened. And it seemed such a backward thing for Buck to do, all things considered, that he assumed he just hadn’t heard correctly.

At any rate, he had forgotten it, especially after that cheap shot some agent he didn’t even know threw at them in the elevator. Forgotten until now. When Chris stopped short and pinned a thoughtful, penetrating gaze in his direction. Already angry and red faced, the young agent felt the burn crawl even higher up his cheeks.

He dropped his backpack at his desk, feeling foolish now. Certain that Chris’s searching look had to do with the album. A mistake, he knew now. Awkward. Both the album and the way he had left it, like a coward. A coward intruding where he shouldn’t have. Unbalancing what little balance they all had left. *God! What Chris must be thinking this morning!* J.D. chastised himself, avoiding eye contact with Buck or Vin, or most of all Chris, all the while knowing he would just fall through the floor and die if any mention of it came out of Tanner’s mouth as a joke.

A cup of light coffee appeared on his desk with a clunk. And a hand rested briefly on his shoulder. Then it was gone. J.D. looked up, furtively, against his better judgment, to see Chris walking away.

Then, as if he had somehow sensed the glance, the team leader turned and looked back, sending J.D. the smallest of smiles. But it was the rare light in the half-lidded green eyes that held J.D.’s attention. The leader inclined his head briefly toward his youngest agent, before turning away and going into his office.

Buck frowned at both of them.

J.D. ducked his head. Not willing to share his moment or the strange warm glow in the center of his chest with anyone. Not with Vin. Not even with his best friend.

* * *

Ezra grimaced as he stepped into the elevator. Frank Ford. Undercover agent. Team Two. Standing there. At one time the darling of Denver ATF’s undercover operatives. But he had let his ego outstrip the facts. And was caught by surprise when Team Seven’s new arrival, rumored to be dirty no less, started to eclipse him.

For a moment Ezra considered stepping back out and taking another elevator. Or going back to Starbuck’s and coming in even later, but he supposed that testing Chris’s temper this morning of all mornings would not be wise. Therefore, he composed his expressionless face and stood as far away from Ford as it was possible to get in a small metal box. Eleven floors to go, he thought to himself as the elevator started upward.
Although Standish was aware of the eyes boring into his back for nine straight floors, he was willing to bear it in exchange for the utter silence. He nearly sighed as the silence came to an end immediately after the tenth floor.

The voice was cold, nasal, dripping with the accent of the man’s native blue-collar Boston. “Lemme give ya a little ca-ree-uh advice, Standish,” Ford offered.

Ezra debated with himself the merits of replying or just ignoring the man. He went for door number one, turning slowly with a toothy smile. “The mind boggles,” he drawled with careful enunciation. “I can hardly wait to benefit from your wisdom.”

Ford’s eyes glinted nastily. “Nothin’ huge. Just a little phrase ya might wanna staht practicin’.”

“I’m in suspense,” Ezra drawled turning back to the elevator doors, utter disinterest set firmly upon his features.

Ford could hardly keep from laughing before he spilled his punchline. “Can ya say ‘Ya want fries with that?’.”

He laughed at the very thought of his Armani clad rival dealing out fast food at a downtown eatery. Maybe the mall.

He was suddenly disconcerted to see the benign smile of pity that spread across Standish’s lips. “Why yes,” Ezra drawled pleasantly after a moment. “Yes I can. In five languages, in fact. While you, my friend, from what I hear, have yet to master basic English.”

The elevator door opened on the eleventh floor about the time Standish was proving his point in the fourth language. He was speaking in Italian when the door closed again.

Arriving at his own floor in a black mood, it dawned on Ford how strange it was that so many countries would use the French term. Wasn’t that cheating? He snorted. It’d be like Standish to cheat. Lying, cheating, dirty bastard.

Standish was confronted with a closed bullpen door. He stopped. Wondered if he had missed a scheduled meeting. He didn’t think so. That would be bad. He raised his hand to the knob, only to have it yanked from his grasp as the door opened. Tanner’s eyes lit on him with an evil grin. Ezra sighed. He’d had more than enough already this morning.

Tanner didn’t open the door. He stood blocking it instead and tossed back over his shoulder a description of the “man standin’ at the door.”

Standish gritted his teeth.

“That sounds like Ezra, all right,” Nathan’s voice said thoughtfully, teasingly from within. “Ask him for the password.”

Ezra snarled and ripped off an epithet worthy of Vin Tanner himself.

Buck burst out laughing.

Vin’s eyes twinkled. “Reckon that’ll do,” he said, stepping aside to admit his teammate. Then shutting the door behind him again.

“We are behind closed doors?” Ezra asked, placing his briefcase on his desk and moving toward the kitchen for another cup of coffee. Lately he noticed his usual Grande wasn’t going as far as it used
“Bracing for the siege,” Josiah added, tipping his head toward the coffee room, where a large pile of “provisions” had accrued on the small table.

“Ah,” Ezra said thoughtfully.

“Buck sent up for the eats after Chris told him to shut the ‘damn bullpen door’, ” J.D. added, giving, in Ezra’s appraisal anyway, a surprisingly good imitation of a Chris Larabee growl.

Coming back into the bullpen Ezra noticed that Josiah’s jacket was sporting a large rip in the elbow. He looked questioningly toward Nathan, who caught his glance. The medic shook his head.

Josiah smiled unpleasantly and unrepentantly. “Let’s just say it was a poor choice for Clint Delvin to be whistling tunes from the Wizard of Oz this morning.”

“Oh?” Ezra asked curiously, noting the surprise on J.D.’s face, looking up from the coffee cup he was cradling in both hands. “Should I inquire which tune?”

Tanner supplied the answer, his voice a low, humorless growl. “Ding Dong the Witch Is Dead.”

Ezra winced.

Josiah straightened his sleeves self-consciously. “I had perfect self-control,” he replied to the question no one had asked.

Nathan shook his head again.

Scowling now, J.D. added, “Buck and I got ‘If I Only Had a Brain’.”

Ezra turned to Wilmington. Whatever comment he was going to make was stopped by the sight of the tasteful jacket. And coordinating shirt. And a tie that didn’t even have cartoon characters on it. In fact the only appropriate comments that came to the undercover agent’s sharp mind had to do with going to a funeral, which Ezra didn’t even want to talk about. Or perhaps a sudden acquisition of professionalism, the possible reasons behind which, he did not want to broach. Nor did he feel up to the task of resisting the monumental temptation to say that now was a bit too late for them all to behave like professionals. So he said nothing. Just took his seat. Feeling J.D. staring at him curiously for passing up the perfect jibe.

* * *

Mumbling words of greeting, the six directors took their seats at the long, oak conference table, sliding into the same padded seats that offered no real comfort, as if they had never really left. Benedetto noticed that the seventh seat had been removed. Unnecessary now, it had been hauled away in the night. Disappeared, like it had never been there at all. Pitchers of water stood on the table, ice cubes still afloat, glasses stacked neatly beside them. A coffee cart hunkered in the corner near the door, offering the comfort of a nice hot drink to ease their burdens.

One by one the six men opened their briefcases, removing their notes, their stacks of transcripts, and reports, and laying them out on the table. Preparing to bear the weight of their decisions. To contend first with their anger or their sympathy and be swayed by neither one. To reach a decision that would benefit Denver ATF as a whole.

At least that was the task, as presented to them. But Vincent Benedetto was never one to lie to himself. He regarded the many piles of papers with weary eyes that saw both what they were
intended to be and what they potentially could become. Guides and signposts through the labyrinth of leadership and decision making. Or props. Crutches. Something to hold up and point to and say, “Here. This is why I made the decision I did. I went by the facts. I am not to blame.”

To be completely honest, he also knew what he wanted the decision to be. As for his boss, well, they had worked together too long and knew each other too well for there to be any secrets left between them. He knew how his supervisor wanted this to turn out. But it was not his job to force the issue to come out the way they wanted. His duty was to the ATF and to his region and to his city. His job was to find the best solution they could all live with. And if that meant compromising his personal preferences, then he would do so to see his duties fulfilled.

He was not surprised to find the mood around the table somber. Gravely serious on one hand and angry on the other. Cranston would be playing the role of moderator today. Playing it to neutral perfection, Benedetto knew. But it would end with Cranston’s final decision, based on what he heard from the other directors and from the available testimony. Cranston had been appointed to head the inquiry precisely for this reason. He was not likely to ramrod the inquiry’s decision into fitting his own ideas. Ideas, which at the moment, Benedetto would be hard pressed to identify. The man had given precious little of his own point of view away, in his effort not to sway the inquiry with the weight of his office.

Benedetto understood that. It was the very reason his own supervisor had declined to participate. Instead he had requested Benedetto to attend in his place. And Vincent knew his boss would be waiting upstairs to find out the outcome.

Hofstader blew out a long breath born of frustration. “If I may be frank, this is one hell of a mess.” He pushed his notes away in disgust.

Benedetto eyed the field veteran on his right. He could not disagree, and he noticed that although there was some uncomfortable shifting in uncomfortable chairs, and some frustrated looks on the other side of the table, no one bothered to disagree. He caught a quick glance from Cranston. A nod. A go ahead.

Benedetto suppressed a sigh of his own, and spread his notes out on the table. “We’ve read all the reports and heard the testimony, so now it’s time to make a decision.” He glanced around the table. “There’s a lot here to consider, so for the sake of our sanity—and our tailbones—my suggestion would be to cut to the chase. Lay the cards on the table.”

La Force was the first to take up the offer. “After reviewing the testimony and the IA report, I feel very strongly that Agent Larabee has a pervasive lack of respect for chains of command and procedure, and that left to their own devices, his agents are inclined to follow that lead.”

Ramirez nodded his agreement. Benedetto noticed that, as LaForce paused for breath, no one took the opportunity to disagree. Himself included.

LaForce continued. “I believe it is a dangerous precedent. To let it continue unchecked sends the wrong message. Not to mention undermines the good work done by our teams who do adhere to regulations and authority.”

He looked around the table.

“And I’d like to add to that,” Ramirez said gravely. “The issue of loyalty concerns me. Although AD Travis ably argued that under Larabee’s leadership Team Seven has not demonstrated any serious ethical breaches, I am concerned that holding one man’s authority higher than the authority of the agency one serves, creates a cult of personality. It gives that man more power than is warranted or
deserved by his position.” He narrowed his eyes in aggravation as he looked around the table. “Let’s not forget that Agent Larabee is not a director. Nor is he an assistant director. It is not his job to decide policy and procedure. It is his job to fulfill the mandates of his mission under the guidelines established by this bureau and its leadership and set policies and procedures. And if Agent Larabee doesn’t understand that, it should be driven home, or he should be relieved of his duties.”

Costas blew out a breath and looked sideways at Hofstader, who cleared his throat and regarded Ramirez impatiently. “That’s all very nicely stated,” Hofstader said, a note of frustration evident in his own voice. “But let’s consider the realities. To date, Team Seven is arguably the best team in the Western region, taking into consideration the size of their caseload, and percentage of cases solved and arrests made. If we look at their evaluations, you will see that their chain of command, which includes several of the directors present, have rated their overall work to be highly satisfactory, including a number of field commendations for decisions made under fire. Reprimands to date have been taken care of at the Team Leader or the Assistant Director level. There is nothing here to suggest that we have even issued a warning about the way Agent Larabee has conducted his team. Frankly, I think it will look very bad if we suddenly decide that Agent Larabee should be relieved of his command based on one incident in which he did not even take part.”

