Building the Blind

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Summary

Vin and Ezra build a relationship with each other after Chris, whom they both love, marries Mary Travis.
Building the Blind Part One

Ezra awoke slowly. Lying still, he sighed happily.

Vin was plastered against his back, one arm wrapped tightly around his waist, one leg thrown over both of his.

Smiling he leaned his head back slightly, rubbing it against Vin's chin. He felt Vin come awake, his grip on Ezra tightening slightly.


Ezra wiggled around to face him, "Mornin' to you too." He smiled as Vin moved in to claim a kiss.

They lay there for a long few minutes, happily exchanging kisses and cuddling. Two weeks... sixteen days actually, since they had become a couple, a real couple, committed to each other and their couple-hood as Ezra had dubbed it.

Their first night together as a real couple had been heaven. No more just consoling each other because Chris Larabee was a blind jackass who couldn't see the love and devotion that they had both felt for him. That was behind them.

After Chris had married Mary Travis, he and Vin had committed to building a life together. For the first time they had really made love, not simply had sex, using each other as a substitute for the man they both wanted. That night and every night since, it had been Ezra's name that Vin shouted when he came and Vin's name that he had moaned in ecstasy.

He snuggled closer to Vin, feeling happy, satisfied and content.

Vin pressed one last kiss to his forehead then said, "Time I was up, babe. You know I can't lie around."

"Ah know," Ezra mumbled back, his accent heavy as he began to drift back to sleep.

Vin pulled him closer and held on tightly for a moment.

Ezra's eyes opened again. Damn! Today was the day that Chris Larabee would return to work from his honeymoon. Vin was upset, scared most likely. He slipped his arms around Vin and hugged him gently. "Vin, do you want me to go in with you?" he asked.

Vin took a deep breath and held on a minute longer. "Best not. We agreed to keep our separate schedules. Somebody'd be sure to notice."

"To hell with what people think, Vin, if you need me with you...." He left the rest unsaid, that he would always be there.

"I'll be all right, Ez." He pressed a last kiss to Ezra forehead, "Just give me a few more minutes."

"As long as you need," Ezra promised. Feeling Vin settle back into his arms, he stroked down the other man's back in long soothing caresses.

After a few minutes Vin sighed and pulled away. "Thanks, Ez. Love ya," he murmured before
rolling to his feet and striding to the bathroom.

He didn't hear Ezra's whispered, "Love you, Vin."

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Ezra lay awake with his eyes closed listening to Vin get ready for work.

The last two weeks had been wonderful, as if they were living in a dream world, cut off and protected from reality. They had wrapped themselves up in each other and in their plans for the future.

They had slept together every night, awakened in each other's arms every morning. They had shared long lunches at work as they laid the groundwork to setting up their cover for living together. Realtor's brochures were scattered around Ezra's desk and Chris' desk, which Vin was using as Acting Team Leader. They discussed houses and what it would take to repair them and how much they could be sold for when they had been remodeled, making sure the others overheard. They had explained about deciding to go into business together, buying, remodeling and re-selling old houses. A hobby, they had said, which could be quite profitable.

Evenings after work and weekends were spent looking at houses. Josiah, Buck and JD had accompanied them several times to look at places. Even Nathan had come along once, listening to Vin's suggestions of what could be done with a particular house and looking over Ezra's shoulder in surprise at the sketches he did, bringing those suggestions to life.

They had however kept to their individual schedules at work. Vin went in early. Ezra still came in late. They made certain that Vin's jeep was always parked in the garage and the garage door closed, if he didn't take a cab from Purgatorio.

Now, today, reality would come crashing back into the dream.

Chris was back.

Vin would be at the office alone with him until the others arrived. The two of them were always the first ones in.

Ezra forced himself to lie still, feigning sleep when Vin leaned over him to brush a gentle goodbye kiss across his forehead.

When he heard the front door close he rolled over and covered his head with the pillow, swearing into his feather mattress as visions of Chris and Vin alone together in the office tormented him.

He tried to push them away by reminding himself that Vin had promised that he wouldn't abandon him if Chris decided that he wanted Vin, but it didn't help. He *knew* how much Vin loved Chris.

He didn't stand a chance.

With a curse he slung the pillow across the room and climbed out of the bed.

There was no way that he could go back to sleep.

He went into the bathroom and bathed, the smell of Vin's shampoo and soap tantalizing him. He almost reached for it instead of his own but stopped himself. Someone was bound to notice if he used Vin's things. On the other hand... maybe... maybe he should use Vin's... a subtle staking of a claim. Most people didn't notice smell that much, but Vin would.
He leaned against the shower wall thinking about it, then with a determined smile reached for the bottle of herbal shampoo that Vin used.

Afterwards he dressed carefully. He might not stand a chance if Chris decided that he wanted Vin but he wasn't giving up without a fight.

He chose a jade-green, hand-knitted angora sweater, pairing it with a forest-green suit jacket and matching pants. He slipped into his best black leather, Italian loafers, polished to a high sheen. He put on the solid gold wristwatch, slipped the plain gold wedding band that he sometimes wore undercover on his left hand and a simple signet ring set with jade, half-white/half-green carved into the yin/yang symbol, the dots two tiny diamond chips, on the right.

He regarded himself in the mirror. A slow sensuous smile curved his lips.

Heads would turn.

Good.

He strolled out of the bedroom and smiled at the sight that greeted him in his living room.

The others wouldn't know the place.

A drawing board with a drafting machine attached sat at an angle in one corner. The walls on both sides were covered with photographs and sketches of the houses he and Vin had looked at over the last two weeks.

They had narrowed it down to three possibilities. The one that they wanted was a huge old stone house. They were trying not to seem too eager, hoping to bring the price down. It was more than they wanted to pay for a house that they planned to remodel and sale.

The problem was Ezra wasn't certain that he'd be *able* to part with it if they did buy and remodel it. It was simply too perfect. All that remained of one of the oldest estates in Denver, it was just twelve blocks from Purgatorio. Vin would be able to continue his volunteer work at the Youth Center and with the Sisters of Mercy without having to drive too far. His friends could even walk the distance to visit if they chose. It was just fifteen blocks to work in the opposite direction. Add the fact that it had nearly five acres of land, shielded from the surrounding houses by trees and it was like a piece of the country in the city.

It even had a barn, albeit in disrepair, but a barn none the less, where they could keep their horses. Which was one more thing that could reduce the amount of time that they habitually spent at Mister Larabee's ranch.

In Ezra's opinion anything that reduced the amount of time that he and Vin spent at Larabee's was a good thing. He knew he was being irrational about this. He knew that Vin had promised that he wouldn't leave him for Larabee. He knew that Larabee was married, supposedly happily so. But he just couldn't help it.

Chris was back and, irrational as it might be, he was terrified that Vin would leave him for the other man.

He went into the kitchen and fixed himself a cup of coffee, forcing himself to wait until his usual time to leave for work.
Briefcase in one hand, paper folded under his arm, Starbucks's Mocha-Mint Deluxe Cappuccino in the other hand, Ezra Standish casually sauntered through the lobby of the Federal Building, through security and into the elevator, apparently unaware of the admiring glances that he garnered along the way.

He stepped out of the elevator and strolled down the hallway to Team Seven’s offices, secretly pleased as heads turned in his wake.

He entered the offices, crossed to his and Vin's desks and set his briefcase, paper and Cappuccino down on the desk. With a graceful shrug he let his jacket slide off his shoulders and down his arms, catching it and carefully hanging it on the padded coat hanger that he had brought in just for that purpose then hanging the hanger back on the coatrack, with precise and elegant movements.

Nathan, Josiah and Buck were all watching him with curious looks on their faces. JD was absorbed in his computer screen.

Ezra bent over slightly, and flipped the clasps on his briefcase, taking out his files and laying them on the desk. He bent farther to set the briefcase on the floor under the desk.

Vin stepped out of Chris' office with a sigh. He was both relieved that Chris was back and he could give up the Acting Team Leader's position and upset because Chris was back but now he was married to Mary. He looked up just in time to see Ezra bend over to slip the briefcase under his desk. His cock jumped to attention. Goddamnit! Was the man trying to give him a heart attack? The forest green pants of the silk suit were pulled tight across his lover's perfect buttocks.

As Ezra straighten, Vin could see that he had on the jade green sweater, the soft fuzzy one that felt so wonderful when he touched it. What was Ezra thinking coming to work dressed like that? It was enough to make a man want to toss him over a desk and fuck him right there. Then he noticed the other men looking at Ezra. And just what the hell did they think they were looking at? Ezra was his dammit!

He stalked towards his oblivious lover.

Grabbing Ezra's wrist, he started hauling him towards the conference room.

"Mister Tanner!" Ezra's indignant cry drifted back to the other men, "What is the meaning of this outrage?"

Vin shoved him into the conference room, slammed the door behind them and spun to pin Ezra to the door, bending down to devour his mouth.

Ezra remained tense for a moment then relaxed, opening his mouth to Vin's plundering tongue. When the need for air forced them apart, Vin rested his chin on the top of Ezra's head, breathing deeply. He frowned, "You used my shampoo?"

Ezra seemed to shrink away a bit before murmuring, "Uh... yes."

Vin took another deep breath, "I like that. My scent. Marks you as mine."

Ezra relaxed again.

Back in the office, Josiah gave a slight nod of his head, "Well, now, that explains that."

JD looked up from his computer, "Huh?"
Nathan looked across at his partner, "That explains what?"

Buck was grinning. "Everything, Pard, everything," he answered for Josiah, giving the big man a wink.

And it did explain everything, at least to him. This sudden urge the two men had to remodel an old house. Ha! Damn house probably wouldn't ever get finished... and if it did, by the time it did everybody would be so used to the two to them living together that no one would question it if they just conveniently forgot to sell the house and move on. Had to be Ezra's idea. Their undercover agent was as sly as a fox.

As for why Ezra felt the need to practically seduce Vin in the office this morning. Chris was back... and while his oldest friend might have been blind as a bat to the two men pining over him, Buck hadn't been. He'd seen the looks, the desire in them both. He'd even guessed that they were consoling each other.

Apparently Chris' marriage had changed that consoling into something else and Ezra was just insecure enough to feel threatened by Chris' mere presence. Therefore he waltzed into the office dressed to kill and it had worked too. Vin was definitely distracted from any thought of Chris. Hell! If Buck was any judge, and when it came to sex he was, Vin was jumping Ezra's bones in the conference room right now.

Maybe he ought to go distract Chris, give them a few minutes.

Rising he made his way to Chris' office.

As soon as he closed the door Chris looked up, "Thought I saw Ezra come in."

"He's here."

"I need to talk to him about the Thompson case."

"Well, now Vin grabbed him soon as he got in. Reckon they'll be a few minutes."

Chris sat back in his chair. He wasn't certain what was going on, but he'd give them a few minutes. Vin had been in charge while he was gone. Maybe he wanted to talk to Ezra before Chris did. He picked up a realtor's brochure off his desk and tossed it to Buck. "What's all this? Vin musta carried a whole box of these out of here this morning."

"Well now, seems Vin and Ezra have decided to go into business together. Sort of a hobby that might turn a profit. Vin likes fixing up old houses and it seems Ezra has an eye for design. Would you believe the man can draw? I saw some of the sketches. Damn good." Buck rambled on for quite a while until a soft knock came at the door.

Ezra stuck his head in, "Did you wish to see me, Mister Larabee?"

Chris nodded and Buck stood up to leave, as he passed Ezra he patted the other man's shoulder and leaned into whisper, "Way to go, Pard."

Ezra looked after him with raised eyebrows unsure of what he meant, then shook his head and took a seat. Leaning back, he cocked his head and smiled at Chris, unaware that his hair was slightly mussed and his lips slightly swollen from Vin's kisses. They really hadn't done anything but he felt buzzed, turned on. He didn't realize that he was giving off pheromones or that his unconscious body
language was sending out signals.

Chris looked up and felt his throat tighten. Good Lord! The man looked like he'd just been ravished or more to the point like someone had turned him on and forgotten to turn him off. He veritably glowed. Chris had always known Ezra Standish was attractive. He used that when he sent Ezra undercover. The man had an innate sexuality that attracted men as well as women but Chris had never really felt that attraction. Until now.

He swallowed hard. Damn. Ezra had just come from talking to Vin. Talking? A little voice inquired. Do you really think that they were talking?

He knew Vin was bisexual. The man had told him straight off when he'd joined the team, wanting his boss to know in case it ever became an issue.

He forced his mind away from that and managed to say, "The Thompson case... where are we on that?"

"The buy is set for tomorrow. They haven't stated a place yet. I suspect the warehouse that he used for the initial meeting. He's asking two million for the weapons and he claims to have everything that I asked for, which would tend to indicate that he was involved in the Armory heist or that he has obtained some of the weapons from it."

"Good. Any idea how many men he will have at the buy?"

They discussed the case for quite some time then Ezra rose to go.

"Ez."

He turned back to see Chris holding out a realtor's brochure. "Vin left this in here. Want to give it back to him?"

Ezra looked down at it then smiled, "We've eliminated all the houses this particular realtor had to offer. Just throw it away if you don't mind."

"Sure," Chris tossed the brochure in the waste can beside his desk. "Let me know the minute that Thompson calls."

"Yes, sir," Ezra gratefully fled the room. He returned to the bullpen to discover that everyone except Vin was gone.

As soon as he reappeared, Vin grabbed his arm, "Let's go to lunch."

Ezra looked up at the clock. "Is it that time already?"

"Yeah. It is," Vin practically dragged him out of the office.

They were late leaving and had the elevator to themselves, a fact that Vin took full advantage of, pulling Ezra to him and kissing him passionately.

When he broke the kiss, Ezra asked, "Where are we going?"

"Your place," Vin kissed him again, tugging the sweater out of his pants and running his hands under it. "I'm having you for lunch."