Cranston’s gaze moved from Hofstader back to Ramirez.

“Consider this the rectification of our earlier mistakes,” Ramirez replied icily, “if your main concern is appearances.”

LaForce licked his lips and frowned at Hofstader. “Look bad to whom?” he asked.

Costas snorted and turned to Hofstader, replying to the question himself. “To the other teams and team leaders.”

“Who have to adhere to the set of rules that Agent Larabee so casually disregards when it doesn’t suit him,” Ramirez retorted. “I would think that at least some of them would be glad to see Team Seven brought back into line.”

“That’s probably true,” Hofstader conceded. “But I’d like to be there when you deliver the message to Agent Larabee that we’re reining him in.”

Ramirez scowled. “That’s exactly what I mean,” he replied angrily. “Agent Larabee answers to the directives of this command. We do not tiptoe around Agent Larabee. Like his chain of command has been doing for the past three years. It’s a bad idea. It’s a bad precedent. And it sends a bad message to the other teams.”

Costas shifted in his chair again, as if uncomfortable with the words he wanted to say. “But we can’t forget that we agreed to certain conditions when we recruited Agent Larabee to start up RMET Seven. Among those was agreeing to a lack of direct access to his agents. We gave our tacit approval to setting his own procedures when we hired him.”

LaForce shook his head. “And as I recall, the decision to start this team under Larabee came at the assistance and patronage of a particular U.S. Senator, did it not? Who was already well acquainted with Agent Larabee through Larabee’s parents, correct?”

Benedetto raised his eyebrows. Ah, the accusation of nepotism rears its ugly head. He had wondered when that might come up and nearly laughed to see the scowl on Cranston’s face.

“Director LaForce,” Cranston grated. “The initiative to establish RMET Seven was a joint effort between the Senator and my office. Are you accusing me of practicing favoritism in the
establishment of this team?”

LaForce’s quick downward glance showed that he was aware he had stepped out of bounds. “I’m not accusing anyone of favoritism,” he replied firmly. “I simply agree with Director Ramirez’s assessment that concessions were made without thoroughly thinking through the potential problems.”

Hofstader scowled. “For the most part those problems are still potential,” he ground out.

“And shouldn’t we try to keep them that way?” Ramirez replied. “I don’t see the point of waiting around for a bigger disaster before we attempt to rein Agent Larabee in.”

“By then it could be too late to enact changes,” LaForce agreed.

Costas snorted. “More than likely, it’s already too late.” He turned back to his notes. “I reiterate that Agent Larabee has been very clear about his role in enacting policy and discipline within his team. Not to go into unnecessary details, but Agent Larabee’s main concern has always been avoiding confusion and conflict in the chain of command, to ensure quick decision making, to allow his team to respond rapidly in the field.”

Hofstader nodded. “Director Costas is correct. The foundation of the team is to look to the Senior Agent for direction.”

“Under those conditions, he opens himself up to be held responsible for actions undertaken by his team, whether he is present or not. Like an AD or a director,” LaForce replied, his tone showing clearly the very absurdity of the idea.

Hofstader and Costas looked at each other and at Cranston.

“I do believe Agent Larabee would agree with you,” Hofstader said with a tight smile.

“No wonder they’re so goddamn loyal,” Ramirez muttered under his breath. Aloud he replied, “Fine. He can have it his way. Discipline Agent Larabee for the actions of his team.”

“And establish a directorial oversight, that will ensure adherence to bureau policies and prevent a situation like this from happening again,” LaForce added firmly.

“That’s sufficiently vague,” Hofstader snapped. “Did you have anything concrete you wanted to suggest?”

Costas shook his head. He shot a look to Cranston. “I feel compelled to bring to all of our attention that Agent Larabee is not likely to accept changes to the established way of doing things.”

“You mean our here-to-fore hands-off attitude and penchant for looking the other way,” Ramirez retorted. “Of course he’ll object. He won’t be allowed to do whatever he wants.”

Costas pointedly ignored the interruption. “We should carefully consider the likelihood that he will not accept the changes.”

“Then he is invited to seek employment elsewhere,” Ramirez replied. “As he indicated at the original inquiry after the team returned from Texas.”

And LaForce agreed.

Hofstader threw up his hands. “All right then. Who do you propose to replace him with? Since our choices all worked out so well the first time.”
Costas smiled tightly. “Of course, on the issue of loyalty, I think we’ll be hard pressed to convince the rest of the team to accept it.”

“They are likewise invited to seek employment elsewhere,” LaForce returned coldly.

Costas’s expression did not change. “So long as we recognize that we face the very real possibility of losing the entire team.”

Benedetto interjected softly. “Not to mention any fallout among Larabee’s many admirers among the other teams.”

Ramirez grimaced at that, but LaForce spoke. “It’s the admirers that worry me. That and a number of young agents who have come up believing that Team Seven represents some sort of paragon of excellence.” His lips twisted. “They call them the Magnificent Seven.”

Benedetto had to duck his head not to smile at that, as he pictured the team in cowboy garb, Yul Brenner shouting orders and waving a machine gun, and Steve McQueen laying along a rafter with a high-powered rifle and Agent Vin Tanner’s long hair.

LaForce seemed irked by the reaction. “Team Seven is not an example I would care to see emulated by future teams.”

Benedetto kept his head down, rolling through an image of a future bureau filled with Larabees and Wilmingtons and Tanners, Dunnes, Sanchezes, Jacksons, and worse yet, Standishes. Ramirez and LaForce seemed genuinely concerned about that. He, however, was fairly certain that this peculiar mix of personalities was not likely to be easily replicated.

His face was serious when he looked up to speak again. “Do we seriously want to consider losing one of our best teams? Is that in the best interests of the bureau, our district, or even the public that we serve?”

The other directors looked at each other for a long time.

LaForce drew breath to speak again, but was interrupted by a sudden knock at the door.

The directors fell silent. Frowning, Cranston called out for the unknown person to enter. A very young, very junior member of Benedetto’s staff poked her head nervously in the door. But she quickly put on her professional game face and strode into the room toward the table filled with directors.

“I apologize for the interruption,” she said with calm sincerity, taking in each of the assembled directors before stepping up to Benedetto. “I was asked to deliver this to you right away,” she said, handing over a folded message.

Benedetto nodded at her and gave a brief smile, dismissing her. She nodded back and turned sharply on her heel. He waited for the door to close behind her before he unfolded the note.

The other directors waited with ill-disguised impatience, as he read the message through, his eyebrows knitting slowly together. He read it over again just to be sure, then handed it to Cranston. Cranston read it over once or twice, while the others waited, their curiosity growing. Cranston handed the paper back, with a barely hidden expression of disgust. Benedetto folded the paper back up and then flattened it under his palm, feeling the corners of his mouth pulled into a tight straight line.

“Hell of a mess indeed,” Benedetto growled, throwing a glance at Hofstader, who had said it first.
He addressed the board, struggling to keep the anger out of his voice. “News from Texas. Senior Agent Matthew Richter, Texas Team Four, is to receive an official commendation for his quick thinking in the capture of four militia members and the subsequent reclamation of a large cache of illegal weapons.”

There was silence. Costas looked down at the tabletop and shook his head. “Does his vaunted quick thinking apply to the circumstances under which our heavily sedated agent somehow agreed to pose as a militia prisoner in order to lure the militia to attempt to kill or recapture him?”

He threw his angry glance at LaForce and Ramirez, as if they had had something to do with Richter’s questionable actions.

Cranston held up his hand. “We have already agreed that the actions of Team Four and the events leading to the capture of the militia members are outside the scope of this inquiry.” He paused. “And Assistant Director Travis and Agent Larabee have both made it clear that they have no desire to pursue the matter.”

Costas launched a protest.

Cranston narrowed his eyes before he could get it out. “I have no intention of getting into an interregional pissing match over the hero of the moment. Let them have their day in the sun.”

Costas glared back with more gumption than Benedetto had seen from him yet. “Just seems a damn shame that Texas gets its intelligence wrong, resulting in injury to our agent, who is then held a virtual prisoner for two weeks, and when it’s over, they give their agent a commendation, and we put ours in front of a board of inquiry. I’m sure this will play well with the troops, too.”

Dead silence fell over the table as the directors all eyed each other. None of them seeming very happy with their position. Or very certain what action to take.

* * *

Doug Stone was on his fifth phone call in a row. Not that that was particulary surprising. Doug did a lot of work on the phone, using the instrument so much that sometimes it was impossible to tell whether the calls were business or personal. But Kirk Gustin, who sat at the desk across from Stone and was forced to endure listening to Doug’s end and only Doug’s end of every call, had slowly become adept at deciphering the who, what, and whys of Stone’s innumerable conversations.

Today’s topic eluded him however. And by the third call he had become exasperated by the steady stream of “No kidding?”, “You’re joking?”, “You can’t be serious!”, and variations of the same theme that spilled from the man’s lips as he furiously scribbled notes to himself, then reached for the dial to call yet another person in his endless information chains.

Kirk would have resorted to reading Doug’s notes, having long since learned to read the man’s handwriting upside down, but apparently, Dougie had gotten wise to the trick because this time he’d written it all in that damn shorthand he had learned somewhere and was always talking about how useful it was in this profession. Since Kirk could not read shorthand, even right side up, he abandoned that idea. In the end, he put down his own pen and leaned back in his chair, staring at Stone’s head and waiting to be enlightened.

At long last, Doug hung up and wagged his eyebrows at Kirk. He opened his mouth, finally, to spill it but was cut off by his phone’s insistent ring. Doug nearly laughed at the black look of frustration that Kirk threw at him, as he reached for the phone.
“Stone,” he said. Followed by “Yeah…” then “That was quick!” and, predictably, “No kidding?” He paused a moment then said darkly. “Wait till this gets out.”

Kirk’s fingers itched to tear the phone from his teammate’s grasp. He willed himself to be patient as Doug hung up. But instead of filling him in, Stone jumped up from his seat with more animation than he had shown since combined U.S. military intelligence had got their impatient claws on Team Eight and started breathing down their necks demanding more and more information on Dowd and company. Doug disappeared into Ryan Kelly’s office and shut the door.

Kirk, Brett, and the other two members of the team exchanged glances. Kirk very nearly tiptoed to the door to put his ear against it. The only reason he didn’t was the bad example it would set for the more junior members of the team. It was a precedent he didn’t want to set, especially since he sure as hell wouldn’t have wanted anyone listening in on some of the conversations he’d had with Kelly in the past. So he waited. They all waited. And no one got any work done—military or no military.

“Where’d you hear that?” Kelly demanded as soon as the words were out of Stone’s mouth.

Stone hadn’t expected his team leader to be happy with the news, but he hadn’t anticipated quite this level of angry. He shifted his feet before giving his usual answer to that question. “I prefer not reveal my sources.”

Kelly eyed him irritatedly, and Doug could tell it wasn’t just the “usual answer” that had the Senior Agent irked. Doug frowned. Suddenly unsure. “It is true. Isn’t it?”