Ezra moaned in pleasure as the hands slid into his pants. "Good Lord!" he gasped, "Vin get a hold of yourself. Someone will see us." He shoved Vin away as the elevator dinged to announce its arrival at
the garage.

Vin stepped back but grinned at his disheveled lover.

Ezra quickly straightened his clothes and fished for his car keys.

Vin grabbed them from him and announced, "I'm driving."

Ezra didn't argue. It was a moot point. If he tried to drive, Vin would be all over him and they'd probably wreck the Jag. At least with Vin driving both his hands would be occupied between the steering wheel and the gearshift.

Then again, maybe not. He shivered in anticipation when, as soon as they were out in traffic, Vin moved his hand from the gearshift to Ezra's knee.

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He barely had time to click the close button on the garage door opener before Vin was out of the driver's side door, around the back of the Jag and pulling him out of the passenger's side door.

The sharpshooter pushed him up the steps to the door into the back hall beside the utility room, reaching around him to fumble blindly and one-handed to punch in the combination to the lock on the steel door, (a safety feature that Larabee had insisted on after the last time Ezra was attacked in his own home) while continuing to work his way under Ezra's sweater with the other hand, simultaneously kissing him breathless. Somehow he managed to get the combination right and they were through the door and Ezra was being waltzed backwards through the short hall to the kitchen, losing his sweater somewhere along the way as Vin continued his assault.

His shoes were kicked off at the archway between the kitchen and the dining room. His pants and silk boxers were discarded on the living room floor, then he was being pushed down on the buttery soft white leather couch while Vin drove him completely insane, kissing, nipping and licking his way down Ezra's body to his cock, taking it in his mouth, sucking hungrily, while he fumbled in the couch cushions seeking a half-remembered tube of lube.

Then Vin was rearing back, kneeling between Ezra's widely spread thighs, grabbing for his wallet, digging a condom out and letting the wallet fall to the floor forgotten as he tore open his pants and rolled it on. He grabbed the lube and smeared it on his condom covered cock then quickly coated his fingers and slipped one into Ezra's tight channel.

Ezra moaned. "Oh, yes! Oh, god yes!" His head rolled to the side as Vin added a second finger, then a third. His glazed vision landed on the picture window, the open curtains, the raised blinds.... "Oh, god!" but Vin was pushing into him now and he could barely remember, let alone remember to *care* that they were doing it on the couch in full view of the world.

He reached up to pull Vin closer, no longer caring about anything except the feeling of having Vin fill him, take him, possess him. One leg, lay on the back of the couch, the other wrapped around Vin's waist, pulling him closer. He whimpered and cried out, "Harder! Deeper! Oh, God! Vin! Please!"

And Vin gave him what he needed, pounding into him, nipping and sucking on his neck and earlobes mumbling incoherently, "Mine! Nobody else's. Ever!"

Then they were soaring up and over that pinnacle, shouting each other's names as they came then spiraling down into dizzying darkness.
He came back to consciousness slowly, pinned to the couch by the limp weight of Vin lying atop him. He nudged the other man and got a grunt in reply.

He turned his head and saw the window and froze. Oh, Shit!

"Vin!" he pushed at the other man. "Wake up! We have to move!"

Vin roused, enough to nuzzle his neck and mumble sleepily, "'ey, babe."

"Vin," Ezra tried again, then sighed. "Mister Tanner!" he snapped.

"What?" Vin asked, raising up slightly.

"We need to move." He said firmly then at Vin's puzzled look he took Vin's chin in his hand and turned his head so that he could see the window.

For a long moment Vin was silent then he said, "Oh..." He blinked then it seemed to register that the curtains and blinds were open, "Oh, shit!" He dropped his head to rest his forehead on Ezra's chest. "I'm sorry, babe. You just looked so good... I couldn't help myself."

Ezra sighed. "It's all right Vin. I didn't really try very hard to stop you, either. But we really should move."

"Yeah." Vin sighed and slowly rose off him, gently pulling his cock free of Ezra's body. He bent to brush a kiss across Ezra's lips as Ezra followed him up.

They retreated to the bedroom, where Ezra headed for the bathroom only to have Vin pull him back and push him onto the bed.

"Vin, we need to get back to the office."

"Long lunch," Vin declared. "Just need to hold you a little bit, Ez," he added softly.

Ezra sighed. It wasn't as if he could deny Vin and he wanted to be held anyway, to bask just a little bit in the memory of their intense lovemaking, in the reassurance that Vin did want him. Vin pulled the comforter that was folded at the foot of the bed up to cover them and Ezra settled into Vin's arms. Both men were asleep in minutes.

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Vin awoke sometime later and lifted his head from the bed. He thought he heard something. After a minute he identified it. One of their cell phones was ringing. Scrambling off the bed he staggered sleepily towards the sound. It took him a minute to find it. It was Ezra's, in the pocket of his pants laying on the living room floor.

He managed to get it out and opened but it had stopped ringing. He stared at it for a moment then headed back to the bedroom.

"Ez!" He called to his lover, who was sitting up on the bed looking around. "Somebody called." He held out the cellphone.

"Shit!" Ezra swore softly, "Thompson is the only one with this number." He threw back the covers and stood grabbing for the phone. He pushed some buttons then gave a curt nod, turning his back to Vin.

A moment later he spoke into the phone, "Mister Thompson, my apologies for not answering a
moment ago. I was... occupied." His voice was smooth as silk, not giving away a hint that he was standing naked in his bedroom with Vin's come seeping out of him. "An hour? Very well. Where shall I meet you?"

He looked around and frowned. "I see. However, I am not at home at the moment. Could we make it an hour and a half? That would give me time to get there. You do remember where it is?" He paused. "Yes," he said then repeated the house number of the safe house they were using as his residence for this case. "I'll be there."

He turned back to Vin. "I have to get cleaned up. Call Chris. Tell him to have JD get over here ASAP with a wire. The buy's going down now."

"Shit!" Vin swore and grabbed the bedside phone to call in.

Chris Larabee looked at the clock again. It was almost two o'clock and his undercover agent and sharpshooter weren't back from lunch. He stalked out into the bullpen.

Buck looked up. "They're probably looking at houses and forgot the time. Developed a real habit of that the last week or so," he said, trying to head off the explosion.

"Well, Tanner's not in charge any more. Soon as they get here, I want to see them." He had just turned to go back into the office when the phone rang.

JD grabbed it. "Dunne. Yeah, sure Vin, he's right here."

Chris grabbed the phone. "Where the hell are you?" He snapped then there was a pause. "What? Shit! Hang on while I put you on the speakerphone."

A moment later Vin's voice came out of the speaker. "Thompson called. The buy's going down now. Ez needs JD to meet him at the townhouse with a wire. Thompson's man is gonna be at the safe house in an hour and a half to pick us up."

"Where is the buy going down." Chris demanded.

"I'm not sure. Ez hasn't told me.... Hang on." There was fumbling noise then Vin called out. "Ez! Chris wants to talk to you."

Mumbled cursing came over the line then Ezra's voice snapped. "We'll need a surveillance team at the safe house. You'd best have JD bring a couple of tracking devices too. Mister Thompson is being quite paranoid. He did not tell me where we would be going."

"That's gonna to make it damned hard to cover you!" Buck put in.

"I am aware of that, Mister Wilmington, but it can't be helped. If we want the bust we have to do it Thompson's way."

"I don't like this, Ezra," Chris snapped.

"Neither do I, but Mister Tanner and I have worked too hard on this to let it slip away because Thompson is being paranoid!"

It was a good thing that Chris couldn't see Ezra standing in the bedroom, dripping from his shower. Vin wasn't so lucky. He reached for the dripping man.
A firm hand in the middle of his chest and an annoyed look from Ezra as he mouthed, "Go get cleaned up!" stopped him.

Turning away, with more strength of will than he knew he had, he stalked into the bathroom to wash off. By the time he returned, Ezra was off the phone, dried off and half dressed. He had left his shirt open for JD to attach the wire and his jacket and tie were tossed over his arm. He looked Vin up and down then nodded. In the two weeks that Vin had been Acting Team Leader he had begun dressing a lot sharper with Ezra's help. He still had his own and different style but he looked extremely good. He had on dark indigo jeans, with a crisp pleat, a matching jacket, a raw silk shirt in turquoise that brought out his eyes, a bolo tie with a turquoise stone and ostrich skin boots.

"That's a bit dressier than Victor Tyler usually wears but hopefully no one will ask about it. We have about fifteen minutes before JD will be here with the wire. We should then just have time to get to the safe house in time for Thompson's man to pick us up. Mister Larabee is bringing the money."

He motioned Vin to exit the bedroom first and closed the door firmly behind them. He sniffed the air in the living room and grabbed a can of air freshener, spraying it around hoping to remove the scent of sex from the room. He got a rag from the kitchen and quickly sprayed the couch with leather cleaner and wiped it down.

When JD arrived he was sitting quietly on the couch while Vin paced.

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Chris Larabee was not a happy man. He didn't like not knowing what was going on. He hadn't even finished reading the reports on what had been happening with the Thompson case and now the timetable had been moved up. Two of his men were going into danger and there was something going on between them that he had not known about and wasn't sure he wanted to know about.

He'd been gone two weeks on his honeymoon and come home to feel like he'd stepped through the looking glass. His normally cool, reserved undercover agent had waltzed into the office, dressed to kill, giving off, 'I'm too sexy for my clothes' vibes to everything that moved, including him. His normally taciturn sharpshooter had babbled endlessly about houses and remodeling and Ezra, Ezra, and more Ezra. Then they had disappeared together for a two-hour lunch. The two of them were obviously having some sort of an affair.

His oldest friend was running interference for them with him. Josiah was looking like the proud father of the bride. While Nathan and JD appeared oblivious, except for being caught up in the house hunting game with the rest of the bunch.

Maybe Mary was right. Maybe he should step up to the AD's chair when Orrin retired. The whole damned lot of them were stark raving mad.

He sat back down in the back of the swaying surveillance van. They were following Thompson's man, who had picked Vin and Ezra up at the safe house twenty minutes before. JD was tracking them with the devices that he had put on the two AFT agents. Ezra had one tracking device in his shoe and one in his jacket lapel. Vin had one in his boot and another in his wristwatch. They were both wired as well. Unfortunately no one seemed inclined to say anything. The only way that they knew the wires were working was that Vin or Ezra would occasionally make a comment just to assure them that the wires were working.

Teams Three and Five were on backup duty, each in a separate van, shadowing the surveillance van on parallel streets following the softly voice directions that Josiah was feeding them as he drove the van following JD's instructions as he followed the blip on the screen.
It was nuts. He never should have allowed them to do it. He should have told Ezra to call Thompson back and cancel the meet... but then they would have lost him for sure. The dance had gone on for too long. If they pulled back now, Thompson would find another buyer and all those weapons, including three hand-held rocket launchers from the armory heist would hit the streets.

He sighed and banged his head against the side of the van. He hadn't really had a choice but he damned well didn't have to like it. Wherever they wound up he wouldn't be able to get a man inside. They would have to surround the outside and pray that nothing went wrong inside.

He leaned forwards and buried his head in his hands. Yeah, right. Vin and Ezra would be inside. What could possibly go wrong? Anything. Everything. The fucking impossible. Leave it to Vin and Ezra. They could find trouble in a church choir. The fools, the crazy, beautiful fools. Just a couple of overgrown boys. His boys.

"Please, God, keep them safe," he whispered.

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"Nice scenery," Vin's mutter came through the headphones.

JD adjusted the volume and checked the tracer again. "We're leaving the city, Chris," he informed his boss.

Larabee growled, "Where the hell are they going? Does Thompson have anything up here?"

"He's a member of a hunting club up in the mountains." Buck said, flipping through the info sheets they had on the gunrunner.

"Shit! How are we going to follow them if they go onto a private hunting preserve?" Chris snarled. "What else is up there?"

"Small air field." Josiah called back from the driver's seat. He was familiar with practically every place a small plane could put down in the Denver area, as he was a pilot. "Could be going there if they had the goods flown in."

"What's it like?"

"Like any airfield. Lots of open space, a few buildings, a tower and a hanger. No cover. No way to get close unseen," Josiah said with a sigh. "If we knew for certain that that is where they're going we could circle and get in position. There is another road up there...."

"Have Team Three do it. Give them the directions, Josiah," Chris ordered.

"But if it's not the right place...," Buck protested.

"Then we still have Team Five for back up... but if it is where they're going we need to have someone there ahead of them." Chris snapped, "We can't follow them in. It'll blow Vin and Ezra's cover. If they chose the airfield, we'll have to hang back and be back up for Team Three. If they go to the hunting club there will still be two teams to take them down."

Buck subsided but he clearly didn't like it. JD stayed glued to his monitors. Nathan began checking his medical supplies.

Half an hour later the car turned onto the airfield access road and Chris both breathed a sigh of relief and swore softly. He was glad that he had taken the chance and put Team Three in position at the
airfield but he hated not being able to be on the scene, himself.

Josiah pulled over and stopped beside the road, getting out and raising the hood as if the van had engine trouble. Team Five pulled in behind them.

Chris changed channels on his headset so that he could listen in on Team Three's communications, while signaling JD to put the link from Vin and Ezra's wires on the speaker so that he could hear both.

God! Could there be anything worse than having to sit in the van parked beside the road, half a mile from the airfield, listening and helpless to actually do anything, having to depend on someone else to keep his boys safe?

He soon found out there could be.

Everything was going well. Ezra was smooth as silk as always. Thompson sounded pleased to do business with him and completely unaware that he was dealing with the ATF. A crate had been opened, Vin had examined the guns and declared them to be as advertised.

Ezra had asked about the rocket launchers and they had been walked over to another crate and from the sounds one of Thompson's men was prying the top off when Vin's voice came through the wire in a harshly whispered, "No! Don't shoot!"

Then all hell broke loose. Gunshots rang out, accompanied by shouts and screams.

Josiah, listening through his headset as he pretended to work under the hood of the van, slammed it shut and ran for the driver's door, yanking it open and plowing into the driver's seat only to find himself colliding with Larabee who had charged forwards to start the van himself. The smaller man bounced off the big profiler and ended up sprawled sideways in the passenger seat as Josiah cranked the van and slung gravel as he tore up the road towards the airfield.

Larabee straightened himself up in the seat and yelled into his headset. "What's happening? Hamilton! What the hell is going on?" he demanded of Team Three's leader.

Mark Hamilton had sent his men in as soon as the first shot was fired but he wasn't answering Larabee. From the sounds coming over the headsets, several of Hamilton men were being sick.

That and the lack of response from the team leader had Chris swearing and pounding his fist on the dash as Josiah careened towards the airfield. Moments later the van screeched to a sliding stop just short of the hanger where several of Hamilton's men were kneeling on the ground puking. Two others holding handkerchiefs over their mouths and noses with one hand and pointing their guns with the other stood over Thompson and his bodyguard who were puking their guts up on the tarmac.

Chris was out of the van and into the hanger before anyone could stop him. He took a deep breath to yell Vin and Ezra's names then froze, a gagging cough stopping him with his mouth open. Spinning around he staggered back out into the open and fell to his knees, puking. His eyes watered and tears ran down his face.

Buck who had been several steps behind him stopped before he got to the hanger as the smell registered with him.

Skunk. Pure unadulterated skunk. Fresh and coming boiling out of the hanger.

He grabbed a handkerchief and covered his mouth and nose as his eyes watered.
Several more men staggered out of the building and like the ATF agents fell to the ground puking helplessly. None of them were Vin or Ezra.

Buck grabbed Chris up and hauled him back away from the confined, concentrated smell of skunk.

Nathan jumped out of the back of the van, a wet handkerchief tied over his face, looking like an old west bandit. "Everybody get up wind!" he shouted, then turning to Hamilton and his men demanded, "Anybody got a gas mask?"

Several men staggered to their feet and looked around trying to determine what the hell was upwind.

Josiah pointed to the windsock on the top of the small tower and started herding anyone that he could towards the back of the hanger.

Team Five's van pulled up just then and Josiah told them to circle around behind the hanger.

Someone produced a gas mask from somewhere, Nathan didn't bother asking where, just grabbed it, put it on and headed into the hanger. Vin and Ezra were both allergic to tear-gas. He didn't even want to think about how they would react to skunk... especially Ezra who was severely allergic to the tear-gas. The big medic swore softly but continuously as he plowed through the hanger looking for the missing agents and not finding any sign of them. He did however find the bodies of four bullet-ridden skunks. Now he understood Vin's desperate yell just before everything went to hell. If the idiot that had opened fire had just stayed quiet and still the skunks would have most likely just ambled off.

The banging of a door drew his attention to a side door not far from the crates holding the rocket launchers. He turned his steps that way.

Vin would have tried to get them out of there when the shooting started.

The door opened under a shed and the sound of violent retching led him straight to them.

Vin was on his knees, obviously having already been sick and over the worst of it. He was holding on to Ezra who, although he no longer had anything in his stomach to throw up was still retching uncontrollably in spite of being practically unconscious.

Neither of them seemed even aware that Ezra's right sleeve was soaked with blood where he had apparently caught a stray bullet.

Yanking off the gas mask Nathan fell to his knees beside them and yelled into his headset. "Officer down! We need Med-Evac!"

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Several hours later, six men sat in various places around a room in Four Corner's Mercy Hospital. The seventh lay on the bed, sedated. The bullet wound had been just a scratch. The doctors had simply stitched and bandaged it, but they had sedated Ezra, as it was the only way to stop his retching. He was attached to a heart monitor and had an IV of saline to keep him from becoming too dehydrated.

Vin had refused to be admitted but sat in the chair next to Ezra's bed, holding one limp hand in both of his and staring blankly at the face of the man he both knew intimately and barely knew at all.

He lay his head down next to their joined hands and thought back to the first time he had awakened in Ezra's condo.
Flashback

He'd been drunk. Blind, stinking, drunk.

He's awakened in a strange place, violently ill. Rolling off the surface he'd found himself on he'd landed on his hands and knees and puked. When he finished he'd sat back, leaning against whatever he had been laying on.

"Where am I?" he'd slurred.

"In my condo," a very familiar and highly annoyed southern drawl had answered.

"What'm I doin' 'ere?"

"Puking on my carpet... my white carpet!" The voice was even more annoyed if possible. "This is the thanks I get for saving your inebriated ass!"

He'd tilted his head back to gaze drunkenly up at Ezra, "Don't recall askin' ya ta sav' me."

"Ungrateful as well," Ezra had snapped.

"So, what'd ya sav' me from."


"Didn't see him," Vin declared.

"I can believe that. As drunk as you were, you undoubtedly thought he was Mister Larabee, finally come to take you home from that horrid gay bar you were cavorting in."

"What!?" Vin yelled then grabbed his head as it attempted to explode.

"You were making a beeline for Mister McKindley, tall, blond, dressed in dark clothing...."


"And fortunately I don't think he saw you. I am however quite sure he was looking for you... as that deathtrap you call a vehicle was parked on the street in the middle of the district."

Ezra marched over to Vin and thrust out a hand opening it to reveal several aspirin. He had a glass of water in the other hand.

"Take these," he ordered before returning to his diatribe. "Whatever possessed you to drive your own vehicle to a gay bar not ten blocks from your home, leave it parked on the street in plain sight, taking no precautions whatsoever to keep it or yourself from being recognized? Were you *trying* to get outted by IA and tossed off of the team? Do you think that would bring you closer to your goal of seducing Mister Larabee."

"I ain't interested in Chris that way," Vin mumbled.

"Bullshit. Your infatuation is so obvious that it is pitiful. How the man can possibly be blind to it is an absolute mystery to me."
Ezra bent over, grabbed Vin under the arms and hauled him back up on the couch. He shoved a wastebasket into the sharpshooter's hands. "Try to hit this the next time you feel the need to practice your projectile vomiting."

He then opened the doors to the patio and set a fan up to remove the smell of the vomit as much as possible then began cleaning up the worst of it from his carpet, muttering darkly as he did so. "My cleaning service is going to charge me extra for this. I'll have to call them and schedule a special cleaning. I ought to make you pay for it!"

"Write ya a check," Vin muttered.

"And what good will it be?" Ezra demanded angrily.

"I got money."

"You've got money? No one would ever guess."

"Yeah, well I don't spend it less I have ta. Gotta have somethin' ta fall back on." He leaned his head back against the soft leather of the couch. Damn but the couch was comfortable.

"So, how much?" Ezra asked.

"How much what?" Vin asked.

"Money, Mister Tanner. How much money do you have? Enough to pay to have my carpet cleaned? Enough to reimburse me for the hundred and fifteen dollars in cover charges I racked up looking for you after I spotted McKindley and slipped out of the bar I was in and saw that junk pile of yours parked on the street? How much money do you have?"

"Reckon it's enough. Couple of hundred thousand in my money market account. 'Bout fifty in the savings. Maybe twenty thou in my checking."

Ezra was silent.

Vin cracked an eye to look up at him.

The undercover agent was staring at him with his mouth open. "A couple of hundred *thousand* dollars? Mister Tanner, did you say a couple of hundred thousand dollars?" His voice rose near the end and Vin winced.

"Yeah."

"Where the hell did you get that kind of money?" Ezra demanded.

"Hell, Ez. I hunted bounty. I's good too. Didn't go after no penny ante stuff. Some of the guys I brought in had fifty 'r a hundred thousand dollars on their heads. Bounty hunter ain't got no insurance, no unemployment. Had ta make sure I had money put back 'n case I got hurt, an' couldn't hunt...," he trailed off.

After a long moment Vin asked, "What was you doin' down there?"

"The same thing you were, Mister Tanner. I merely had enough sense to take some very basic precautions. I took a cab. I did not drive my own personal and *very recognizable* vehicle. I changed my appearance, dressing to fit the neighborhood rather than simply heading out straight from work *in what I had worn to work*. I did not frequent a bar close to my home nor did I drink
Another long silence, then Vin said, "Reckon if McKinley saw my jeep the shit is going to hit the fan."

Ezra sighed, "I took care of it."

"How 'n hell could ya take *care'a* that?"

"I called one of my snitches, paid him two hundred dollars to say that he had asked me to meet him in the bar I pulled you out of. I then filed a report to that effect, adding that as I did not wish either to take the Jag into that neighborhood or go into a gay bar alone, I commandeered you as backup and we used your jeep for the meet. Even if McKindley actually saw us, it is covered."

"What if he talks to your snitch and he don't say what ya told him to?"

"By now the gentleman in question is drugged out of his head. He most likely will tell McKindley nothing except that he saw me and I gave him the money. He won't be capable of telling him anything else and McKindley will have to accept the explanation. After all, the report has been filed, the snitch is a known homosexual, who is also known to frequent the bars in that neighborhood."

"Thought of everything did ya?"

"I'm an undercover agent, Mister Tanner. My life depends on thinking of everything... and I have been concealing my sexual preferences for most of my life. I know how to do it."

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End Flashback

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With a sigh, Vin pushed the memories aside and raised his head to look at Ezra again. Damn but he looked so thin lying in the damn hospital bed. His skin was deathly pale and he seemed to be barely breathing.

Josiah looked up from where he was sprawled on one of the larger chairs the group had commandeered. Rising he lay a hand on Vin's shoulder. "He's going to be all right, son," he said quietly.

"I know. He's tougher than he looks," Vin said sitting back in the chair but not releasing Ezra's hand. He rubbed circles on the back of it with a thumb. A faint smile curved his lips as he gazed at his injured lover.

Chris sat up straight in his chair, raising his head to look across the bed at Vin. He knew the look that was on his best friend's face. The look of remembrance. The sharpshooter was obviously thinking back on his time with their undercover agent.

Damn! It was so blatantly obvious to him now. They were a couple, clearly had been for some time. How could he have missed it?

It had been a shock at the airfield, having Vin shoulder him aside snapping at the EMTs that *he* was Ezra's legal next of kin and had the Medical Power of Attorney as well, to check with the hospital if they didn't believe it.
Then 'his boys' had been gone in the Med-Evac chopper, leaving the rest of them to do the mop up at
the crime scene. That had been a real trip. Nobody had wanted to take the bad guys with them. They
had ended up calling for a paddy wagon and shoving them all in it. He hated to think what the
holding cell down at the Federal Building now smelled like.

Vin had managed to give a quick statement before the chopper had gotten there to take Ezra to the
hospital. Apparently a family of skunks had decided to take a stroll across the hanger. One of
Thompson's men had seen them and panicked, drawing his gun and opening fire. Vin's desperate
"No! Don't shoot!" had been ignored. The skunk family had gone down fighting, any that hadn't
managed to spray had had their scent bags exploded by the bullets.

Vin had grabbed Ezra and dove for the side door. They had escaped being in the skunks' direct line
of fire but had still gotten a good lung full of the scent. A stray bullet had clipped Ezra's arm but
neither man had noticed, as they had collapsed not far from the door retching violently.

Jesus! Skunks! Chris shook his head slightly. It could only happen to Vin and Ezra.

After they left, Nathan had gone around handing out Dramamine like it was candy. There wasn't a
soul at the bust that wasn't nauseated.

He almost grinned but felt it fade away. His boys... but maybe not anymore. When he had finally
arrived at the hospital, he'd had the nurse on duty check both Ezra's and Vin's legal next of kin and
Medical Power of Attorney. Ezra's listed Vin. Vin's listed Ezra. He couldn't help the feeling of hurt
that learning that had caused. It had only helped slightly to find that both had made provisions for
him to be the second, should they both be incapacitated at the same time and that the changes had
been made the Monday after his wedding.

Did they think that being married would make him care less about them? They were family. That
wasn't going to change just because he and Mary had finally tied the knot. Was this what it felt like
when your kids grew up and started pulling away from you? Did it leave you feeling empty and
helpless, uncertain of your place in their lives? For five years he had always known where Vin
would be if he needed him... right there beside him. All he ever had to do was ask and Vin would be
there for him. Hell, most of the time he didn't even have to ask. Vin would help with the horses, do
repairs at the ranch, go camping, or look after him if he was hurt.

And while Ezra wasn't much for mucking out stalls or doing carpentry work, he'd lend a hand where
his expertise lay. Chris had paid less taxes in the last four years than ever before, thanks to Ezra's
grasp of tax laws and willingness to sort through Chris' paperwork and straighten it out. He'd set up a
filing system and put the ranch books on the computer after the first year he had done Chris' taxes.
After that he had stopped by the first of every month to sort receipts and file them, keeping the
paperwork straight.

Until this month. The thought caught him by surprise. This was the second. He'd gotten home from
his honeymoon on Sunday. He'd been home two days and neither Vin nor Ezra had showed up.
Buck and JD had been by, along with Nettie and Casey. Josiah, Nathan and Raine had come by.
Even the Travis' had been out, but Vin and Ezra hadn't come by the ranch... or called.

True, he and Mary had been busy, moving some of her things out there, and getting her house ready
to sell, but he'd had his cellphone with him all the time. Neither of them had called his cellphone or
called the ranch either. There were no messages on the answering machine from them and none of
their numbers were on his caller ID.

He scrubbed his hands over his face and ran them through his hair, standing he stepped out of the
room. He needed some air.
He leaned against the wall outside the door.

He was losing his boys.

Chris looked up at the sound of high heels clicking on the tiled floor of the hospital corridor. He straightened, "Mary."

She smiled and came to him.