The team leader blew out a breath. “Yeah,” he said finally. “It’s true.” His voice was resigned but the expression on his face was dark. “Word came from Travis this morning.”

Doug sat down suddenly. “Bastards,” he spat out.

Ryan Kelly raised an eyebrow. “You don’t know the half of it,” he replied, a faint growl behind his words.

Doug shook his head. “From what you said…”

Kelly looked up sharply. Cut him off. “What I said was between us only,” he snapped. “I thought I made that clear.”

Stone held up both hands, palms out. “Whoa, Boss!” he replied. “You were very clear. And I didn’t say a word. None of us did.”

He watched relief replace the skepticism on his team leader’s face.

“But you should tell them,” Doug urged quietly. “Tell the brass what you told us.”

Kelly grimaced. “I can’t,” he said angrily.

Stone frowned. “You were there,” he said more firmly. “They should know.”

“I can’t tell them,” Kelly bit out.

Stone gave his boss a long, searching look. “Why not?” he blurted out finally, perplexed.

A strange, sad but determined smile twisted up one corner of Kelly’s mouth as he wryly replied, “That I can’t tell you.”

Doug gave him a sour look. “Well it ain’t fair,” he said looking down at the floor. And Kelly knew
his giant-sized agent wasn’t referring to being kept out of the loop.

“You weren’t supposed to know,” Kelly said gently.

When Doug looked up, his boss’s eyes were serious, earnest. “Don’t tell anyone,” he said finally. “Especially Team Seven.”

Stone glowered. “What is this, the sixth grade? How long they figure they can keep the lid on this?”

“As long as possible,” Kelly replied with a bitter laugh.

He repeated his words one more time, only now it was clearly an order. “Don’t tell anyone.”

Anyone. Pure and simple. Meaning just that.

Doug crumpled up his notes in disgust and threw them into Kelly’s wastebasket. “Yes, sir,” he snapped sourly and went out again.


Brett frowned. Then raised his eyebrows meaningfully at Kirk. Getting no response, the younger agent jerked his head toward Stone and raised his eyebrows again. Kirk glowered back, but did as he had been silently requested, leaning across his desk and whispering to Stone, “What was that all about?”

Doug’s eyes were hard and angry when he looked up, coldly replying, “None of our business, apparently.”

Kirk stared at him. They all stared at him. But Doug went determinedly back to his work and said nothing more about it.

Brett shrugged at Kirk and turned back to the work at hand. A secret, then, he thought, his tongue thoughtfully planted in his cheek. Well, if there was one thing he knew about a bureaucracy like the ATF, it was that secrets leak. They get out. And the bigger and juicier the secret, the faster it was likely to get around. Based on the amiable Douglas Stone’s present angry expression, it seemed that once this one got loose, it was likely to sprout wings.

The lid was not screwed on as tight as anyone had hoped.

“God damn it all to hell!” Buck exploded, shattering the silence that had reigned over Team Seven’s bullpen since mid-morning. The second in command slammed his foot violently into the back of his metal desk hard enough to move the other three desks that abutted his own.

At the desk adjacent, Ezra Standish jumped as his hot coffee, spilled down onto his paperwork. He jumped to grab a tissue before it damaged the cross-referencing notes he’d been so diligently working on all morning. He threw Buck an angry glance. “What in heaven’s name could possibly...?”

He was cut off, as Buck jerked up out of his chair and yanked his computer screen around toward Standish and jabbed a finger at it as if he wanted to reach in and shred the e-mail message that filled the screen. A moment later Ezra knew why, even as he realized from a soft ding from his own computer that a new e-mail had just arrived for him. Forwarded to the entire team, based on the “To” line on Buck’s message. Staring at Buck, the rest of the team reached slowly for their keyboards to open their messages.
Chris appeared suddenly in his doorway, his face carefully composed. “Buck…,” the team leader began, a warning embedded in his scrupulously even tone.

Buck rounded on him, giving him a savage glare. “Don’t ‘Buck’ me,” the taller agent snapped, pointing the deadly finger squarely at his boss.

Behind and around him, angry muttering, like bursts of staccato gunfire began to increase in volume and length, as one by one, the rest of the team read the message and began to understand its meaning.

Buck stabbed his finger through the air as if he were pounding his point through the center of Chris’s chest. “If that’s the way it’s gonna be,” Buck snapped, so angry he was nearly sputtering, “then I oughta just fuckin’ quit.”

His eyes sparked. His finger leveled itself at Chris’s face. “You oughta just quit,” he snarled.

Ezra averted his eyes, but not before he saw the ironic smirk that cracked the calm composure of Chris’s face, as the team leader said quietly but firmly, “Might come to that, yet. But it won’t be over this.”

“Goddamn miserable son of a bitch!” Buck growled savagely. His brows knitted together, blue eyes flashing. “He fucking blackmailed you.”

Buck sucked in a sharper breath and his eyes widened in further realization of facts he had so carefully kept away. Away from his mind. Safely at bay. Not willing to consider them. But now there they were on the tip of his tongue.

“That bastard almost got you killed!” His voice shook with anger. “And now they’re practically pinning a medal on him.”

Chris scrubbed a hand over his face.

Nathan closed his eyes. Medical charts that had been banished from his memory now rising unbidden in his mind. Followed by the images that had faded from his overheated imagination as they had turned to the business at hand.

He could feel his teammates looking at him. He opened his eyes. Facing them, the brown depths bleeding out what he had known. And hadn’t told.

Vin swallowed. Hard. Turning blue eyes on Nathan like a spotlight demanding to know the truth. Like an interrogation. Where were you on the night of…, Nathan thought incongruously. Almost hysterically.

Chris saw the look in Vin’s eye. The sudden pallor of Nathan’s face under that glare. And opened his mouth to intercede. Redirect. To placate.

But he was silenced by Nathan’s sudden fury.

“Don’t,” the medic snapped abruptly, leveling a hot burning glare in Larabee’s direction. His teammates faded away from his awareness, like he was in a tunnel. Him at one end and Chris Larabee at the other. He heard the words come from his mouth, rolling up out of some room deep inside, and he knew that he couldn’t have stopped them now—even if he really wanted to.

“You could’ve died down there. Two or three times over. An’ we would never have known. That bastard left you for dead. And we were getting ready to put his body in your grave. Next to your wife and son.” He hardly stopped to breathe, his voice rising higher. “Pirelli came within a half hour
of beating you to death!” he snapped. “A half hour! If that detective hadn’t stepped in… If the ambulance hadn’t been there already…” He swallowed, but did not stop, his words gathering speed. “And the fuckin’ hospitals didn’t do you no favors, movin’ you around. Then Richter blackmailed you into fightin’ the militia for him. He’d have let them shoot you dead and still been happy to take all the credit for it. So don’t….”

He stopped. His breath coming hard. “Don’t you hand me any nothing-really-happened-so-everything’s-all-right bullshit.”

Chris stared at him. They all stared at him.

“I read your damn charts,” Nathan finished, the words coming out hard, harsh, halting. “I know how close it was. So don’t tell me it’s fine.”

Five agents stared silently at the medic while Chris stared at them. At the identical expression etched onto each face. Slack jaws. Eyes vacant. And brows come together suddenly, as if frozen in midgasp. Horrified. An expression so familiar that he could feel it stab right through him. The face of someone who has only just heard terrible news.

And still he wanted so badly to remind them that it didn’t happen. It was over and done. Not real. Like a bad dream that they all had to get past. But he couldn’t. Not with his career and the team’s future still hanging on a decision, and Nathan’s words still ringing in his ears.

He stared at them. It could have happened, yes. But it didn’t. He thought it. Again. But he didn’t know what to say.

The awful silence was broken by a sudden, embarrassingly loud growl from Vin’s empty stomach.

All eyes turned toward the sharpshooter. Chris had hoped for some comment. Some smart remark. Anything to break the tension. But there was none. No one spoke.

Ezra flicked a glance toward Chris and saw his discomfort. Too little too late, he realized, of course, but at least this was one plight he could rescue his team leader from. Minor though it may be.

He cleared his throat.

“I think gentlemen,” he said in his smooth Georgian accent, “that Mr. Tanner’s inner clock has indicated that it is time for us to partake of lunch.”

“Our last meal?” Josiah asked sardonically, and Nathan sourly agreed.

J.D. was the first to actually move. Toward the coffee room. Ostensibly to see if anything suitable was left. But more likely to break the strain in the air.

Vin crossed his arms stubbornly over his chest. “I ain’t hungry,” he growled.

Buck, still staring at the Texan, stood frozen for a moment. A laugh burst from him, as Vin was again loudly betrayed by his own stomach.

“Sure ya aren’t, Junior,” Buck cracked, pulling the reluctant sharpshooter up from his chair. “You best feed that beast before it starts roamin’ the countryside lookin’ for virgins. Speaking of which,” he added suddenly, swinging a long arm across Tanner’s shoulders, “did I ever tell you about the time I…”

Relieved, Chris grimaced as he predicted the direction that story was going to take, but his thoughts
were interrupted as Buck swiveled his head and pinioned him with still-angry blue eyes. “You. Eat.” was all his oldest friend said before steering the petulant sharpshooter toward the kitchen. Two words only, but Chris read all the warnings implied beneath them. And knew it would make no difference whether he could force anything past his knotted stomach or not.

He turned to Ezra, who had stepped aside to let him pass. Or maybe force him past. But, then again, Ezra had gotten him off the hook.

The undercover agent tipped an imaginary hat at the team leader as he passed, allowing himself to flick a small conspiratorial smile at the taller blond. A smile that clearly showed he was still playing both sides.

Behind Chris’s back, the smile widened. Genuinely, at the brief look of recognition that had flashed across the team leader’s face when Ezra had redirected the conversation. But it was the gratitude that he saw there that had made it worth Ezra’s while.

* * *

It was very late, by the time Travis called. Quitting time had come and gone. No one had left. They had put their work away, to be sure, the very moment the clock reached the bureau-appointed and officially sanctioned and approved time. But they were still here. Talking quietly. Playing trashketball. Whatever made the waiting easier. Because that’s what they were doing. Waiting.

They waited through two long hours. They waited through the brief phone call. They waited for Chris to appear in the doorway. Looking tired. As tired as they were. But the moment he smirked at them, the weight flew off their chests. And they listened intently to the news he could give them.

“We can all go home,” he said. A smart-ass gleam replaced the weariness in the green eyes, as he added, “And we all get to keep our jobs.”

One or two cheers went up as sounds of relief flooded their small room.

Buck started toward him like a gigantic panther stalking its prey. Chris held him off with one hand, adding dryly, “Travis and I meet tomorrow to talk about ‘appropriate discipline’.”

Chris gave them all a warning glance, eyeing the stalking second in command in particular, as he added, “That doesn’t mean that there won’t be some changes.”

But his words fell on deaf ears. They were just waiting for him to stop speaking. They weren’t actually listening. And there was no holding Buck off anyway. He found both of the man’s big arms wrapped unceremoniously and embarrassingly around his shoulders. As if he were J.D. for God’s sake. Crushing him. Thank God it was his shoulders, he thought, or he might have had all breath squeezed out of him. As it was, he could have gone deaf from the whoop the man let out.

Chris glowered at his old friend sourly, but couldn’t hold it in the face of that stupid-looking grin and the blue twinkle in the cobalt eyes. To his chagrin, he knew darn well that a similarly stupid expression had plastered itself on his own face.

“Go home,” he growled at them. And was happy to see that they wasted no time in taking his advice. For once.

He picked up his own briefcase and locked up his office last. He found J.D. waiting in the bullpen door.

He looked at the young agent questioningly. J.D. cleared his throat, looking almost nervous, but he
didn’t say anything. They walked toward the elevators in silence. Side by side.

The small metal box slid smoothly toward the parking garage. Chris regarded his youngest agent from the corner of his eye. A thought bubbling up from the back of his head where he had stuck it this morning. Overtaken by events. But now it occurred to him to ask. Now that they were alone. He turned to the youth beside him.

“The title on the album?” he asked.

J.D. jerked toward him, as startled by the sudden break in the silence, as by the question itself.

“Your idea?” the taller man asked.

Looking away again toward the elevator doors, Chris had the good grace to ignore the way J.D.’s face reddened. And J.D. was grateful. Because Buck surely wouldn’t have.

Then again, J.D. considered, Chris probably wasn’t all that comfortable with the conversation anyway. He stared up at his boss. Having asked at all must mean that Chris really wanted to know.

J.D. looked at his shoes for a moment before answering simply, “Josiah gave me the idea. And the verse.” He halted. Not sure what to reveal. But in the end, he added, “Just seemed to fit. You know?”

He winced. Watched Chris mull it over as the numbers ticked down. Still thinking about it as the doors slid open onto the gray concrete expanse of garage. Still turning it over as they started out toward their cars. Then he turned slowly to look at J.D. through shielded eyes. Shielded from what, J.D. wondered.

After all that, “Nice,” was all he said. Quietly. But it was enough. J.D. hardly even heard the soft but unnecessary “Thank you” that followed.

Part of the reason he hardly heard it was that it was all but drowned out by Buck’s shout of “Where the hell ya been? You two are slower than pair of turtles goin’ backwards through molasses in January.”

Both men turned grateful faces toward their boisterous friend. And Buck grinned back. He waved Chris over impatiently.

“Get in,” he ordered. “We gotta get your truck.”

Then he winked at J.D. over the top of his little red, rebuilt classic. “See ya at home, kid.”

J.D. gave his best friend and roommate a wave and pulled on his motorcycle helmet.

Buck turned to Chris as they pulled out of the parking spot. “Don’t s’pose you’d tell me what all that was about?”

“What?” Chris asked.

“You and J.D.” he replied.

The smile that split Chris’s face foreshadowed his one-word reply. “Nope.”

Buck shrugged. “I’ll blackmail it outta the kid, then.”

Chris smiled but said nothing further about it.
In fact he said nothing at all on the way out to Johnny Ringo’s. Staring out the window instead. But that didn’t concern Buck. He was used to Chris’s long silences. And had come to accept that he’d hear anything he needed to know once Chris was ready to tell him.

But that sure as hell didn’t mean that Buck had to keep still. He turned up the radio, set to a banjo-jangling, fiddle-screeching, old-fashioned twanging country music station and began to sing along. Loudly and gleefully off key. Purposely ignoring the wheels silently turning in the head beside him. The blond was completely lost in thought. The darkened countryside flashed by outside Chris’s window. But he wouldn’t have seen it anyway, even if it were broad daylight. His eyes were turned inward. Thinking.

* * *

Long after the sun had sunk behind purple hills. Long after supper had cooled and then congealed inside the refrigerator. Long after she had slipped under the sheets and the quilt in the bed they shared, Raine finally heard his keys jingling at the front door. Patience rewarded. She waited a bit longer until she heard his footsteps, tired and plodding coming up the front hall, marking each step patiently until he appeared in the doorway. The bedroom light was still on, letting him know that she had been waiting for him. Now that he had arrived, she scanned his face from beneath her lowered lids, looking for an indication of the news. New strains or anger. Or maybe relief from the tension that had been slowly pressing them both down. Some sign hinting at an end to the silence that had slowly overtaken him. But she could tell nothing from the view she had of his back, as he skinned out of his work clothes, barely bothering to slide on a battered pair of shorts before snapping off the light and slipping under the covers beside her.

He let go a huge breath as he lay back, as if hitting the mattress had knocked the wind out of him. And she turned and rolled into his arms. Resting her chin on the back of one hand that rested on his chest, she searched his face up close in the dim moonlight filtering through the bedroom window.

She saw the fatigue there. And the weariness that he had borne for weeks. But something was different. Something in the way his face seemed less closed. Less clench in his jaw. Less hunch in his shoulders. She searched again, and she waited, exercising the very end of her patience, and biting back the demands she itched to make. Or perhaps just the urge to scream.
At long last, she prodded him to speak. Gently. But meaning business. It was her life, too.

“You seem a bit less tense,” she observed, letting her voice rise at the end, intimating the question she had not asked.

A short chuckle escaped him, his lips curling back to reveal white teeth to the moonlight. “Do I?” he asked.

His arms wrapped around her, enfolding her, his eyes thoughtful in the moonlight, looking backward into the day that passed. He smiled ruefully at her.

“That’s probably ‘cause I hauled off and yelled at Chris about almost getting his damn fool self killed. And to stop telling us that ‘nothing happened’.”

She frowned, as much in sympathy as at hearing the bitter tinge in his voice. He looked down at her, imitating her frown, his handsome face filled with dark humor.

She turned her head away. Resting her cheek against his chest and trying to imagine her Nathan actually yelling at Chris Larabee, a man he so admired, though few had earned that honor. She heard the quiet rumble of Nathan’s voice vibrating within him as he spoke again. Thoughtfully. Distantly.

“You know,” he began, and she turned her head up to see him better, to watch his face as he spoke. Seeing his brows knitted together in an impatient, exasperated frown. “I love that stubborn, obstinate, hardheaded horse’s ass like he was my own brother, but now and then I’d just like to knock him upside that hard head until he gets it through his thick skull.”

He did not elaborate on what precisely needed to be gotten through the team leader’s thick skull. Probably a lot of things, Raine reflected. But she smiled.

“Mmm,” she muttered, with a sleepy sigh. “I know the feeling.”

His arms tightened around her. There was no point arguing with her when she already knew she was right, so he kissed her instead. Once. Softly.

Then she snuggled down against his shoulder.

“Oh,” he said abruptly. An afterthought. “And we get to keep our jobs.”

She shook her head as well as she could shake it without lifting it from the comfortable hollow of his shoulder. But she smiled fondly, tightening her arm across his belly to show that she had heard. And was glad.

Of course, she had already known. Had it been otherwise, had one or all of them been fired or forced to resign, they would not be lying together in bed. They’d be in the kitchen. Pouring hot coffee and trying to assess the damage and what could be done about it.

Instead they were safe together beneath the comfortable weight of an ancient quilt. Just missed by the tornado that had swept through their lives, picking up their orderly world and scattering their careful plans. But it had passed, she thought hopefully. And looking sleepily through the list of all the things that mattered most, she discovered that everything they needed was still here. Moved around and shaken up to be sure. Bruised and disordered maybe. Altered perhaps. But here.

Tomorrow they could begin the job of inspecting the damage. To his career. To their lives and friendships. To fit all the pieces back together again one at a time. But she could live with that. Because she knew he could live with it, too.
She knew that because she felt sleep come over him. Felt his breathing and heartbeat slowing. Felt each tight muscle slowly relax in a way she hadn’t felt in a long time. She wasted no time in following his lead. And soon, entangled in the comfort of each other’s arms, Nathan and Raine slept more peacefully than either one had since seven men had flown off on a simple backup mission more than a month ago.

* * *

This time it was just Assistant Director Orin Travis and Team Seven Leader Chris Larabee. In A. D. Travis’s office. No tape recorders. No directors. Just the boss, and the man who was supposed to be receiving the dressing down of his life.

Travis was doing his best, too. Blunt. Angry. Angry at the directors. Angry at Senior Agent Matthew Richter, AD Rivers, and all the members of Texas Team Four. And particularly angry at the seven agents under his direction who had caused most of this trouble. But at the moment, he was mostly angry at Chris Larabee, as he watched his Senior Agent listening to everything he had to say. Calmly, patiently, passively and without comment other than to nod his head at the appropriate times. His face did not give away one iota of his thoughts, displaying a perfected detached analytical acceptance. That was bad enough, but what irked Travis most was in one corner of the team leader’s mouth, where the AD knew a smirk was struggling to be born. 

Damn you, Travis fumed silently at his agent. Don’t look so smug. They’re going to be watching every move you make from now on. You won’t be able to scratch without a staff of directorial assistants writing it up in triplicate.

It was a nice threat. Satisfying actually. But empty he knew. Fact was, Chris Larabee could be smug. Because Chris Larabee had got his way. Again. And Travis wondered why he should be so surprised. After all, he had helped Chris get his way. Again. It made him angry all over again.

“In addition,” Travis grated out harshly, continuing his tirade, “you can consider yourself ineligible for promotion for the foreseeable future. And don’t expect to be receiving any merit increases this year.”

That alone would have made another agent squirm. Or protest. Or something. Chris said nothing. He cared little for promotions. And wasn’t in it for the money.

“Agent Wilmington has been removed from consideration for all current leader position vacancies and all currently scheduled promotion lists.” Travis continued. “When he is returned to the promotable rosters, he will begin again at the bottom of the promotion list.”

The team leader managed to look insincerely contrite over that. Agent Wilmington would have refused promotion away from his team anyway. And it wouldn’t have been the first time. Not that Chris would ever stand in Buck’s way, but he knew damn well that Larabee would shed no tears over continuing his working relationship with his oldest friend, his veritable right hand.

“No one on your team will be receiving merit increases this fiscal year.”

That oughta hurt, Travis decided, considering their impressive success rate up until this fiasco. Chris looked vaguely disappointed about that, but clearly the wound was not fatal. None of the rest of them were in it for the money either.

The AD handed Chris an official memo over his desk. “And this memo is to be placed permanently in your file. It is from Director Cranston’s office and details your penchant for out and out ignoring orders, directives, regulations, and chains of command. As well as how you are personally
responsible for passing this penchant on to the agents under your leadership.”

He knew better than to expect the man to even flinch. He watched the green eyes skim the carefully prepared words. Chris handed it back without a word.

“A similar letter will be going into the personnel files of each member of your team, regarding their misappropriation of surveillance equipment, conducting an unauthorized surveillance, and possible destruction of public and private property.”

That got a reaction. Travis saw the flash of anger from the team leader.

Travis held up his hand. “The letter does acknowledge that they admitted their activities despite a lack of corroborating evidence and showed a clear willingness to cooperate with the subsequent investigation.”

The angry look was quelled, or more likely pocketed again, wherever Larabee stored up his anger until it could be conveniently unleashed. He resumed his composed detached listening.