He reached out and pulled her into a hug.

She held him close a moment then pulled back, her nose wrinkling slightly. One eyebrow lifted.

"Sorry," he sighed. "We got skunked. I took four showers and changed clothes. It's not nearly as bad as it was. Poor Nathan stunk to high heaven."

"Skunked?" she looked incredulous.

"Yeah. A family of four skunks ambled into the buy. Some idiot started shooting at them. Stunk up everything. Even the weapons smell."

"Is that why you're here?"

"No. Ez caught a slug. Just a graze but then he reacted badly to the skunk juice. Worse than he does to tear-gas. Docs want to keep him over night. Give him fluids. He kept retching till they sedated him. He's still out."

"Are you planning to stay here tonight?" she asked. She moved back in close again, one hand resting on his chest.

"Well, I usually stay until he wakes up...."

"The others are here aren't they?"

"Yeah, but...."

"He's going to be fine, isn't he?"

"Well... yeah. They're supposed to release him in the morning."

"Then you really don't need to stay, do you? You can be back first thing in the morning."

"Well... uh... let me just...." he gestured helplessly towards the room. He'd have thought Mary would understand. She'd been around them long enough to know that the seven always gathered around a fallen member even if it wasn't serious. But she was his wife now, maybe she had different expectations now.

He stepped back into the room. "Guys.... Mary's here.... I... uh...."

Vin stood up from Ezra's bedside but didn't release his partner's hand. "It's all right, Cowboy. You head on home. You got a family to think about now. In fact, alla ya'll can go on. I'll be stayin' with Ez. Ain't no need for you all to hang around here. Ain't like it's serious."

"I'll be back first thing tomorrow," Chris assured him with a relieved sigh.
"Ain't no need. I can get him checked out and took home. Reckon I'll need tomorrow off. He ain't gonna be up to coming in an' I don't want ta leave him alone."

Chris nodded. Ezra would be weak as a kitten tomorrow. He'd need someone with him.

The others slowly roused themselves from the chairs that they had been lounging in and said their goodbyes, some more reluctantly than others.

Nathan seemed glad to go. He no doubt wanted another shower and change of clothes. He had taken the worst of the smell, going into the hanger to look for Vin and Ezra. Even after the several showers he felt like he still stunk. In a way he was glad that Raine was out of town for the week. He might feel halfway decent by the time she returned.

Buck and JD dragged their feet, glad to not have to spend the night in the uncomfortable chairs they had been sitting on but reluctant to leave their two team members alone in the hospital. Buck gave Vin a smile and a nod, before steering JD out.

Josiah was the last to go, "You know, son, I'll be glad to stay with you."

"Know, 'Siah," he lowered his voice, "Kinda looking forwards to it being just me'n him. Know he's gonna be asleep but... ya know."

Josiah patted his shoulder and nodded before slipping out the door.

Chris stood a long moment longer then said, "Sorry, I don't want to go, but..."

"Mary's waiting. I know Cowboy. Go home. We'll be fine."

"Yeah. Don't doubt that," Chris stepped forwards and held out his hand.

Vin reached across the bed and took it, clasping forearms in a warrior's grip, but he maintained his grip on Ezra's hand with his other hand.

Chris slowly drew his hand back then reached down to brush the hair away from Ezra's forehead. "Night, Ez," he murmured quietly.

Then he turned and left, going to Mary who stood just outside the open door.

When they were gone Vin sank back into the chair beside the bed after pressing a kiss to Ezra's forehead. It was something that he hadn't been comfortable doing with the others here, even if it did seem as if Buck and Josiah, at least, knew about and seemed to approve of their relationship.

For a long moment he stared at the door Chris had disappeared through and tried to envision him with Mary, walking with her, holding her close, maybe even kissing her. He couldn't even conjure the images and somehow it didn't matter. He didn't even care.

He turned back to Ezra. He drew the hand he held to his lips and kissed the back of it.

This was his mate. So like him and so different from him.

That first night, after Ezra had cleaned up the mess Vin had made he'd put him to bed in the spare room to sleep off the hangover. Strange as it might seem their mutual love for Chris Larabee had brought them closer together.

They hadn't started sleeping together right away but they had become friends. Turning to each other when they needed to commiserate over something that Chris had said or done to make them feel
slighted.

They had even started going out together to the bars, Vin giving in to Ezra's insistence that they be more circumspect when doing so. They always took a cab, never went anywhere they might be known, dressed to fit in with the crowd wherever they had decided to go. It was one of these "dates" that had indirectly led to their arrangement. They had agreed that they would go out together but if they met someone they could leave separately.

It was working perfectly, until the night Vin let himself be picked up by a man that Ezra knew had a reputation for bare-backing, demanding unprotected sex from his partners. When he saw Vin about to leave with the man he went ballistic.

Vin had been grinning up at the tall blonde, leaning into the arm around his shoulders when someone grabbed his arm and he suddenly found himself facing a furious Ezra Standish.

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Flashback

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Ezra grabbed Vin's arm, jerking him away from the man he was with. "What in hell do you think you are doing?" he yelled.

Vin just looked puzzled.

"Are you out of your mind? This SOB bare-backs!"

The blonde made the mistake of grabbing Ezra's arm and yanking him around to face him.

Ezra released his hold on Vin just long enough to twist his arm free from the man's grip. He snapped out a lightening quick blow to the man's diaphragm that took his breath away then ducked down, grabbed the man by his balls with both hands and yank upwards.

You could have heard the man shriek in LA.

He hit the floor and curled up, both hands cupped over his genitals.

Ezra didn't give him a second look, just grabbed Vin by the hair and started hauling him out of the bar.

Vin was too shocked by this suddenly violent version of his friend to offer any resistance. He stumbled along behind Ezra just trying to keep his hair from being ripped out.

The bouncer started to step in front of them but Ezra snarled something and he stepped back, reaching to yank the door open for the furious man.

Outside, Ezra hauled Vin several blocks down the sidewalk before shoving him against a wall and pulling out his cell phone to call them a cab.

As soon as he got his bearings Vin had lunged at Ezra only to be slammed back into the wall. "What the hell do ya think yer are doin'?" he yelled at Ezra, echoing the words Ezra had thrown at him. "Ya got no right!"

Except for making sure he stayed where he was, Ezra ignored him until he completed his call. Then he turned back to Vin pinning him back against the wall.
"No right?" he snarled. "I'm the one you come running to when one of these apes hurts you. I'm the one that has to make up excuses when you can't go in to work because of it. I'm the one that has to listen to you moan and bitch that you can't find anyone that cares about you. I'm the one that deals with your hangovers and morning after blues! And I've got no right to tell you that you're acting like a god damn idiot?! I'm your friend! I care what happens to you even if you don't! Do you think I want to watch you die of AIDS? Do you? You're the closest thing to a friend I've got! I can't do that... I can't!"

With a disgusted sound he suddenly stepped back, releasing Vin. Holding up his hands he shook his head. "I can't do this anymore. I can't stand watching you play Russian Roulette with your health."

He moved farther away. "I'm sorry. Go on back if you want to. Find some other Larabee clone and... do what you want. But don't ask me to come out with you again... and don't come running to me in the morning when you wake up and realize that it's just a fucking fantasy."

The cab Ezra had called pulled up just then and he opened the door and climbed in. He had reached to pull the door closed when Vin grabbed it.

"Ez! Wait!" Vin clung to the door, not letting Ezra close it. "I'm going with you... we can talk about this." He climbed into the cab.

Ezra retreated across the seat. "There's nothing left to talk about. You're a self destructive SOB and I can't stand watching you self-destruct, not anymore!" He reached over the back of the front seat and handed the cabbie a bill, giving him the address of the condo.

The cabbie started at the hundred-dollar bill. "I can't change this."

"Screw the change. Just get me home," Ezra snapped.

"Ez," Vin pleaded.

Ezra covered his ears and leaned forward, burying his face in his knees, "No, no, no, no! I won't listen to you! You won't change! You'll never change and I can't do this any more! I can't watch you trying to kill yourself!"

"Ez, I'm not *trying* to kill myself!"

Ezra straightened turning his searing gaze on Vin. "The hell you're not! Every time you leave one of those bars with a stranger, you're putting your life at risk! Do you have any idea how many gay men are HIV positive? Do you? Do you know that the type of gay man that frequents gay bars and behaves promiscuously is more than twice as likely to be HIV positive than those in exclusive relationships? And to go with a man that is known for bare-backing is just plain stupid!"

"I didn't know he was known for bare-backing!"

"Did you ask him if he practiced safe sex?"

"Figured we'd get to that when we got to that."

"Are you nuts? By then it would be too late. He was damn near twice your size!"

"So what? I was an Army Ranger! I coulda took him if I had to! Hell! You took him out!"

"Yeah, right! You could take him... lying on your belly with your pants around your knees!"
"Oh, shit! Ez! I'm sorry."

The cab pulled up at Ezra's and Ezra slung the door open and climbed out, almost running for the condo, one hand pressed to his cheek where Vin had slapped him.

Vin plunged out of the cab and followed, running after him. "God! Ez! Please! I didn't mean ta... Ez!" He came up behind Ezra as the other man fumbled with the key.

Ezra got the door opened and fled inside.

Vin forced his way into the apartment before the door could close.

Ezra retreated across the living room.

"Ez, please... I'm so sorry..." Vin stepped closer.

"No! Back off! Touch me and I'll kill you, you bastard! After everything I've done for you...."

Vin backed off. "I'm sorry, Ez. I swear to god. I never meant to hit ya. Please, forgive me? I'll... I'll do anything... if you'll just forgive me... just tell me what you want me to do." He sank to sit on the carpeted floor. "Please, Ez. I'm so sorry. I swear I never meant to hit ya."

Ezra stared at him, for a long moment then let out a deep sigh. "Aw, hell. I always was a mouthy bastard. Took you longer to slug me than most."

"Won't happen again," Vin vowed softly as he rose from the foyer floor to step into the living room.

Ezra had moved to the wet bar and had two glasses out filling them. He took one and moved to sit on the couch, motioning Vin to take the other glass.

Vin picked it up, "This mean I'm forgiven?"

"For striking me? Yes. For trying to get yourself killed? Never."

Vin crossed to the couch and sank down on the soft leather couch. "Ezra, I swear to you, I ain't *trying* to get myself killed."

"Bare-backing is like going to a bust without your vest."

"You're a fine one ta talk 'bout not wearing a vest, Ez."

"This isn't about me and I do wear a vest when I can. I seldom can when I'm undercover. It would blow my cover. But when it comes to sex, Vin, I always use protection. Always, even though I get tested regularly and have never tested positive for any STDs. We take enough risks in our profession without taking them in our private lives."

Vin slumped letting his head drop back onto the back of the couch. "All right," he said tiredly, "I told ya, I'd do whatever ya wanted so, just tell me what ya want from me."

"I want you to take better care of yourself. If you don't have enough respect for yourself to do it, then have enough respect for Mister Larabee."

"What do you mean? I got lots of respect for Chris!"
"Do you? Tell me, how do you think he would react if he should someday recognize and return your feelings only to discover that your promiscuity had infected you with the HIV virus? Do you think he'd still be willing to have a relationship with you, knowing that you would always have to use protection? Knowing that sooner or later he would end up watching you die of AIDS? The man is nothing if not possessive... just knowing the life style you had led to become infected would repulse him. And even if he never falls in love with you, he has watched too many people he cares about die to want to watch you die. Especially like that, slowly and painfully."

"So what are you saying? That I can't be with anybody if I ever hope to be with Chris?"

"No. I'm saying that you need to be more careful. Find someone, some one person who is willing to take care of your physical needs, knowing that you are carrying a torch, if you will, for someone else. Someone who will be willing to practice safe sex."

"I know what you're saying Ez. And I reckon I know you're right. The way I'm living is dangerous... but where am I gonna find some body like that? Hell it's hard enough to find someone to be with when you're not in love with somebody else."

Ezra looked down, coloring slightly. "I need someone too, Vin. I go out, I play the game. I flirt and tease but I haven't actually had sex with another... person in years. There simply hasn't been anyone that I trust that much. I do, however, trust you... so if you wish... I would be willing to... provide you with whatever sexual favors you require in exchange for the same. We would of course use protection at all times."

He refused to look up at Vin.

Vin could only stare at him in disbelief. Ezra hadn't had sex with another person in years?! "You ain't had sex with another person in years?!" He couldn't keep the disbelief out of his voice.

Ezra turned several shades redder. "I believe that is what I just said."

"But... but... you're beautiful!"

"Thank you," Ezra swallowed hard. "That is not, however, what I was asking. I realize that the vast majority of your recent partners bear a more than passing resemblance to Mister Larabee and I fail that test completely. But I do know about your feelings for him and would not hold it against you should you call out his name whilst we are engaged in the act."

"Ez, I... I don't know what to say. I mean... can I ask you something?"

"Of course."

"How could ya go for years without having sex? I can't hardly believe that.... Not that I think you're lying it's just...."

"Beyond your comprehension."

Vin nodded.

Ezra sighed. "I have had a great deal of practice at pushing aside what I want in favor of what must be done, or what someone else wants. One of the first things I learned as a child was that what I wanted didn't matter. Only what Mother wanted mattered."

Vin could hear the bitter note in that last statement.
Ezra went on, "Nothing in my experience since has led me to believe differently. I spend more time undercover than out and when I'm under I must always focus on what is necessary to get the job done. I can not allow myself to become distracted especially not by sexual needs."

He shrugged. "So, I take care of myself or hire a discreet professional. Of late I find that I no longer care to engage a professional. My need to feel desirable and sought after is fulfilled when we go out and men approach me, but I could never trust a stranger enough to actually have sex with one. Still, there are times when I long to actually be touched with desire by another human being. I make this offer to you purely and simply because you are the one person other than Mister Larabee that I would be willing to trust enough to have sex with."