Travis referred to a private interoffice memo on his own desk before continuing. “The board of inquiry does acknowledge, however, that ATF leadership also shares responsibility for the actions of your team during your absence, in that the manner of your replacement could have been accomplished in a way that was less disruptive to the team and more likely to promote acceptance of new leadership. They acknowledge that their action in this regard may have contributed to a breakdown in communication between the team and its supervisors and that the decision to block Team Seven completely from the subsequent investigation into events in Texas may have engendered an atmosphere of distrust that might have exacerbated the situation. The board of inquiry concedes that Team Seven’s unauthorized activities were facilitated by the absence of clear leadership in a crisis situation, which was not immediately recognized by the team’s chain of command.”

When Travis stopped to take a breath, the low voice inserted itself dryly. “Whose permanent file does that go in?”

Travis glared at him.

Chris did not blink. “I want a copy of that acknowledgement stapled to the front of each of the personnel memos regarding my team’s actions in my absence.”

Travis glared harder. “You are not in a position to demand anything, Agent Larabee.”

Damn the look he got in return was cool. And completely unrelenting.

“We’ll discuss it,” Travis replied coldly.

The smirk that had been struggling so long finally reached the open air. And sat smugly there on the corner of his lip, as he offered politely, “You can staple it to the back then.”

The audacity was staggering. It was all Travis could do to keep from catching that damn smirk, as he snapped back. “Fine.”

He succeeded finally in getting his angry expression back into place and continued relentlessly.

“I am hereby directed by the board of inquiry and your immediate chain of command to ensure that clearer chains of command and closer oversight are established over you and your team.”
He skewered Chris with his best glare helped by a finger leveled at the man’s heart. “They want steps to be taken immediately to ensure that you and your team adhere more strictly to established regulations, policies, and procedures.”

He had to give Chris credit. Aside from a slight hardening of the look in the man’s eye, there was no discernible reaction.

He leaned forward. “You, Agent Larabee, are going to be held personally and professionally accountable for ensuring that the team meets bureau standards.”

Nothing. Not a flinch. He didn’t even have the good grace to look satisfied, since Travis knew damn well that the directors had just given him exactly what he wanted. And, unless Travis missed his guess, and he doubted that he had, more than one of the directors would realize this, too.

But that didn’t mean it had to be pleasant. He stabbed the finger through the air at the team leader. “And you will begin with the immediate censure and discipline of Agent Buck Wilmington for the team’s actions during your absence.”

To Travis’s utter surprise, Chris frowned. Not in anger, but in consideration. He cocked his head to one side and said seriously, sincerely, “I’ve been working on that.”

Travis stared at him. “You’ve been working on that?” he asked, dismayed at how confusion slipped, uninvited, into his tone. Hell, he’d have figured the man had been too busy saving everybody else’s ass to start working on punishments.

He narrowed his eyes and couldn’t help the sarcastic drip in his tone as he replied, “What, pray tell, have you come to decide?” Travis frowned at the realization that he was starting to sound like Ezra Standish.

Chris leaned forward in his chair and pursed his lips thoughtfully at Travis. “Well,” he began slowly.

Oh, this’ll be good, Travis thought.

“I’ve been considering that ‘absence of clear leadership’ you mentioned earlier,” Chris said.

God I hate it when he does that, Travis thought. Quote the opposition. Agree with their point of view. Right before you bulldoze right through them like toothpicks standing in front of a tank. Travis practically held his breath to see where Chris was going with this.

The team leader was stroking his jaw thoughtfully. His eyes far away. “I agree that the ‘absence of clear leadership’ was a contributing factor to their ‘actions’ during my absence.”

“You do, do you?” Travis grunted back sarcastically. He paused, while Chris focused back on him. “And what do you propose will rectify that situation?”

The smile cracked across his entire face. “I’m glad you asked that,” he replied and launched into his explanation and proposal with such earnestness that Travis was forced to shake his head in disbelief. He thought for a moment about reminding Chris that he was still in the middle of being dressed down, but seeing the intensity in the green eyes, Travis was forced to give in and listen.

“I haven’t given Buck much chance to lead many missions,” Chris was saying. “As a result, he hasn’t had a lot of practical opportunity to hone his leadership skills in real situations.”

Travis felt his head tilting slowly to one side in a mirror of Chris’s, as he tried to anticipate Chris’s reasoning.
“As the second in command,” Chris continued, “the team looked to him for direction when they came back from Texas.”

He paused and looked at Travis, who nodded slowly. After all, Travis conceded, he couldn’t deny that. He had counted on that very fact to keep the team together when the first of their new team leaders had been installed.

Chris continued, assured that Travis was following. “Buck himself admits that forced into the leadership role, and given the circumstances, he neglected to put the team first. He led them in the direction they wanted to go, not in the direction that would serve them best.”

Chris gave Travis a long look. His voice was grave. “He needs to learn to put the team first. To lead them in the direction that is best for them. Whether they like it or not.”

Like in full retreat from a doomed warehouse leaving one of their own behind? Travis thought suddenly. Unwillingly. He pushed the thought away, not willing to admit that what happened in Texas was the worst possible circumstance and yet a prime example of exactly what Chris meant.

The AD swallowed, but his voice was steady as he asked. “And how do you plan to teach him that?”

Chris smiled. “There’s only one way to learn leadership, Judge,” Chris replied. He had the good grace not to add, “And you know it.”

Travis began to shake his head no. Not now. Let it all die down some. But Chris was ignoring him.

“He needs more time at the helm. Not less,” Chris said. With absolute sincerity. Dead serious.

Travis sighed. “Don’t you think that’ll look like you’re rewarding him?” the AD asked, squinting at the man he sometimes thought was completely oblivious to the political perceptions of those above him.

Chris grinned, his eyes glinting. “Would you consider it a reward?”

Travis refused to grin back. “I’m not concerned about what I would consider it,” he retorted.

Chris shrugged and sat back in his chair. “You want to be sure that strong leadership is in place if something like this happens again, then that’s the best way to go,” he said flatly.

Travis continued to glower at him. But he knew that wouldn’t change his mind. He sighed. “And you really expect me to be able to sell this to the chain of command?” he asked.

A smile flashed briefly across Larabee’s face as he replied flatly and with complete confidence, “If anyone can, you can.”

Travis closed his eyes. And considered the idea as impartially as he was able, what with his own tail feathers still in flames from his immediate supervisor. He wished he’d handled his own dressing down as well as Chris was handling his. Trouble was, the more he thought about it, the more he became convinced that Chris was right. The man was a natural leader. He knew his people. He knew what made them tick. And Buck was not going to become the leader Chris had often told Travis he could be, unless he had more opportunity to hone his skills.

“All right,” Travis said in return. “But what are you going to give the chain of command in return?”
Chris opened his hands out to the air. “What do they want?” he asked.

* * *

It took another half hour of messy proposal and counterproposal, reminding Travis of watching Evie haggling over prices in the foreign bazaars that they had visited in their youthful travels. Back when they were young and unfettered by career baggage and as yet had no children—either biological, or the many unruly semi-adopted ones that were right now turning Travis’s already gray hair to silver. In the end, he knew Team Seven would be unhappy with the arrangements, which is what would allow him to sell the proposal to his chain of command.

Chris and Buck would be required to take an official ATF-prescribed leadership course. Officially, both men would be taking it because of a deficiency in leadership regarding knowledge of ATF objectives, methods, and regulations. Unofficially, Travis had no idea what would be the result, since Chris had agreed to it way too readily.

In addition, all seven members of the team would be forced to sit through an academy lecture course on ethics in the law enforcement profession. They would be required to turn in all assignments given by the instructor. And they would not be eligible for promotion rosters again until they had demonstrated satisfactory completion of the course requirements, as determined by the instructor. And Travis knew just the instructor to ensure it wouldn’t be a walk in the park.

“That’ll work,” Chris said, when the terms were set. “Everyone’ll hate that.”

Travis shook his head. “Fine,” he replied. “You’ll receive official notification of the agreed-on terms by close of business. Then you may inform your team.”

Chris nodded. Ready to leave, but Travis stopped him. “Now to discuss the terms of your requalification,” Travis said smoothly but with a grin that was decidedly smug.

For the first time all day, he had the upper hand. And he was satisfied to see Larabee’s famous composure start to crack at the edges, as the team leader frowned suddenly in genuine consternation.

Chris recovered his poker face quickly, while his mind raced through several possible tracks for this conversation to take. After all, he had known that the AD was withholding permission to take the requalification tests, but he had felt reasonably certain that it wasn’t something Travis would hold over him as punishment. Now looking at that grin, he was not so certain. Conditions were going to be attached before he could resume work. Before he could get back to what he did best. Before he would be allowed to return to his team wholly and completely.

He waited. Ready to accept whatever Travis handed him because he knew deep down they had gotten off easy. They were still together. Still employed. He was still in charge. Sure they’d be watching him more closely, but they’d kept his autonomy in discipline intact. No doubt he’d be called on the carpet a hell of a lot more often, and probably by more people than just Travis. But he could handle that.

As for the other punishments levied by the directorial board of inquiry, they were plenty severe all right, limiting his team’s access to promotions and withholding the merit pay increases they had surely earned. But these were not the sort of perks that mattered much to his team.

He knew they would hate having to attend training classes—like a bunch of green recruits. And do homework—Christ! But not as much as they would hate losing someone from among their ranks. And not as much as they would hate being left at the mercy of any damn member of the brass who felt like taking a look into any and every operation they ran and coming down on them for every
infraction. No, he’d still be there to shield them from that. He’d just be taking more heat himself. Considering the alternatives, they could certainly live with that. So long as Travis just let him come back…

“I’ve given strict instructions that you are to be barred from all requalification tests,” Travis said, watching Larabee’s eyes. “Until you have had a complete physical examination and have been deemed medically qualified to serve as an ATF Team Leader.”

The AD knew he was being petty, as the satisfied smile spread across his face at the first flinch from his team leader all day. He twisted the knife with glee unbecoming a man of his years and position. “By complete, I mean complete. Including full bloodwork, a complete roster of applicable immunizations, and any other exams deemed necessary by the physician I have selected.”

Satisfaction glowed within him, as he actually saw the unflappable Chris Larabee pale. He didn’t even feel the least bit guilty. After all that Larabee had put him through, he could exact a little vengeance. And if he had to take advantage of Chris’s loathing of doctors, hospitals, and all things medically related, to pull it off, well an AD had to do what an AD had to do.

He felt the smirk spread across his face. Openly now, as he pushed a form across his desk toward Chris. Along with a pen.

“This is a release form authorizing my selected doctor to discuss with me any results pertaining specifically to your employment by the ATF,” he stated. “Of course, all information not directly related to your employability remains subject to strict confidentiality between physician and patient.”

Chris tried so hard not to scowl at Travis that the AD almost laughed. He watched Larabee slowly pick up the pen. The Senior Agent read through the form carefully, slowly, and Travis wondered for a moment if the paper might not burst into flame under the heat of his glare. But Chris swallowed his pride and he signed.

And Travis had the satisfaction of knowing, as he watched his agent leave, that just once, for just this brief moment, he had taken the wind out of Chris Larabee’s sails.

He actually whistled on his way out to a long and early lunch.

* * *

The agents of Team Seven gave their leader’s office a fairly wide berth after Larabee growled at them that terms had been decided that were guaranteed to piss them all off, and he would give them specifics as soon as he received the goddamn memo. They had waited until he went into his office before they exchanged long-suffering glances and went back to the dull tedium of doing clean up for Team Eight on a caseload that used to be theirs.

He left again after a short phone conversation, returning a half hour later. Smiling—sort of—as he handed them a stack of file folders for two cases that had gone cold assigned to teams that were unable to make headway on them. Chris hadn’t said a word as he read through the reports in Travis’s office, while Travis watched him closely. Observing the wheels turning in the blond head.

At long last Larabee looked up at the AD and said seriously, “I can think of a few avenues worth pursuing on these.”

Travis looked irritated. “I’d like these put to bed,” he said shortly. “They’ve hung around too long already it is.”

“We’ll do our best,” Chris said, but couldn’t keep the smirk off his face. The same smirk he wore
now as he watched them open up the files.

“Jesus!” Buck groaned reading over the file. “What the hell were those boys doing for the last six months?”

“No doubt, solving other teams’ impossible cases will increase our popularity exponentially,” Ezra drawled sarcastically.

“Best quit jawin’ and get started,” Chris growled, but he couldn’t hold back a grin as he said, “The trail ain’t gonna get any warmer.”

The six agents practically jumped to get down to preliminary and background work. With gratifying speed. No shortage of cockiness. And perhaps just a touch of relief.

From his office, one ear always tuned to the bullpen, Chris had to admit that he was glad to hear the chatter begin. Slowly at first, stuttering out a bit at a time like a small engine, low on gas, and struggling to get running, then winding up to a steady hum. Calling information to each other across the bullpen, sending requests for backup files. The usual sounds of Team Seven at work. Almost. When he heard the taunting and the jibes begin, he let out a long breath, as if he had been holding it for days on end. And in that sudden minute he felt like he could lay down on that long couch behind his desk and sleep for a week.

He didn’t, of course, because almost in the next second he realized his official notification had arrived. The messenger’s arrival was heralded by a sudden silence in the bullpen. They eyed the nervous-looking boy like a bunch of hungry mountain lions.

The messenger could feel their eyes on him. Every one of them. None of them friendly. All of them waiting. He turned instantly toward the Senior Agent’s open door, hoping to get his unpleasant errand over with quickly.

After knocking briskly on the door frame, he had expected the Senior Agent to ask him to come in. Instead the man looked at him, utterly silent, with glittering green eyes and a face completely devoid of expression. Nonetheless, he felt impatience crackle in the air around him, and he realized that he had hesitated too long.

Taking a long step into the office, he placed the folder down on the desk in front of Team Seven’s Senior Agent. He began to reach a finger out to show the man where to sign. He was stopped by the cold glance. The instructions he was about to give died in his throat.

He was not invited to sit. So he stood uncomfortably, trying not to fidget, while the Senior Agent read through the memo without comment or change in expression. He initialed it in the proper places. Likely, based on reputation anyway, the young staffer decided that this was not the first disciplinary memo that Senior Agent Larabee had received.

Agent Larabee handed the folder back. The young staffer completed his duty by saying an electronic copy would arrive via e-mail. He was dismayed by the ridiculous squeak his voice had acquired.

“Yes,” the Senior Agent said frostily, then returned to the work on his desk, as if the messenger had already gone. To his credit, the young staffer, realized instantly that he should have done exactly that and made haste to do so immediately, still feeling their eyes on him as he went out the bullpen door. Unable to shake the feeling even after he stepped out of the elevator onto his own floor.

* * *

The e-mail arrived twenty minutes later. Chris gave a fatalistic sigh and forced himself out of his
chair and into the bullpen, which had been devoid of unnecessary chatter since the messenger boy left. Six pairs of eyes turned toward him. He held up the printed hard copy of the disciplinary memo and jerked his head toward the conference room.

Without a word, they rose from their desks and took their accustomed places around the long black table.

Six pairs of eyes followed Chris to his place at the head of the table. He did not sit. He put the memo down on the table in front of them and outlined the terms of their “parole,” as Ezra put it, in his one and only comment an instant before he was silenced by a glare of the first order.

They read the letter to be placed in their files without comment. Each man carefully reading the attachment. Each face darkening in memory as they reached the director’s memo. Each one initialing the document in the appropriate spot.

Josiah grimaced at the clean, clinical, comfortable white-noise of bureaucratic memo-writing “the manner of Agent Larabee’s replacement”, “during Senior Agent Larabee’s absence.” Sanitized sentences. As if bureaucratic bleach could wash the bloodstains out.

Chris ignored the expressions that flashed across their faces. Waiting patiently for them to look up again so he could continue.

They took the news that they were temporarily ineligible for promotion with good grace. They were somewhat disgruntled at the news that they could kiss any bonuses for their previous good work goodbye. He recognized their relief to know that there would be no further investigation into their activities while absent without authorization. And their chagrin when he told them that the actions of the team would be scrutinized more closely in the immediate and foreseeable future. But he saw their teeth grind when he told them all they were taking the ethics class. All seven of them. All together.

Something close to desperation rose up suddenly into Vin’s throat at the realization of the amount of reading and writing the ethics course would entail. He’d barely made it the first time.

As if he’d read the sharpshooter’s mind, Chris announced with a low growl that since every man among them had six potential study partners, he would personally and severely punish every single one of them if they did not all pass the course on the first try.

A quick glance around the table told the former Ranger that several of his teammates were decidedly uneasy about taking the course, too. It was gratifying to note that apparently he wasn’t the only one who would be relying on a study buddy.

“All things considered, we got off easy,” Chris finished, letting his stern glower rest on each of them. They did not reply. Glancing away at the table or the walls.

What do you mean ‘we’ got off easy? Nathan thought bitterly. All you did was ride to the rescue.

He didn’t have time to dwell on it, as Chris altered his stance somewhat, and told five of them tersely that nothing further in the memo applied to them. Dismissed. Just like that. Except for Buck.

They got up slowly. Reluctant to leave. Moving almost hesitantly toward the door. J.D. was the last to go, sending Buck his best supportive look, before shutting the conference room door behind him.

“Go ahead, Pard,” Buck said after the door had closed, the confidence in his voice belying the nerves that had taken up residence in his stomach.

Chris pulled out his chair and sat down. He reiterated the consequences for Buck’s promotion
potential and pay. Wilmington didn’t blink. His expression composed. Promotions and pay. Two punishments that hardly even mattered. He knew that there would be more. He gritted his teeth as Chris went on.

And tried not to be too hopeful as he watched Chris try hard not to smirk, failing miserably, as he said, “You and I have been found to be deficient in our leadership.”

Buck raised one eyebrow.

“So we’re being sent to the academy leadership class.”

Buck raised the other eyebrow.

“Together,” Chris added.

To Buck’s credit, Chris noted that he managed to look suitably regretful—for a couple of seconds at least—until his face suddenly brightened as a thought occurred to him.

“Guess you’ll want that big ol’ book back,” Buck said, an evil gleam in his eye. He got the same gleam right back. “Oh you’ll need that,” Chris said nonchalantly. “To follow the syllabus I set up for you.”

Buck winced. “Don’t you think one leadership course at a time is enough?” he asked.

“I do,” Chris agreed. “But they’re forcing us to take the academy class.”

Buck suppressed his groan as he sat back, reading clearly in his old friend’s face that there was more that he needed to know. His instinct told him that he probably wouldn’t like it. “What else?” he asked.

“You’ll be taking the lead a lot more,” Chris informed him.

“Why?” Buck asked suspiciously.

“Because you need to,” Chris answered. “You can’t learn to lead standing behind me. You’ve earned it. You deserve it.”

The cobalt blue eyes regarded him narrowly. “That the only reason?” he asked.

The smirk was unsettling. “The only reason that counts.”

“And what about you?” Buck asked slowly. “What does that memo say about you?”

Chris grimaced. And Buck read the tell tale signs that Chris didn’t want to tell him. Several unpleasant possibilities flooded his mind.

Chris sighed. He gave in. “Only that I’ll be held a lot more closely accountable for the actions of the team.”

“Which will be scrutinized much more closely,” Buck added. He eyed his leader and oldest friend. “They’ll be wanting to see that we’re adhering more closely to the rules, right?”

Buck sighed but he knew better than to argue. He’d be having a word with the team later, though. Whether Chris liked it or not.

“Is that all?” Buck prompted.

Chris shrugged, a rueful smile crossing his face. “Except for Travis’s cruel and unusual sense of humor, yeah that’s all.”

“Spill it,” Buck said frowning impatiently.

He had to give Chris credit in his attempt to gloss right over his additional punishment, but Buck stopped him.

“You have to qualify to requalify?” he asked, not quite sure he understood. “Qualify how?”

Chris moved backward in his chair, a sure sign that he would rather not answer the question. He answered reluctantly in a voice so quiet that Buck almost wasn’t sure he heard.

“Did you say medically?” Buck asked, mustache quivering in disbelief, a smart-ass grin spreading itself across his face.

Chris glared at him. “It’s not funny.”

“I ain’t laughing,” Buck retorted. And he wasn’t. At least not the way Chris meant.

He stared at Chris for a moment. “Who gets to decide that?” he asked.

The question made the blond decidedly agitated. He muttered back. “Travis picked the doctor.”

It felt like an eternity passed while Buck stared at him.

“Well, hell,” Buck said finally with a grin. “Good for ol’ Orin.”

Chris gave him a truly dirty look. “Whose side are you on?”

“Yours, Pard,” Buck replied, his comic hurt look belied by the seriousness in his eyes. “Always yours.”

Wilmington clapped his boss once on the shoulder and rose from his chair.

Chris glowered, watching him head for the conference room door. “Where are you going?” he demanded.

Buck concealed his smile. Looked innocent. “Was there something else?”

“No,” Chris conceded unhappily.

Buck nodded and turned back toward the door, commenting offhandedly as he reached for the knob, “Just remembered I have to talk to Nathan.”

“Traitor,” Chris hissed at him under his breath.

“Bastard,” Buck shot back. Grinning to himself on his way to Nathan’s desk. Knowing the medic, above all, would appreciate the shrewd AD’s decision.

Watching Buck leave, Chris estimated a time lapse of two minutes before the entire team would
know the conditions of his return to the team. Knowing Buck and J.D., he gave it about twenty minutes before everyone on the entire floor knew it. And only until quitting time before he would have to endure the gloating.

He missed his last guess by one minute. Precisely one minute after quitting time, Nathan paused by his door. The tall medic said nothing. But triumph was written all over his face.

Chris also said nothing, but his glower told Nathan just how unhappy the team leader was with the decision.

But Nathan was not sorry.

The last to leave, Vin slouched into one of the two chairs across from Chris’s desk, sticking out his booted feet and folding his hands across his belly.

Chris eyed the conspiratorial gleam in the blue eyes.

The sharpshooter gave the team leader a sly grin as he asked, “So when’s yer appointment?”

A smile cracked Chris’s face, as he replied. “Soon as I get out of here.”

Vin shook his head slowly. Not surprised.

He rose lazily from the chair. “Goodnight, Cowboy,” he said over his shoulder, pausing in his retreat through the office door.

Chris looked at him in mock surprise. “What? No one’s riding herd on me tonight?”

Vin grinned. “Nah,” he said easily. “We all know how bad you wanna get back. Gotta eat and sleep to get there.”

Chris snorted. Tanner had him pegged all right. He wondered if that was a good thing or a bad thing.