"Oh, Ez," Vin whispered, "thank you. You don't know what having you trust me means to me.... And I'm sorry."

"Sorry?" Ezra cocked an eyebrow at him, "For what?"

"For all the times that I took off with somebody and left you hanging in some bar. I reckon I figured that good looking as you were, you'd find someone for sure. Never realized you was going home alone all the time. Didn't mean to abandon you. Think you've had more'n enough of that."

"It was my choice to go home alone. No fault of yours."

"Still I'm sorry... and if you're sure about this offer, then yeah, I agree, Me'n you can take care of each other."

Ezra smiled and held up his glass in a toast, "Until the scales fall away from Mister Larabee's eyes and he sees what he's missing." He grinned cockily, "Then it's every man for himself... should he by some miracle choose me, I shall not give you a second thought!"

Vin laughed, "Same here!"

Then he'd had a lap full of Ezra.

He'd worried after Ezra had said he hadn't been with anyone in years that it might mean that Ezra was a cold fish in bed.

It didn't take him long to learn how wrong that idea was.

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End Flashback

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A movement from the bed drew him back from his memories.

Ezra had turned his head to face him and his eyelashes were fluttering slightly.

He grinned. Looked like his lover was about to wake up.

A moment longer and the long dark lashes parted to reveal sleepy green eyes.

Vin smiled at him, "Hey, Babe. Want some water?"

Ezra nodded slightly.
Vin let go of his hand long enough to get his glass of ice water and hold the straw for him. "Little sips now. Don't want you to start retching again."

Ezra nodded and took just enough to wet his mouth before turning his head away. The sleepy gaze wandered over the room, "The others?"

"Fine. Everybody's fine." He grinned, "Skunks took care of the bad guys. Nathan got enough skunk juice on him, searching the hanger for us, that he had to take a tomato juice bath but the rest of the guys are fine. Chris and Buck lost their lunches. Some of Hamilton's guys lost everything back to supper last night... but you're the only one that even got a scratch."

"Weapons?"

Vin chuckled, "Confiscated. Ain't sure where they parked them. The packing absorbed the skunk juice and the shipment smells to high heaven. Don't figure anybody wants them in the evidence room."

Ezra looked around the room again. "Where...?"

Vin sighed, "Mary come by and hijacked Chris. Took him home. So I told the rest of the guys to head on out, too, that I'd take care of you."

"I see." Ezra said softly, a note of sadness in his voice. "So, it begins."

"Hey," Vin took Ezra's hand again raising it to his lips. "You'n me, Babe. You'n me."

Ezra smiled up at him, "Through thick and thin."

Vin grinned back and added the part they'd laughed over one night when they were drunk and couldn't seem to pronounce their Ts, "An' sick and sin."

Ezra chuckled softly then faded back to sleep.

Vin sat back down in the chair and lay his head on the bed near his mate.

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Continued in Part 2
Building the Blind Part Two

Chapter Summary

Ezra is released from the hospital. The guys celebrate the Fourth of July. Nathan angers Vin.

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Morning found Ezra impatient to be gone from the hospital. Fortunately the Doctor making morning rounds knew the two men in Room 311. He didn't hesitate to sign the release papers, even though it normally took until afternoon to get released. Both of these men had reputations for escaping from the hospital and with only one of them truly in need of being in the hospital, he counted himself lucky they were still there when he made rounds.

He was giving Vin the care instructions for Ezra, verbally, when Chris arrived just after seven. "I want him on liquids and soft foods only for the first twenty-four hours. Afterwards if he can keep that down, he can resume eating normally."

Chris grinned, "Good. You'll be able to eat what you want at the cookout on the Fourth."

Both Vin and Ezra were suddenly regarding their leader with matching 'deer caught in the headlights' looks.

Chris frowned. "What's wrong, guys?"

"Uh, Mister Larabee, I uh, fear that Mister Tanner and I shall be unable to attend that event."

"What! Why?"

"Well, cowboy, ain't nobody said anything about the cookout... an ya'll just got back from your honeymoon and we wasn't sure iffn Mary would wanna throw a shindig that soon after. And the Sisters asked me about helping them that day and well, I...."

"What Mister Tanner is attempting to say is that he volunteered both our services to the Sisters of Mercy. They are giving an all day picnic celebration for the neighborhood children that day and I'm afraid that we shall be tied up all day helping out."

"Exactly what are you doing?"

"Mister Tanner shall be manning the grill all day and I am scheduled to give three magic shows. One in the morning, one shortly after lunch and the last just after dark. Between shows I shall be doing face paintings, making balloon animals and reading to the children. We are also slated to help with the clean up after it is over. I fear we will be quite too exhausted to make the trip out to your ranch after the event."

Chris bit his tongue to keep from snapping at the undercover agent who had subtly stepped back to stand beside Vin showing a united front. They were in the hospital. Ezra was a wounded man. He couldn't rip into him here. But damn it hurt that they would assume that the annual cookout might be off. It was an *annual* event just like the damned holiday it was held on. Finally after he pushed
down his anger and hurt, he asked, "You sure you're up to doing all that."

Ezra smiled, "A magic show is hardly strenuous, Mister Larabee... and I shall have an assistant. One of the little girls from the youth center. I shall be seated for the reading, face painting and balloon animal making. I don't think that it will be too great of a strain on me."

"What about cleaning up?"

"Me'n some of the guys will do the heavy stuff." Vin grinned, "We'll give Ez one 'a them sticks with a spike on it to pick up trash with. All he'll have to do is walk around an spear stuff and stick it in a trash bag."

The doctor handed Vin the written instructions and made his escape before the tension in the room got any worse. He wasn't about to get into the argument about what Ezra could and couldn't do. It wasn't as if the man would listen to him anyway.

"Who's going to do the fireworks for the ranch?"

"Misters Wilmington, Dunne and Sanchez have helped us enough in the past to be able to take care of it this year," Ezra said.

Chris took a deep breath reaching up to pinch the bridge of his nose. He already had a headache. Mary had been a tad upset when he got up at four in the morning to get the chores done before heading into town so he could be here before Vin and Ezra escaped from the hospital. Now this.

He looked up and sighed. He might have assumed that everyone knew that the cookout was still on, but maybe he shouldn't have. He'd have to make sure the others did know. Hopefully they wouldn't have made other plans. "It won't be the same with out you there."

Ezra turned to look up at Vin, something Chris couldn't quite read in his eyes before he turned back and said softly, "We are truly sorry, Mister Larabee, we meant you no slight. We were simply trying not to intrude on your first holiday with your new family."

"Dammit, Ezra! Having a new family don't mean you have to give up the old one! You two are a very important part of my family. You don't intrude. Hell, you can't intrude! You're family, too, and I don't want to lose what we have." He paused, "I know you two have found something special together and I don't want to intrude on that, but I hope it won't mean that you don't want to still be part of our family."

Again the two men shared a look that he couldn't read. It was as if they were having an entire conversation without words. Then Ezra said, "This is quite a long weekend, Mister Larabee, we shall make every effort to stop by the ranch during it."

He nodded. Good enough, at least for now. He turned to go then turned back, "Ez?"

"Yes, sir?"

"You going to do the books this month?"

"If you wish... it is however a simple system. I'm sure that should you prefer, Mrs. Larabee could take it over quite easily."

"No. I don't think that Mary will want to do the taxes and it's better if you keep doing the books... if you're going to do the taxes?"
"Of course, I shall if you wish."

"Yes. I want you to keep doing them... but only if it's not a imposition."

"Hardly. In case you are unaware of it, I do the taxes for the entire team. Yours is far from the worst I have to deal with. Mister Sanchez for instance, does not appear to have the slightest idea of how to obtain a receipt for tax deductible items or gifts to charity nor does he appear to have any idea what qualifies as a work related expense." He heaved a put upon sigh but the twinkle in his eyes revealed that he didn't feel nearly as put upon as he was trying to make it seem.

The conversation ended with that as Buck and JD came boiling into the room, pushing a wheelchair with Nathan and Josiah on their heels. Buck and JD parked the chair in front of Ezra.

Buck announced loudly that he had confiscated the 'vehicle' to aid Ezra in his escape from the confines of the 'hall of horrors masquerading as an institute of healing'.

Everyone laughed at that, as Nathan stuck out his hand to Vin demanding to see the written instructions for Ezra’s care.

Ezra sat down in the wheel chair like a king on his throne then grabbed the armrests in a death grip, as with a whoop Buck charged out the door that Josiah was holding open for them and careened down the corridor towards the elevator.

JD and Vin charged after them.

Chris, Nathan and Josiah followed at a more leisurely pace, grinning at the antics of their friends and hoping that they didn't start Ezra to retching again.

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The rest of the guys left them in the parking lot and headed on in to work while Vin took Ezra home.

When they got to the townhouse Vin parked in the driveway since he didn't have the garage door opener and they walked around to the front door.

As they stepped up on the low stoop, Vin saw something lying in front of the door. He picked it up. It was a small rectangular tin box with a pretty mountain scene on the top and several smaller ones around the sides. There was a note attached. He picked it up and saw that the note was addressed to Ezra. "Hey, Ez, looks like somebody left you a present."

Ezra took it and raised an eyebrow. "It's from Mrs. McGinty."

"Who's she?" Vin asked as he opened the door with his key.

They walked in and Ezra sat down on the couch before answering. "She's the lady that lives across the way." He detached the envelope from the box and opened it. A moment later he groaned, "Awww, hell!"

"What! Ez! What's wrong?"

Ezra shook his head and handed him the note.

Vin stared at it, taking a moment to work his way through the shaky handwriting of the elderly lady.

***************************
Dear Mr. Standish

Just a small token of our appreciation for you and your friend.

It has been some years since Mr. McGinty has shown the interest in our marriage that he did last Monday afternoon. However dear Fred’s heart isn't what it used to be, so perhaps next time you could close the curtains.

Mrs. Ida McGinty

PS. Your young man is very handsome, and soooo ardent. I think you have a keeper. Good luck with him.

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"Uh, Ez, exactly where does Mrs. McGinty live?"

"There." Ezra pointed out the picture window to the townhouse exactly opposite his across the small lawn.

Vin looked up and could see a short, slim, old lady with pink hair in the picture window of the other townhouse, busily watering the half dozen hanging baskets full of flowers.

She peered across and waved at them.

Ezra waved back, his face flaming red.

Vin blushed as well and lifted a hand at her. Turning back to Ezra he said, "Ain't you gonna open the box?"

"Whatever it is I'm sure it's not on my diet." He handed Vin the box. "You may open it."

Vin eagerly did so. "Hey! This is fudge! Homemade, rocky-road fudge!" He gave Ezra a wicked grin, "We musta really inspired the old man!"

He quickly stuffed a piece in his mouth and grabbed another.

"Don't I get any?" Ezra asked but there was a smile in his voice.

"Uh..." Vin said around his mouthful of fudge, then held out the piece in his hand to Ezra. "Sorry."

Ezra took it and reached up with his other hand to caress Vin's face, "It's all right, Love, I understand. I'll just put this in the fridge and you may have the rest."

Vin ducked his head, shamefaced, "Sorry," he muttered again. "It's just...."

"I *know*, Vin." Ezra tipped Vin's chin up so that he could look into his lover's eyes. "It's just that there were times when if you did not grab what you could get as quickly as you could, you didn't get any, especially when it was something special like this. That will never happen here. I promise you that. Take your time. Savor the treat. This piece will be all that I want." He smiled at Vin and leaned in to place a soft kiss on his cheek before rising to take his piece of fudge into the kitchen and wrap it to put in the refrigerator.

As he left, Vin forced down the fudge he had crammed in his mouth, the lump so large it was painful to swallow. He looked after Ezra, realizing as he did so that he hadn't really tasted the fudge at all. He'd been too eager to make sure he got his share.
He sat the tin down on the table and picked out one piece. 'Savor it.' Ez had said.

He looked at the piece of candy for a long moment, seeing the dark richness of the chocolate, the pure white of the miniature marshmallows, the golden brown of the walnuts and the darker color of the pecans. Finally he bit off one corner, but didn’t swallow, instead he let the chocolate dissolve on his tongue, sweet and sharp at the same time. He closed his eyes and concentrated on the taste. In a sudden spike in sweetness, a marshmallow dissolved. Finally only the hard lumps of the walnuts and pecans remained. He rolled one of the bumpy lumps of walnut into his jaw and bit into it, letting the flavor fill his mouth. A second walnut chunk followed then a pecan, it's flavor just as nutty and rich but very different from the walnuts.

He opened his eyes to see Ezra standing in the archway into the dining room-kitchen area smiling at him.

He grinned up at Ezra then picked up the box and put the lid back on it. "Reckon we can save the rest of these for later."

Ezra's smile widened into a grin, "Indeed."

Vin tucked the tin in the fridge then turned back to pull Ezra into his arms. "You oughta lie down for a while."

"Are you going to lie down with me?" Ezra asked coyly.

"Oh, yeah." Vin grinned down at him.

"In that case, yes, I shall be most happy to lie down for a while."

The Fourth of July dawned bright and hot. People started gathering at the Larabee ranch early on. Buck and JD were the first to arrive with Casey and Nettie on their heels. Nathan and Raine brought Josiah as his old Suburban was broken down again. Orrin and Evie Travis arrived just before lunch.

Lunch as always was cold-cut sandwiches with various cold salads and slaw. They saved the grilling for the early evening when the sun had sunk behind the mountains and the air had cooled.

Buck watched his oldest friend as he fixed himself a sandwich and carried it out to the porch to sit in one of the rockers and eat it. He watched Chris pick at the sandwich rather than actually eating it.

"Want to tell me what's the matter, old dog?" He asked quietly, already knowing the answer.

Chris sighed. "It's just not the same without them," he said.