Vin was not alone in taking the leader’s measure. Every one of them knew that it would be too much to hope for to get the go-ahead right away. But there was no discounting that famous single-minded Larabee stubbornness. He’d probably be cleared to requalify in record time. The dates on the bets already laid in Ezra’s new betting pool testified to Team Seven’s confidence in their leader’s tenacity.

Tanner stopped in the door again on his way out of the bullpen. “Run tomorrow? Same time?”

It never hurt to hedge one’s bets.

Chris grinned at him.

It was all the confirmation Tanner needed. He moved toward the hall, getting out of the way. So Chris could get to his appointment on time.
Chapter 16

It was late when Chris finally returned to his silent home. Much later than he had expected. And he was grouchy. Between the vials of blood drawn by a vampire with bad aim—honest to God, how hard was it to find a vein in a white man? You could see them for God’s sake!—and the sheer number of booster shots that damn sadist with a medical degree deemed necessary, he felt like a walking pincushion.

He did not bother to turn on the lights, but set the security alarm and headed straight up to bed, wondering faintly if maybe it was all the blood he’d just lost to the medical lab that was making him so tired.

He did turn on the bathroom light, so he could see how much toothpaste he was putting on his toothbrush. The album, still sitting on the rocking chair, caught his eye. He pondered it, wondering what to do with it. Especially since J.D. didn’t seem to want anyone to know about it. He snorted, laughing at himself. Not like he’d leave it lying around either.

As he spit into the sink, the perfect answer came to him. Floating up into his brain. He rinsed, smiled, scooped up the book, and carried it to the hall linen closet.

It took a little searching, but there it was. Right where he’d left it. He reached into the back of the little closet up to his shoulder, forcing his hand under the tablecloths and linen napkins Sarah had made the summer she decided suddenly that she ought to learn to sew. That was as far as she got before she gave up in disgust. She never used the napkins because the seams were crooked, but the very suggestion that she get rid of them if she wasn’t going to use them had earned him a hurt glare and a surprisingly solid sock in the arm. He smiled suddenly to himself at the memory of how hard he had worked—and how much fun it had been—to make it up to her later.

His hand latched onto the box he sought, and he pulled it out. It was light, slightly crushed by the weight of the fabric that had been stacked on top of it. He shook it once and heard the faint flutter of the piece of paper inside. The sole occupant of the otherwise empty box. The note that Buck had left when he took the photo album. And the bear. All those years ago.

Chris carefully pulled off the top of the box. Read again the note. Buck’s handwriting hadn’t changed much—or improved either, he thought as he read the words again, terse, written in equal parts grief and anger.

Chris,

They were a gift. Both of them. And someday you’ll figure that out. I have the album and the bear. They deserve better than being stuffed away in some dark closet. When you come to your senses, call me. I’ll be waiting.

Buck

Chris grimaced, running his finger over the edge of the paper. It had taken him a long time to come to his senses. It had taken him longer to call. Embarrassed. Ashamed. Buck had been right. He had tried to stuff everything into a dark closet somewhere deep down where his heart used to be. Buck was right, too, about Sarah and Adam being a gift. Chris had known that from day one, but he hadn’t expected to have all the light in his life snuffed out so soon, all at once, or in front of his horrified eyes.

He had let Buck keep the album because he had been right. She had made the album for both of
them. Because she loved them. In honor of their friendship and words neither one of them could say. The album and Adam’s worn bear, tattered from being dragged all over creation, all the more special to the boy because it came from his beloved uncle and godfather, deserved something better than the back of a dark closet and a man who couldn’t bear to lay eyes on them. And after so much time had passed, it didn’t seem right to ask for them back.

Instead he kept the box and the note. To remind him of Buck’s loyalty. And how he had abused it.

With a sigh, Chris placed the new album in the box, brushing a piece of lint off the white cover. Away from the careful hand lettering. It amused him, how well it fit. Almost precisely the same size as the original.

He was in the process of replacing the cover when he remembered something. He rose from his knees, left the box where it was and went swiftly down the stairs. Turning the lights on in the front hall, he rifled through yesterday’s mail.

Underneath today’s bills which he hadn’t even opened, he found the small white envelope. And carried it back upstairs with him, pausing to read it again as he reached the upstairs hall. His eyes running across his father’s neat, careful handwriting. The painstaking words. Never a strong suit for either of them.

A lot of it was a long apology. For what? For ignoring him most of his life? Chris frowned. At himself. He was a grown man for God’s sake. He’d had a child. He knew how impossible it was to do everything right even with one. Let alone seven. At least one was bound to get lost in the commotion. Especially after the number went down to six.

He swallowed hard. Getting himself under control. And telling himself irritatedly to let it go. It’s in the past. You’re not a child anymore. Stop feeling so goddamn sorry for yourself and forget it. A litany he repeated to himself after nearly every encounter with his father and at least half of his surviving siblings.

He concentrated instead on the two lines in the letter that had meant the most.

*I did not often say it Son, and I was not often there to show it, but never doubt you are loved…* 

And in closing…

*I am proud of the man you have become, the work that you do, and the company you keep.*

He grinned at that. Was almost tempted to show it to Buck. The Colonel had never liked Buck. Even after Chris had left home, and both he and Buck were battle-tested Navy SEALs, Chris’s father, by then The General, was loath to change his opinion of Buck. And he had certainly never approved of Buck’s mother’s “profession.”

Not that it had mattered that much. By the time he became a teenager, Christopher Larabee was already in the habit of keeping his own counsel and his silence—especially about those aspects of his life that were really important to him. He had long since learned that if he kept up his grades, avoided the principal’s office, politely if a bit vaguely answered the Who’s, What’s, and When’s his parents occasionally asked him, gave the appearance of conforming to house rules, skillfully concealed his occasional cigarette, and avoided drugs and alcohol, the rest of the time he could pretty much do as he pleased, and no one would be much the wiser. He did. And no one was.

He had come to realize when Sarah got pregnant, how stupid both he and his parents had been. Even before Adam took his first breath of ordinary air, while he was still just a “lump” in Sarah’s belly,
Chris already knew there was nothing he could give his child that would be more important than his time and his attention. And the words “I love you,” given freely without reservation or conditions attached. Good day or bad, good behavior or not. He was relieved when he found it to be a whole lot easier than he had expected. Just like Sarah had told him it would be.

Sitting in the upstairs hall, he smiled to himself. He had always had one consolation. Their lives together may have been short. But at least he could always be sure that his wife and son had known he loved them. Because he had been sure to tell them, one way or another, every day they had been together.

He swiped the back of his hand impatiently across his eyes. Glad there were no witnesses. And he stuck the card, now back in its envelope, between two empty pages at the back of the album. He replaced the cover on the box, gently pulling up the crumpled corners.

Then he pulled out one of the napkins, inspecting the seams and smiling to himself. Yeah, they were crooked. But hell, he thought, who was really going to look? He pulled out the whole stack and made a note to himself to put them in a kitchen drawer, where he’d at least remember to use them once in a while.

This time he put the box back on top of the tablecloths, where it wouldn’t get crushed. And found himself wondering whether it wouldn’t hurt to spruce up the dining room table once in a while. On holidays. Or maybe just on Sarah’s birthday. Or their anniversary. He shut the hall light off with a smile.

He was asleep almost as soon as his head hit the pillow.

* * *

The two men sat on uncomfortable wooden chairs, hunched over a scarred wooden tabletop in the kind of hole-in-the-wall restaurant you already had to know about to find. Six people besides themselves sat in the dank dark cellar room which made up the bulk of the place. A fire roared in the huge brick and stone fireplace despite the warmth of spring on the streets above. Most of the room’s occupants sat over glasses of wine or exotic liqueurs, speaking more or less bastardized versions of the language of a mother country some of them had never seen.

A woman past middle age, long gone soft around the middle, but still flaunting the beauty that had made her vain in youth, stopped at a nearby table to trade jibes with a patron, speaking rapidly in the strange mixture of Slavic languages, liberally sprinkled with Yiddish and English that had become the local dialect of the tiny room.

She came to their table next. Presumably asking them if they wanted another bottle of wine. Vincent Benedetto’s companion did not look up from the chessboard between them as he placed his order. She threw a jibe at him that was too fast, or perhaps too colorful for Benedetto to catch. The other man only smiled slightly, crookedly, as she walked away.

Benedetto didn’t bother to ask his boss what she had said. In the years that they had been coming to this tiny place hidden beneath a brownstone style apartment building in an all-but-forgotten ethnic enclave of urban Denver, he had come to understand a little bit of what he heard all around him. He never asked his old friend, a man he had followed off and on, for many years, and through a number of professional arenas, where he had picked up the various elements of the strange patois that murmured around them.

There were a lot of things he never asked his boss. In many ways the man’s past was closed. Too many things of which he would not speak, perhaps from professional obligation or that sense of duty
as solid as a brick wall. Or as Benedetto often suspected, his more personal reluctance to revisit the past.

Despite the fire roaring in the nearby hearth and the springtime outside, the man had not removed his long grey overcoat. And the cuff of his sleeve trailed slightly among the pawns as he reached to move a knight.

Benedetto pulled at his lip but raised his eyes to his friend.

Another bottle of wine appeared on the table between their elbows. He waited until the woman moved on again before he spoke.

“You didn’t tell me your thoughts on the inquiry results,” Benedetto said, giving his companion a quiet but none-too-subtle nudge.

The man raised his head and smiled slightly, a sly gleam in his left eye, his right eye long ago lost on a foreign shore under circumstances never spoken of. In public, he usually hid the empty socket and the awful scars under a grey patch, more to dissuade the stares of the morbidly curious than out of any self-consciousness on his own part. In private, in the office, and when at ease, he generally chose not to wear it. And didn’t much care who was uncomfortable with the glaring disfigurement.

Benedetto was long familiar with the scars. So long now that he had to think to remember what his friend had looked like with two eyes. It was not the only set of scars that bore witness to the man’s service in his country’s interests.

Typically the man in grey did not offer any answer beyond the smile.

Benedetto shook his head. “So about like you hoped, then,” he replied to his own question. Reminding his boss with fond exasperation that most people preferred to hear an answer in words in order to consider it a real conversation.

The man smiled that crooked, disarming smile that had once been his trademark, long ago when they were both young and arrogant and had believed themselves to be both handsome and immortal. Time had taught them both some cruel lessons.

Benedetto made his move on the board and refilled his wine glass. “You realize it’ll be a cold day in hell before Larabee gets any kind of promotion,” he said, taking a sip of a very nice red, properly and expertly served at room temperature.

The man shrugged.

Benedetto narrowed his eyes. “It won’t play so well for Wilmington or Travis either when they are ready to move up.”

The man shrugged again, and smiled. He looked down at the board, as if contemplating his move. “Then I guess we have them right where we want them,” he replied quietly. “Doing what they do best.”

Benedetto raised an eyebrow.

The man in grey did not have to look up to know what was coming.

“What the hell were you going to do if they fired one of ‘em?” he asked.

Benedetto frowned. “You know I would never have used your influence to convince them to see it your way or used mine to force my personal preferences on them.”