Buck didn't have to ask who he meant. "Well, it was their decision."

"I know... I just...."

"Miss them," Buck confirmed, looking out across the yard where Casey and JD were sitting quietly on a blanket under one of the trees. They would normally be following Vin and Ezra around, the four of them playing games like kids. Chris wasn't the only one that missed the "Terrible Twosome" as they sometimes called the missing members of the team. Even AD Travis had asked where they were.

After a minute Buck suddenly grinned, "You know, pard, just cause they ain't coming out here, don't
mean we can't share this day with them."

Chris looked up, frowning, "What are you talking about, Buck. We're here. They're there."

"So, what's to keep us from being there? I mean that shindig they're at, it's sort of a charitable event, now ain't it? Volunteers giving those kids a nice day in the park with food and games and stuff, right? So, you can't ever have too many volunteers for something like that, or too much food or too many adults to keep an eye on things."

"So?"

"So, hook that big grill of yours up behind the Ram, toss the hotdogs and hamburger meat in a cooler and load it in the bed. Gather up all the charcoal, the buns and slaw and other stuff and let's go help our boys out!"

JD and Casey had heard Buck when he started talking and come up to listen in. "Yeah!" JD said enthusiastically. "That's a great idea!"

"What's a great idea?" AD Travis came out of the house to ask.

"We're gonna load everything up and go help Vin and Ezra at the picnic for the Purgatorio kids!" JD happily declared. "Come on, Casey, let's get started packing stuff up!"

"Wait a minute I haven't said we're going to do it yet!" Chris stood up, "I need to ask Mary about it." He turned to go back in the house.

Mary stood in the open doorway, listening. She had known that Chris was unhappy about Vin and Ezra not coming that day. The whole group had seemed depressed or perhaps just repressed as if without the other two they didn't feel right about having a good time. As much as she wanted to blame it on the Terrible Twosome, she knew that it really wasn't anyone's fault. The group was just happier when they were all together. She could fight it, but she knew that that would only cause a rift between the others and Chris and they would all blame her for it.

Taking a deep breath, she smiled, "Sounds like a good idea to me."

The grin Chris flashed her was worth the chaos that was sure to follow. She turned to her former father-in-law. "Do you want to come along?"

"We wouldn't miss it." Orrin Travis answered for himself and Evie.

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Vin had his hair tied back but strands had escaped around his face and he used the back of one hand to wipe the sweat away from his eyes and push his hair back as he flipped burgers with the other. A white apron, now stained and dinghy, was tied around his waist. He looked up and grinned as he heard the deep purr of the Dodge Ram pulling up nearby.

He watched as Chris maneuvered the truck to park his big grill next to the one that Vin was manning. Looking past the Ram to the parking area across the street he could see an entire cavalcade of vehicles pulling in to park. Buck's truck was followed by Nathan's SUV, and Nettie's little compact. Orin Travis' Lexus and Mary's Lincoln followed them.

Chris climbed out as Buck came jogging across the street to help with unhooking the grill and unloading the food.
Vin left the grill for a minute to greet his friend. "What ya'll doing here, Cowboy?" he asked, holding out his hand to Chris.

Chris took Vin's hand in the forearm clasp that they always used, but it was Buck that answered the question. "Well, pard, we figured if the mountain wouldn't come to Mohammed, we'd just have to bring Mohammed to the mountain. Thought we'd come help ya'll out."

"Thanks, Bucklin," Vin said, "we can always use more help," he looked at the coolers full of food and grinned, "and more food."

"Glad to help out," Chris said. His eyes added, 'Good to see you, too.'

Vin nodded accepting both what was said and what was not.

Just then Nathan hurried up. "Where's Ezra? He better not be overdoing in this heat. He just got out of the hospital. Are you making sure he drinks enough? I brought him some bottled water. It's cold too. So, where---"

"Nate, if you'd shut up long enough for me to answer, I'd tell you. He's over yonder sitting under the shade tree and yes he's got water with him."

Vin shook his head, turning to Buck, "Buck, if you'll keep an eye on this grill for me I'll take Nate over to check on Ez before he has a fit or something. 'Sides, Ez is reading the kids *The Ugly Duckling* and it's my favorite story." He pulled off his apron and tossed it to Buck. "Be back in about fifteen minutes."

He led Nathan off towards a small group of trees way on the other end of the square block of "park". The park in reality was nothing more than a city block where all the old buildings had been torn down and nothing had yet been built. It was doubtful that anything ever would be built there considering the section of town that it was in. The Sisters of Mercy had taken it over, planting grass seed and keeping it watered as best they could, trimming back the shrubbery and generally keeping it as clean as they could. Vin and some of the neighborhood teens had built a wooden jungle gym and put up a couple of swings and two benches using money that Ezra had donated.

When they got closer to the small stand of trees, Nathan could see that Ezra was seated on a folding chair, a half-empty, liter bottle of water on the ground beside it. A dozen or so children of all shapes and descriptions sat in a semicircle in front of him, leaning forwards eagerly listening as Ezra read to them from a large book that he held.

"Wait till he's done," Vin ordered, stopping Nathan when he would have gone straight to Ezra to check on him.

Reluctantly Nathan nodded and moved to sit on the ground to one side of the children.

Vin dropped down to sit cross-legged next to Ezra's chair and Ezra flashed him a smile without stopping reading or missing a word.

When Ezra finished the story he dismissed the children without seeming to do so, urging them to run along and play reminding them that he would be giving another magic show after lunch. He assured them that it would contain all new tricks with no repeats of the ones he'd done at the morning show.

Nathan stood up and walked over to Ezra handing him the cold bottle of water.

Ezra opened it and drank some of the cold water. He sat the bottle down next to his chair and handed Nathan the other bottle. "Thank you. If you would be so kind as to put this somewhere where it can
be getting cool again, I would appreciate it."

Nathan nodded, "Sure." He nodded towards the white tuxedo and cape that Ezra was wearing, "Good color choice."

"Thank you. I know that black is traditional for magicians but considering the weather I thought this a better choice. Besides I am not much of a traditionalist in anything." He flashed Nathan his dimpled grin.

Nathan chuckled. "Glad to see that you are taking care of yourself."

"Yes, well, Mister Tanner promised me a reward if I was a 'good boy'."\n
Nathan's brow furrowed at the sly smile and look that Ezra flashed Vin and the slight blush that Vin responded with.

Vin stood abruptly and said, "Reckon I better get back to work. Told Buck I'd be right back."

"Mister Wilmington is here, too?"

Vin grinned, "Yep. Everybody's here... even Mary and the Travis'."

"Whatever for?"

"Reckon they missed us." Vin grinned at him then clapped Nate on the shoulder, "You coming?"

They headed back to the grill, leaving Ezra staring after them thoughtfully.

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Ezra sighed wearily. It was shortly after midnight and he and Vin had arrived at the park just after seven that morning. Vin had wanted to get an early start, so that he could set up the small stage for Ezra's magic shows and get the grill fired up and ready to cook the sausages that they had brought to serve the children for breakfast.

The fireworks had been a pleasant surprise for the children. How Chris had gotten permission on such short notice, Ezra wasn't sure. It probably had something to do with AD Travis being there. A fire truck had shown up shortly before they were due to start and soaked down the ground where they would be setting them off. Chris and Buck had roped off the area, using crime scene tape to keep the children back.

Ezra and Vin had checked the fireworks over before letting JD and Buck be the ones to actually set them off.

Now, the grills had been let burn out and cool down. The ice chests were empty. Vin and Ezra had bagged up the left over hamburger and hotdogs in Ziploc bags, four hamburger and four hotdogs to a package, with a matching number of buns with each and put them into plastic grocery bags that Inez had furnished. They had handed them out to the departing families, knowing that even one more meal that they didn't have to purchase would help the poor families out.

Ezra had also given a small book to each of the children appropriate for their ages. Nathan, looking at one of them, noticed that it was the fairy tale that Ezra had read the children, but that it was printed in both English and Spanish and contained an audio tape slipped into the back cover.

"Where'd you get these, Ez?" he asked.
Ezra smiled and shrugged, "From my publisher."

"Your publisher?"

Ezra gave a small, self-deprecating smile. "Yes, I did the translation and read the story in both English and Spanish. It doesn't pay a great deal, not as much as if one actually wrote the books, but I enjoy doing it."

Vin came over then and held out a short pole with a spike on it to Ezra. "Here you go, Ez. I'm gonna help the Sisters with sorting the recyclables."

Ezra took it and reached for the bag to sling it over his shoulder when Nathan intercepted him.

"I'll carry the bag. You just pick up the trash." They moved off together with Nathan fussing quietly about Ezra having only gotten out of the hospital the day before.

Finally the area had been policed and everyone was getting into their cars to go home.

Chris stopped to ask Vin, "What time are you two going to come out to the ranch?"

"Better be after lunch," Nathan put in as he and Raine moved by towards their car. "Ezra needs to rest up after today."

Ezra rolled his eyes but nodded, "After lunch it is. However, we were planning to take another look at one of the houses tomorrow. Perhaps you'd like to join us? We could meet at my townhouse and go out to the ranch afterwards."

"Hey, pard," Buck put in, as he and JD joined them, "does that invite include us?"

"Certainly, If you wish to come, you may. Mister Sanchez has already seen the property. I suppose it is only fair to invite the rest of you to comment."

He raised his voice to call to Nathan who was getting into his car. "Mister Jackson! Would you care to join us in viewing the house Mister Tanner and I intend to buy?"

"Sorry, Ez, but we promised Raine's dad that we'd come up to Boulder and spend the day with them tomorrow."

"Quite all right. There will be plenty of other times you can see it."

Josiah stuck his head up over the other side of the SUV. "I wouldn't mind going back. I still don't know what you want with that pile of stone but you need someone along to talk sense."

"Pile of stone?" Chris asked.

Ezra shrugged, "Mine and Mister Tanner's very own 'Ugly Duckling', Mister Larabee. Mister Sanchez only sees the ugly duckling but Mister Tanner and I believe that it is in fact a swan and not a duck at all."

Vin grinned at Chris, "Ya been warned. It's ugly. Gonna take some work," he smiled fondly down at Ezra, "but it's what Ez wants." He shook hands with Chris and said his goodbyes to the others before slipping an arm around Ezra's shoulders to walk him to the jeep. "Let's get you home, Babe. Like Nate said, you had a long day and you ain't fully recovered yet."

Ezra leaned into the embrace and let Vin guide him to the jeep, shaking his head slightly as the other man stood at the passenger's side of the jeep until Ezra was safely seated in it before going around to
climb into the driver's seat.

Chris looked after them a long moment then started the Ram and headed home. Mary, Orrin and Evie had left right after the fireworks to put Billy to bed. Mary should be home waiting for him when he got there.

The next morning at the townhouse, Ezra arose much later than had been his wont of late, having slept until almost noon. As he dressed he remembered the first time he had seen the house that they were about to take their friends to view.

It was the first day that they had been looking for a house. They had spent much of the day just driving around and looking for realtor's signs, trying to get a general idea of what was available in the area that they wanted. Vin wanted something close enough to Purgatorio that the people in the district that had come to depend on him wouldn't feel that he was totally abandoning them. He wanted a place that was close enough that if one of his former neighbors had an emergency, he could get there quickly as well as close enough so that the youths that he worked with could walk the distance to visit.

They had spent several hours looking and taking pictures. They had three rolls of film that they had taken of various houses and were headed back towards Purgatorio when Ezra noticed a faded realtor's sign set beside the road, just past where they were stopped at a red light. The arrow pointed up what appeared to be a pot-holed gravel road leading through an overgrown lot.

"Where does that road go, Vin?" he asked.

"Don't know," Vin replied. "You want to take a look?"

"If you don't mind."

"It's all right with me. Won't be dark for a couple more hours. We got time."

When the light turned green Vin drove slowly until he came even with the sign then turned into the overgrown road.

"Don't look like anybody's been here for a while," he commented as they bounced along.

"Indeed," Ezra agreed clinging to the dash with one hand and the top of the door frame with the other.

A quarter-mile or so in, there was the shattered remains of what must have been a truly vast, old oak. Vin carefully rolled to a stop on the rutted, pot-holed road. "Looks like the end of the road," he observed.

"No, I don't think so, Vin. Look, it goes on," Ezra said, as he got out of the jeep. "Do you mind walking on? I have a feeling that it will be worth it."

They spent several minutes working their way around the fallen tree and went on to where the path opened up to reveal a large open area with a huge, dark stone house, grown up with shrubs and ivy, sitting almost dead center.

The road made a loop, in front of the house, curving around a huge old oak tree.

Ezra stared at the house, "Oh, my," he breathed quietly.
Vin turned to him with concern, "What's wrong, Ez?"

"Nothing's wrong, Vin. I just can't believe it.... This is almost my dream house, if you look past the overgrown landscaping and the dirty exterior. It has a wrap around porch. Two stories plus a full attic. Round rooms on either side of the front. Gingerbread work. It's incredible."

"There's land with it, too," Vin said, "looks like several acres. We could keep the horses here."

"Oh, Vin. I know I said it would take a while to find a place, but... could we ask the realtor to show us this one?"

"Sure. I like it, too. Way those trees up front shelter it, it's almost like it's out in the country instead of right here in town. We can't be more'n ten or fifteen blocks from Purgatorio. Won't be but about a half-hour, forty-five minute drive to work, either. Looks about perfect to me. Course we'll need to make sure that it's sound."

"Of course," Ezra said, his eyes shining.

Grabbing up the camera that he had brought from the jeep, Ezra had begun to take pictures of the old house. The stone would have to be cleaned and the porch sagged in places but there was no major rot in the porch floor or around the windows and doors. He would be willing to bet the walls were granite. Hopefully when cleaned it would prove to be one of the prettier colors, maybe light gray or blue, possibly even the beautiful silver gray.

Walking around it, they could see four chimneys, indicating that there were several fireplaces. The open porch wrapped around three sides of the house and there was a small back porch as well. There was a detached four-car stone garage on the back and an old stone barn beyond that.

Ezra swiped at the grimy window and then stopped looking at the glass, "Oh, my, Vin, beveled glass!"

He moved over a bit and pulled a handkerchief from his pocket to wipe at the small panes of glass framing the larger center glass. "Colored glass! These will be beautiful when it's cleaned."

He wiped a spot on the main glass and peered in. "Oh, Lord, Vin! There's furniture. It looks like antique stuff." He continued on to another window and looked in again. "A piano! It's an upright and probably in poor condition but... Oh! This is unbelievable!"

He turned to Vin who was now peering over his shoulder. "Do you think that we could check with the realtor on Monday?"

Vin smiled, "Sure. Reckon we could take a long lunch." He hesitated then added, "But we don't want to seem too eager, do we?"

Ezra paused taking a deep breath to calm himself. He couldn't remember when he'd been so excited. "No. No we don't. Where's the notebook? I believe several of the houses we have already looked at were listed with this same realtor."

"Notebook's in the jeep."

"Yes. Yes, of course." Ezra headed back to the jeep almost at a jog, with Vin in tow. He checked the notebook and found that several of the other houses they had looked at were in fact listed with the same realtor. He grinned at Vin.

"We simply tell the realtor that we are looking for a fixer-upper, in this general neighborhood. He
will no doubt show us several properties. If he doesn’t include this one to begin with we then
mention that we would like a bit of land with the house...."

"And this is the only one we've looked at that's had more'n just a single lot with it."

"Yes. He's bound to show us this one then." Ezra looked back at the house. "Let's go get the pictures
developed. I can't wait to start sketching."

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The realtor hadn't shown them that house right away. Ezra had used the intervening time researching
the ownership at the courthouse, checking the land deed records. He was delighted with what he
found.

The house had been built in 1839 and had remained in the same family until the last of them had
passed away just a few years before. Theodore Stillwell had made his fortune in gold mining,
becoming one of Denver's first millionaires. He had originally owned more than a thousand acres of
what was now downtown Denver. The house and ten acres with it was all that remained of the
original estate.

It was the next Tuesday before their hints of wanting land with the house got the real estate agent to
show them the house they really wanted to see. Josiah offered to go with them saying that he knew a
thing or two about old houses. They graciously accepted the offer although Ezra already knew that
he wanted the house and nothing anyone could say would change his mind.

The three of them had taken a long lunch to look at it.

The realtor was a sophisticated woman, with red hair. Dressed to the nines in a power suit and high
heels, she won Vin's enmity with a sentence about how near Purgatorio was, while they were
parking just off the street. "Unfortunately the back of the property is just three blocks from the area
called Purgatorio. The only saving grace is that the thickness of the undergrowth has prevented the
young hoodlums over there from coming through to the main property."

Ezra asked about the land that came with the property, carefully steering her away from Vin before
his partner lost his temper.

"Yes, Mr. Standish, there are ten acres of land with the house, but, as you can see, there isn't much
street frontage. It's only about three hundred feet, across here. The parcel is sort of wedge shaped, it
gets wider as it goes back."

She paused then went on, "You do understand that there are restrictions on what can be done with
the property. That is why it's still on the market. When Miss Stillwell first put it on the market ten
years ago she put such unreasonable restrictions on the sale that we haven't been able to find a buyer.
Then when she passed away, the will made the same stipulations. She left the proceeds of the sale to
the Humane Society, but insisted that it had to be sold and the buyer had to agree to her terms. The
Society tried to get the stipulations set aside. A developer would pay many times more if they could
subdivide, but the judge refused."

Ezra had his game face on and Vin looked pissed under a placid face. Josiah smiled to himself.

"I understand there's some old furniture left in the house, but, I have no idea how much there is or
what it might be worth. The will specified that the house was to be sold as is with all contents. No
one has done an inventory as far as I know."

Ez smiled kindly, "That's quite all right, my dear. I'm sure my associates and I can attend to that."
"Here are the keys to the house and outbuildings," she said smiling brightly. "Are you sure you don't want me to walk you through?"

"We're sure," Ezra had to struggle not to snap at her. "Gentlemen, shall we go?" he said, taking the keys.

"We'll drop the keys off, at the office," Josiah reassured her, as he turned to follow the two younger agents.

They had walked as far as the fallen tree when Josiah remarked, "I remember hearing about this place. The lady that owned it was almost a recluse. She was the last descendant of one of the original gold mining families from the 1830's. Somehow, someone got her to come to the opening of the old mall. She fell when, I think, a railing broke? Anyway, it fractured her spine. That was, um, the early 60's? She spent the rest of her life as the guest of the mall owners, in Hawaii. I thought I saw in the paper where she died, a few years ago. She was almost a hundred years old."

Ezra smiled to himself. He wasn't going to tell Josiah that he not only knew that, but he knew her name. Miss Elizabeth Gaylene Stillwell, great-granddaughter of Theodore Stillwell and the last remaining member of the family had been born in 1899. She was, in fact, a hundred and three years old when she passed away.

Vin had moved ahead, striding up the drive headed for the barn.

"Vin," Ezra called. "Do you want to look in the house?"

"Be there in a minute," he hollered back.

Josiah chuckled, "You can tell where his heart is, checking the barn, first."

Ezra smiled, his gold tooth glinting. "We both care greatly for our mounts, Mr. Sanchez. I'm sure he'll be in the house, momentarily."

It took a few minutes work, with the key the girl had given them, to get the door open. "I think it might be quicker to use a lock-pick!" Ezra muttered.

The entry hall was... vast, was his first thought. It had to be at least twenty feet square. The flooring was hidden under an inch thick layer of dust. It was impossible to tell if it were wood, tile or stone through the dirt. There were Victorian moldings on every opening, the thick doors half opened where they had been left, forty years before. The one to the right, was a double door, the glass in it still intact. It was too dirty to tell if there was a design on it, or not.

They turned that way, to make a tour of the house. The parlor was... ghostly. All the furnishings exactly the way they had been left, so many years ago. A coffee cup and saucer sat on one side table, the black spoon resting neatly with it.

Ezra waded slowly through the dust and carefully picked up the cup, then held it up to the light shining through the dirt caked window, where the drape had rotted and fallen years before. His finger shadows were clear through the translucent porcelain. He turned it over to read "Haveline" and just below it, "Theadora" for the pattern name.

He smiled to himself as he realized that "Theadora" was probably as close as Theodore Stillwell had been able to come to purchasing a set of china with "his" name on it.

He swallowed hard, and put it down carefully, picking up the black spoon. The first thing that surprised him, was the sheer weight. He rubbed a thumb over it, bringing the black up to a soft shine.
"Brother Ezra," Josiah called. "You're going to have a problem, here," he said, pointing at the ceiling twelve feet above their heads. "All of this wiring is surface mounted. It's all going to have to be ripped out. You're probably going to have to rewire the entire house to bring it up to code."

Ezra nodded. *Just the cup and saucer with the spoon, is probably worth enough to do this floor.*

Josiah moved ahead of him pointing out all the things that needed fixing. "Wall paper's peeling here," he said pointing to the paper along the long hall.

Ezra cocked an eyebrow, noting that the wall exposed by the peeled paper was actually wood, rather than the plaster and lathe Vin had feared the old house might contain. In fact, it looked like oak and if the *walls* were the solid oak planking used in that era then the floors most likely were as well.

Josiah moved on, not appearing to notice. They passed several more rooms before arriving at the dining hall.

The table stretched a almost thirty feet long, with eleven chairs to each side and one at each end. Twenty-four place settings and it didn't appear that there was a leaf in the table. It looked solid although it was hard to tell with the dust caked on it.

Ezra reached out and swiped some of the dust away with his hand, then reached in his pocket for a handkerchief to wipe his hand. He stared down at the portion of the table revealed by his wiping. There was a carving there. It looked like a train car. He raised an eyebrow and wiped another spot. It was a train car. It appeared that the entire edge of the massive oak table might be carved with a long train, as exquisitely detailed carvings of a steam engine and a loaded wood car looked up at him from the area he had uncovered.

The table had to be one-of-a-kind, hand-carved, most likely by a local artist, as Stillwell had prided himself on patronizing the artists in 'his' community.

Over the table hung something that might have once been a chandelier. Now, it was just a dust and cobweb covered lump. But with the other items he had seen already, he wasn't about to discount it as worthless until he had a proper look at it.

He stepped over to the glass fronted china cabinet and turned the knob to open it. His breath caught. Good Lord! The rest of the china set. From the looks of it the *entire* china set. He counted the coffee cups hanging by their delicate handles from the cup hooks on the bottom of the top shelf. Twenty-three. The one in the parlor made twenty-four. Oh, god! If it was intact... if the set was whole... he was looking at well over fifty thousand dollars worth of china. Sold at auction as a set, it could easily bring three times that. His eyes swept over the dishes, cataloging them. Dinner plates: twenty-four, bread plates: twenty-four, salad plates: twenty-four, soup bowls: twenty-four. Coffee-cup saucers: again twenty-three. The one in the parlor made twenty-four.

He took a deep breath and stood on his toes to see the top shelf. Teacups: twenty-four. Teacup saucers: twenty-four. Butter dish, sugar, creamer, coffee pot! *Tea pot!* Intact... It was *intact*!!!

Josiah calling him from the kitchen broke into his jubilation.

"Ezra! This sink has a hole in it. You need to have the water turned on so you can see what needs to be fixed. I'd bet the whole place needs to be re-plumbed."

He wiped the grin off his face as he walked into the kitchen, "Yes, Josiah, I'm sure it does." *And I really don't care. I love this house. Even if I didn't know that it contains enough valuable antiques to*
more than pay for having it restored.

He finished dressing and headed into the kitchen to fix his and Vin's lunch before the others arrived. He knew that when they took the others out to see the house they would think as Josiah did that he had lost his mind but he hadn't. He *had* made sure that the contract to buy the house specified that they agreed to take it 'as is' including the full contents of the house and all outbuildings.

Vin was going to appreciate that. The nineteen-twenty-eight Ford Roadster sitting in the garage had caught his eye immediately. In spite of the fact that the tires had succumbed to dry rot and someone had smashed the windshield at some time, it could easily be restored.

Ezra was sure that Buck would be more than happy to help Vin restore it. He was the team expert on antique cars.

Ezra grinned. He couldn't wait for the others to arrive. Even more he could barely wait until they saw the house after he and Vin got it cleaned up and restored. Closing his eyes for a moment he envisioned the house as it must have looked when first built. The silver-gray granite, glittering in the sun, the beveled glass windows reflecting the sunlight, the colored glass around them seeming to glow faintly, the wide looping driveway circling the massive oak that stood in front of the house. There had been a flower-bed surrounding the old oak, indicated by the now crumbling stone retaining wall that held in the soil to a level about eighteen inches higher than the surrounding ground.

Yes, their ugly duckling was definitely a swan just waiting for the right people to come along and see that it was a swan. It served the sellers right to get took to the cleaners. They hadn't even bothered to do an inventory of the house. Gross negligence on someone's part, of that he was sure, but he'd checked the clauses to the buy-sell agreement saying that they took the house 'as is' and that the sale included all contents of the house and outbuildings, himself. It was iron clad. It wasn't *his* fault if the idiots had never bothered to see what they had.

He'd close the deal as soon as possible after this weekend was over. No use in risking that someone might tumble to the fact that he was getting one hell of a bargain.

Vin came in from the driveway where he had been working on his Harley and gave Ezra a grin. "What are you smiling about?"

"I've decided to close the deal on the house. If you're agreeable we'll tell the agent on Monday that we will take it at the agreed upon price of one-hundred-sixty-five thousand dollars. As you will be doing most of the actual work, I will pay the hundred-thousand and you can pay the sixty-five. Do you want me to write the check for the full amount and you just pay me back or do you want to write your own?"

Vin hesitated. "That's an awful lot on money, Ez. Are you sure the house is worth that, considering what it's gonna cost to redo it?"

"Yes. I have no doubts. I know that you and Mister Sanchez are concerned with what it will cost to restore it, but I can assure you that it is worth it. This house is not one of the cookie cutter houses of the early part of the twentieth century. It was begun in 1839 and took two years to build. According to the newspaper accounts of the time, the house is described as sparkling like a fairy tale castle, which would seem to indicate that it was built of silver gray granite, a common stone in this area. It appears black now because it is dirty. A good cleaning with a pressure washer and it will once more sparkle. As for the interior, under that dreadful wall paper in most of the rooms is solid oak paneling.
I believe the entry hall is floored with stone but the rest of the flooring is oak, solid planking. From the trees still standing on the property I'd say that there was a grove of oak trees on the estate which was cut, milled and used for the interior of the house."

"Also there are the contents of the house to be considered. There is not a great deal left in the house but what there is, is quite valuable. The china set is Haveline, Theadora pattern. A partial set, of eight place settings without serving pieces, sold at Christy's in London for twenty-five thousand dollars just six months ago. This set has twenty-four place settings plus all the serving pieces. There is also a set of silverware that compliments it perfectly, also twenty-four place settings and all the serving pieces. If I were to sell the china and silverware together, I would set the opening bid at a hundred thousand dollars."

"How do you know so much about antiques?"

Ezra grinned at him. "Stepfather number three, Leonard Van Halsen, was an antique dealer in England. He was delighted to discover that the stepson that came with his new wife had an appreciation of, and an eye for, antiques. I spent four of the happiest summers of my life wandering all over England, Wales and Scotland attending estate sales with him. I've already spoken to him concerning the possibility of his coming over to inventory the house and make the arrangements concerning the contents. We won't know for certain until after he has done an inventory but I would estimate that the contents will be worth well more than the price we are paying for the house."