“I didn’t expect you to,” the many in grey snorted none too politely. “I expected you to use your prodigious powers of persuasion to broaden their minds.” He shrugged. “Turns out you didn’t have to. Lucky boys to have a lawyer like Travis on their side.”

Benedetto eyed his old friend.

The man’s lips twitched as he felt the unspoken question in the air.

So what’s next?

He could always count on Vincent to be looking for the next move, and the next mission. He raised his head to his old friend, out of courtesy and a long-held respect. “For now we just let it ride. Status quo.”

Then he did grin as he added. “After all, we know where to find them when we need them.”

Benedetto’s own smile was hidden by his wine glass. Not surprised at the answer. Always looking at the long haul. Thinking seven generations ahead, as the saying went.

One hell of a strategist, Benedetto thought, raising his glass in silent salute.

He looked back down at the board and moved his bishop. But I can still beat you at chess, he thought as he good-naturedly announced, “Checkmate.”

* * *

Chris slid his eyes slowly to the right, where J.D.’s left knee was jiggling so hard Chris wondered whether the whole van might be moving. The young agent was leaning forward squinting at something on his monitor.

“Vin, on your left!” he cried out suddenly.

“Where?” The sharpshooters’ voice came back. “I don’t see him.”

“On your left behind the stack of three crates,” he answered keeping his voice calm, despite the fact that he was practically out of his seat and jabbing his finger at the screen.

Chris saw the motion on his screen this time, too.

“Nathan,” Chris said into his mike.

“I got it,” Nathan replied calmly. Chris saw him move slowly behind the crates, calling out to the unknown person to freeze, identifying himself, his gun held carefully out in front of him.

Chris saw it a moment before the medic’s horrified swearing filled up their radios. Accompanied by Vin’s loud laughter.

Over Ezra’s mike, they dimly heard one of the storage facility’s security guards say irritately, “I told you there was nobody back there.”

“Nobody but the rat!” Vin hooted.

“Yeah? Well that’s gonna be one dead rat.” Nathan snapped back.
“Boys,” Buck said exasperatedly. “Open up the lockers on the warrants and get the weapons. You can shoot all the rats you want on your own time.”

J.D. laughed but stopped suddenly as he shot a look over at Chris. The team leader’s arms were crossed over his flak-jacketed chest. His head was down, and it took J.D. a moment to realize the team leader was trying not to laugh.

There were no further encounters with rodents, and the rest of the mission was completed cleanly. And quickly. One shipment of illegally imported arms off the market. One distribution point shut down. No casualties. No shots fired.

*All missions should go this smooth,* Chris thought sardonically, watching his team secure the contraband.

Their intelligence had been accurate. No one had been inside the closed facility at this late hour, except for a pair of security guards, who had stood aside the moment they saw the badges. No resistance was offered—if you didn’t count the rat, which wasn’t likely to show up in anyone’s report.

Although, for just a second, Chris thought about daring Ezra to include it in his write up. But then, since it was the first raid that Buck had planned himself, from start to finish—with Chris’s tactical assistance and advice—Buck was also going to have to manage all the reports. And deep down, Chris knew it wouldn’t be fair to give the man a hard time. He grinned to himself. Not yet anyway.

He climbed stiffly out of the van, kicking aside the brand new box of frosted, filled chocolate cupcakes that he nearly tripped over getting to the door. Standing in the warm night air, under the yellow parking lot lights. A breath of breeze hovered lightly around him like a harbinger of the oncoming summer. The rest of the team emerged from the facility little by little. Until they gathered at the side of the van and started in on Nathan about whether he was gonna read the rat his rights first or just shoot him.

Buck came last, supervising the clean-up crew in loading up the weapons cache to be carted off to lockup. He came toward the van, throwing Chris a questioning glance. The team leader stepped away from the group.

“Nice, clean grab,” Chris said approvingly.

“Yeah,” Buck replied, hands on hips.

Chris’s eyes narrowed slightly. He waited.

Buck squinted at him. “It’s Friday night. And it’s late.”


Buck scowled at him. “What do you want me to do?” he asked. “They can do the reports Monday morning.”

Chris shrugged. “They could,” he said noncommittally, refusing to give his second in command the instructions he was looking for.

Buck glowered back at the blond, sighed in exasperation, and trudged toward the van.

“Nice job, boys,” he said, as he arrived at the van. His tone clipped. “Good, clean,” he threw a backward glance at Chris, “and almost textbook perfect.”
Chris grinned down at his shoes. Damn but they had been good boys all month. It was starting to make Travis nervous. Chris wasn’t placing any bets on how long it would last. But he sure did enjoy telling Travis that it “must be those academy ethics and leadership courses.” He had doubly enjoyed the suspicious dirty look he got in return.

“I know it’s late,” Buck was saying to a chorus of groans. “But Monday is a long way away.”

He turned to J.D. “We got surveillance tape?” he asked.

“Taped and saved,” the young agent replied. He looked to Chris for confirmation. Chris nodded back.

“Audio?” he asked.

“Taped and saved,” Chris said with a slight grin.

J.D. grinned back.

Buck nodded. “Then we’ll do a set of drafts back at the bullpen, and you can polish them up on Monday.”

They all began to protest. All except Chris.

Josiah was the first to notice the blond’s silence. He swallowed his own protest. “The faster we get started, the faster we get done,” the profiler said resignedly, moving around to the driver’s side.

“Right,” Nathan agreed, pulling open the rear passenger door.

“Right behind you,” J.D. said, following him into the van.

“How the hell do you do that?” Buck groused, scowling at his friend and leader.

Chris shrugged. “It’s a gift,” he said with a shrug and moved to the front passenger seat.

He turned back and looked at Buck. “Nice work,” he said quietly, sincerely. It had been good work. And it would look good to the brass, too. He’d make sure they noticed.

Buck was grinning at him.

“What?” Chris asked frowning.

“Nothing,” he replied. His grin broadened. “Just glad you could make it.”

Chris swatted him affectionately. Then climbed into the front passenger’s seat. He turned to Josiah. “Back to the bullpen,” he said, listening to the commotion in the backseat of Vin searching for the box of cupcakes. And Nathan wondering aloud how the hell a man could eat that crap at this hour of night. And Josiah quietly humming to himself as he drove the van back toward the federal building.

They worked silently on their reports for the better part of an hour. Until Buck could stand it no longer. “Ah hell,” the mustached agent said, levering his lanky frame out of his chair. He stood and looked around the bullpen.
Vin looked up. “Just savin’ my draft now,” he offered.

Buck grinned and rubbed his hands together. “It’s poker night, boys,” he said. “Let’s get to it.”

“And here I thought you had a hot date,” Chris said playfully from his office.

Buck ignored him. “Save your drafts, and call it quits,” he ordered.

“We reconvene at my place in thirty minutes,” Buck said. “All snacks have been provided. Just bring your money and prepare to lose.”

Ezra snorted but closed down his computer and began packing up his briefcase.

Inside of ten minutes, the Team Seven bullpen had been shut down, secured, and cleared out. Before the stipulated thirty minutes had passed, all seven men were seated around an ancient, rickety card table in Buck and J.D.’s less-than-spotless apartment, shouting and picking at each other and howling with laughter at J.D.’s very best bucktoothed, nose-twitching rat face. While Chris held the last remaining bowl of potato chips out of Tanner’s reach, with a little help from Josiah.

Buck sprang up suddenly from the table, nearly collapsing it to an uproar of loud admonitions to watch what he was doing. He ignored them.

“Gentlemen,” he said, over top of their protests, raising his hands to call for silence. He settled for somewhat quieter.

“Gentlemen, tonight is a special night. And to celebrate our successful, by-the-book bust AND, at long last, the complete qualification and return to duty of our fearless leader...”

“Hear, hear,” Josiah interrupted.

Buck flicked an exasperated look at the profiler.

“I believe, etiquette requires that you reserve that for the end of the speech,” Standish whispered none too quietly to the benignly smiling Sanchez.

Chris smiled back at the profiler.

“And to celebrate,” Buck repeated a little more loudly. “I propose opening up a bottle of twelve year old single malt Scotch that I have been saving for just the right occasion.”

“Hear, hear,” Josiah called out with a wink at Ezra. He was echoed by Nathan.

Buck grinned almost from ear to ear. “Come on kid,” he said to J.D. “You can get the rocks glasses while I get the bottle down.”

“I brought cigars,” Nathan added, reaching into a bag on the sofa behind him.

In the general riot of approval at the suggestion, no one noticed, except Chris, that J.D. had gone suddenly pale. He rose slowly from his chair and moved hesitantly toward the kitchen, a strange, pinched look on his face.

Chris stretched, grabbed an empty potato chip bowl and headed for the kitchen, too, leaning over and saying something quietly to J.D. as he passed, that to Ezra’s eyes, though he could not be sure, looked suspiciously like “I’ll cover you.”

The conversation in the living room stopped abruptly as J.D. bypassed the kitchen and went straight
out the front door.

Buck’s puzzled voice called out to him.

“Where are the rocks glasses?” Chris’s voice rose over Buck’s.

“You know where they are,” Buck snapped, still preoccupied with J.D.’s departure.

“If I knew where the damn glasses were, I wouldn’t ask,” Chris snapped.

Buck swore. “The goddamn glasses are in the same goddamn place they’ve been for the last twelve goddamn years. Where the hell did he go?”

“Like I know where you keep your crap,” Chris groused back at him.

At that, Vin and Ezra exchanged a wry glance and Nathan and Josiah shared a grin.

Buck swore irritatedly at Chris—and with much more detail. The muttering that followed was all but covered by the sound of glasses clinking noisily against each other before thunking onto a counter top.

A second later the four amused men in the living room heard Buck’s confused voice say, “Why is this open?” It was followed, according to Ezra’s watch anyway, by seventeen seconds of absolute silence. Then an immediate and virulent set of curses and a growled out, “I’m going to kill both of you.”

Buck bolted out the front door hollering “J.D.!” so loud they heard the upstairs neighbor’s startled shriek from her balcony.

Ezra sighed. He reached into the inside of his jacket, still pressed, still impeccable, loosened his tie, and pulled out his trusty silver flask. He grinned his gold-toothed grin, as he unscrewed the top and took a sip. He raised it, as Chris reentered the room, his face revealing nothing of what had driven Buck shouting out the door.

The Senior Agent took his seat and accepted the proffered flask with a calm and straight-faced nod of gratitude. He took an appreciative sip then passed the flask over to the sharpshooter.

His agents looked at him expectantly. Chris knew they were waiting for him to tell them what had happened in the kitchen. And why J.D. was heading for the hills. He did not enlighten them. Buck and J.D. would do a far better job of telling the tale than he could. Besides, it wasn’t really any of his doing, was it? Even if Buck had offered to kill him.

No, he didn’t give them the answer they were hoping for, but he couldn’t hold back his smirk as he drawled out, “I believe I’m ready for that cigar now, Mr. Jackson,” in a surprisingly passable Atlanta accent.

Chris clamped the smooth, dark-oak colored cylinder between his teeth, as Nathan lit it expertly. They watched as a moment later, their infamous, hard-assed, surly, intractable, cold-blooded, belligerent team leader blew out a fragrant bluish cloud, settling back into his chair with a long and satisfied sigh. And something that looked suspiciously like a twinkle in his remarkable green eyes.

-the end-
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