Vin nodded. "Okay, I'll write you a check. Look better that way, won't it?" He gave Ezra a questioning look.

"Yes, it will look better, and more like a business partnership than a personal one." Ezra set their plates on the table. "Do you want some of Mrs. McGinty's fudge for dessert?" He was secretly pleased to note that Vin had not eaten it all yet, an indication that he trusted Ezra not to let anyone 'take it away from him'.

"That'd be nice."

"I'll get it after you eat your meal," he grinned, "all of your meal, even the rabbit food."

Vin groaned but went to wash his hands and joined Ezra at the table. They ate and chatted. When they had finished, Ezra set the dishes in the sink and took out two bowls and placed two pieces of fudge in each. He popped them in the microwave just long enough to warm the fudge then opened the freezer and added two scoops of vanilla ice cream to the bowls on top of the fudge. He added a drizzle of caramel syrup to both bowls, then grabbed a can of whipped cream off the refrigerator shelf and shook it before adding a generous amount to Vin's bowl.

Vin grinned happily at him as he set the dessert on the table. He ate the concoction slowly, savoring it as Ezra had shown him.

Ezra watched him fondly as he ate. With a pang he realized that he truly did love Vin. Chris Larabee seldom entered his thoughts anymore other than as his boss. He wondered, but did not dare to ask, if Vin still thought of Chris as more than a friend.

He was drawn out of his musing by the ringing of the doorbell.

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Buck and JD were the first to arrive, impatient as always. After enduring their teasing about the new decorating style, when they saw the drawing board, drafting machine and sketches that had taken
over the living room, Ezra sat them down at the dining room table and offered them coffee. With a cocked eyebrow at Vin he silently asked if he could offer them some of the fudge and at Vin's nod he presented them each with a bowl of the concoction he had prepared for Vin.

Josiah arrived next, his old Suburban, clanking and backfiring before rolling to a stop at the curb in front of the townhouse.

Ezra chuckled as he opened the door calling to Josiah to just let it sit, that he could ride with them or Chris.

Chris arrived just in time to hear the remark and cheerfully called to Josiah that he was welcome to ride with him as he didn't think that the big man would appreciate the back seat of Ezra's Jag.

Half an hour later they were on their way in three vehicles. Ezra and Vin led the way in the Jag, followed by Buck and JD in Buck's truck and Chris and Josiah in Chris' Ram.

Vin and Ezra parked on the street behind the real estate agent's car and got the keys from her. They explained to the others that you couldn't drive all the way in as of yet due to the fallen tree and the others decided that they might as well walk up.

Chris whistled when he saw the tree. "Nice big hunk of oak, guys. What do you plan to do with it?"

Ezra grinned, pleased that Chris would assume that they had plans for the fallen tree. "There is a good bit of rot in the main trunk or it wouldn't have fallen, however some of the branches appear to be solid and most are at least a foot in diameter. Mister Tanner thought that we might cut them into two inch thick pieces and make clocks of them."

Vin spoke up, "Be a good project for the teenagers at the Youth Center. They can learn about 'free enterprise' as Ez calls it. They do the work, the Sisters sell the product and they share the profits. I figured maybe Josiah could help me cutting up the limbs and showing the kids how to sand and lacquer the pieces. We can buy the clock parts in bulk from a crafts store. We could use either stick on numbers or the kids could stencil the numbers on. It won't cost but maybe two dollars per clock to make them, plus the kid's time. Figure they'll sell for ten bucks or so."

"Sounds like a good idea and with that big of a tree it'll be a long term project. This house does have fireplaces, doesn't it?" Chris asked.

"Yep."

"Then you can use most of the dead falls for firewood. Looks like there will be plenty."

Vin and Ezra exchanged glances. It seemed that Chris at least was going to be on their side in this. He was looking at the potential rather than the current state of the property.

"You're going to need a clean up crew, you know. Once you purchase the place, the city will give you ninety days to get it cleaned up. Pick up all the trash and garbage that's lying around," Josiah put in.

"We know that, Mister Sanchez," Ezra told him with a sigh. Josiah seemed determined to play Devil's Advocate and point out every little fault.

"I want to be sure that you two don't take on more than you can handle, son," Josiah told him quietly. "I know that you really love this place and I'm not trying to tell you not to buy it. I just want you to do it with your eyes open."
"Kids at the Youth Center will be helping with the clean up," Vin told them. "They're nearly as excited about us getting this place as we are."

Chris, walking beside Vin as Josiah accompanied Ezra said, "You've already decided to buy it haven't you?"

"Yep. We're gonna tell the agent on Monday that we're ready to close soon as the paperwork can get done."

"How much are you paying?"

"Hundred-sixty-five."

"Thousand?"

"Yep."

"Do you have that kind of money?" Chris asked. He knew that Vin certainly didn't live like he had that kind of money.

"Yep," Vin flashed him a grin. "Got a mite more'n that, in fact. Give Ez half of my life savings a few years back to invest for me. He done good. I'm right well off, now."

"Ezra's that good at playing the stock market?"

Vin had opened his mouth to reply when JD bounded up to them and blurted out, "Hell, yes! He's good. When I sold that software program I wrote two years ago, I gave him the money to invest. He doubled it! He set up Buck with an investment portfolio, too. Course, you know Buck, he didn't have much to put in it to start with, but Ez convinced him to put all his dividends back into the portfolio and it's doing real well. He'll have a nice retirement nest egg."

Chris frowned, "He invests for all three of you?"

"Four," Ezra called back. "Mister Sanchez also trusts my investment advice."

"Which is why, although I'm trying to point out what needs to be done to this place, I'm still sure that if Ezra thinks this house is a good investment, then it's a good investment. He does have an eye for making money."

"So, why aren't you handing my investments?" Chris demanded.

"You never asked me to," Ezra grinned at him. "Of course, if you wish me to take a look at your portfolio, I would be delighted."

"Consider yourself asked. Maybe when you drop by to do the ranch books?"

"Certainly. I can look at them this afternoon, or tomorrow whichever is more convenient for you."

"You're going out there today anyhow." Chris said, then after a pause he asked, "Am I the only one you haven't been investing for?"

Ezra chuckled, "No. Do you really think that Mister Jackson would trust me with his money?"

"Don't see why not."

"Let's just say that our investment strategies differ considerably."
"Yeah. Nate thinks he’s gotta support companies that he thinks are good for the environment and stuff like that even if they're losing money," Vin said with a snort. "Don't guess he ever considered that salving his conscience, ain't gonna do him much good if he goes so broke he can't take care of his family. Him and Raine have been married for two years and they are still putting off starting a family till they can afford it. If he'd let Ez manage his money he'd be able to afford a family."

"You can't fault Nathan for wanting to help others, Brother Vin," Josiah said.

"May be, but I don't have to agree with the way he does it. Me, I like to see where my money goes and what it's being used for."

The discussion was shelved as they walked out into the open area at the end of the roadway.

Chris stopped and stared at the house, blurting, "Shit! This isn't a house! This is the old Stillwell mansion!"

"You know this house, Mister Larabee?" Ezra asked.

"I've heard my dad speak of it. He worked here as a groundskeeper, gardener's assistant when he was going to college, back in the late forties, early fifties. He loved this place. Said it was like working at a castle. He didn't get to see much of the inside. Except for eating in the kitchen with the rest of the help, the only time he got to go inside was for his interview, but he said it was beautiful."

Ezra positively beamed. At last, someone who knew what the house had been like in its heyday. He turned and hurried up on the porch to open the front door.

Chris followed him up on the porch. As Ezra opened one side of the double entry doors, Chris reached up to trace a finger along the glass in the door.

"Beveled glass. You don't see much of that these days... and if I remember right, dad said that there are initials in the center of the glass. They're too dirty to tell now, but they should be etched and filled with gold. T-S for Theodore Stillwell, the original owner." He flashed Ezra a smile, "They could also stand for Tanner-Standish."

Ezra flushed slightly and moved back to stand closer to Vin. He felt flattered that Chris seemed to be pleased with his choice of houses but also felt a bit uneasy. He was with Vin now and he wasn't prepared for the rush that having Chris favor him with that smile gave him.

Chris moved on into the entry hall, stopping to stamp one booted heel against the floor. "That doesn't sound like wood, does it?" he asked no one in particular.

"I believe it is stone. Whether it is granite or possibly marble, we won't be able to tell until it's been cleaned," Ezra told him.

Chris moved farther in, looking around. "Who in the world wall-papered this? Dad said that this was all oak paneling when he was working here."

"I have no idea who would have done that, but I can assure you it is coming down," Ezra said. "It will take some work to get all the old glue off the walls where the paper is, but it will be worth it, I'm sure."

"I'll have to be stripped, then probably sanded down, the paneling should be solid wood, so that won't be a problem," Josiah said. "Then it will all have to be lacquered to protect the wood. Whoever papered it probably did so because they didn't want to have to deal with keeping the wood up. It needs to be wiped down weekly and oiled at least once a year."
"We will need to hire a housekeeper," Ezra said in an aside to Vin.

Vin nodded, thinking of several people that he knew in Purgatorio that could use the income.

Buck and JD had split off and headed upstairs.

Ezra called after them, "Be careful up there! Don't break anything! Some of the antiques here are truly valuable!"

Josiah nodded his head. That explained Ezra's questions to the real estate agent about if the contents were included in the sale. Depending on the value of the contents the house could end up paying for itself.

Chris was impressed with the dining room table, wiping more of the dust off to see the train that circled it. The chairs were also coated in dust but they were clearly also intricately carved, the two at the ends of the table had arms, the rest did not. "Damn, this thing must be at least thirty feet long!"

"I estimate twenty-seven-and-a-half feet. There is a full twenty-four place setting of china in there," Ezra nodded towards the china cabinet, "the table should, therefore, accommodate twenty-four places, two at the ends and eleven along each side. You normally have two-and-a-half feet allowed per place so that makes it twenty-seven-and-half feet."

"This carving is intricate."

"Indeed. I can't wait to get it cleaned off so that we may see it in its entirety."

Josiah rubbed his hand along the carving, "This has to be one-of-a-kind."

"Yes, and most likely commissioned at the time the house was constructed. That would make it more than a hundred and fifty years old. I don't doubt that it is quite valuable but it is one thing that I do not wish to sell."

"What are you planning to sell, Ez," Vin asked.

"The china set. While exquisite, it is far too delicate for our use. It wouldn't survive a single gathering of our motley crew and I can't see just letting it sit in the cabinet when we can sell it to help pay for the restoration. I will most likely sell the silverware with it. Sold as a set they will bring double the amount they would sold separately."

"What else?"

"Well, I don't know yet that they are worth anything, we won't be able to tell until they have been cleaned, but there are several huge paintings that could be valuable, depending on the artist. Also several pieces of what I believe are Lalique glass, again quite fragile."

"If you want to keep that glass, Ez, I can build you lighted display cases that would keep them from getting broken." Vin offered.

Ezra laughed, "Do you really think that anything could keep them safe from our colleagues, Vin? No. I don't actually like them that much. I recognize their beauty and their value but I would prefer to keep objects that aren't so delicate," he grinned, "such as the table. I doubt that even the rambunctious twosome upstairs could manage to break that."

Both Josiah and Chris laughed at that remark. Buck and JD were notorious for breaking things out at Chris' place. Josiah was pleased that while Ezra obviously wasn't going to be talked out of buying
the house he was looking at it with a certain amount of practicality.

Vin reached over and pulled one of the chairs out. With a snort of laughter he said, "Well, now I know why the menfolks always held the chairs for the ladies. Woman'd pull a muscle trying to pull this out and back in!"

Chris had moved on towards the next doorway, "Is this the kitchen back here? What's it like?"

"Yes, that's the kitchen," Josiah said with a grimace.

Ezra chuckled, "It's big, and poorly organized. I intend to completely redo it, all new cabinets and appliances, in a style that is in keeping with the house, of course. That there are two pantries is a plus, however. One is used to store table linens and a second set of everyday china." He flashed Vin a grin, "Now you know why I'm not concerned about selling the Haveline set. The everyday china is heavy stoneware and the tableware that goes with it is stainless steel. Perfect for our use. The glassware is what was called press glass, with intricate designs pressed into the glass, beautiful, but also heavy and durable. That reminds me," he added almost to himself, "I need to find what was done with the stemware that goes with the Haveline china. There should be a twenty-four place setting. It must be here somewhere."

He led the way into the kitchen. "The second pantry was for food storage. There are still some items in there, large canisters of flour, sugar and meal, surprisingly intact, undoubtedly a testimony to the quality of the canisters. They appear to be stainless steel and have a rubber gasket around the top. There are also many jars of home canned fruit and vegetables. Of course, most, if not all, of it will have to be thrown away."

He pointed to a doorway near the back of the kitchen, "That is the back stairway, leading to the second floor and the servant's quarters in the attic. We can use it to join our friends upstairs."

They all trooped up the stairs behind Ezra, noting that this stairway, unlike the one in the front of the house, was quite narrow. Josiah's wide shoulders brushed the wall on either side.

They found Buck and JD chasing each other down the main hallway upstairs.

"Hey, Ez! Did you see the size of these beds?" Buck crowed as soon as he saw them. "Man, I coulda had some fun with the Dawson triplets in one'a them!"

"They are quite large, Mister Wilmington, but that was not unusual for the era in which they were built."

"There ain't but two bedrooms that have furniture, Ez," JD informed them, "but did you see the quilts in the closet in the front bedroom? They're beautiful!"

"They are indeed, and well preserved, as well. Considering their age, I would say they have to all be hand-quilted. We shall keep some and sell some, I believe that there are several unusual ones, including a couple that the Denver Museum of Western History might like to have. We may donate them to it. There is an applique one that shows a scene of the Rockies that I may decide to frame and hang in one of the rooms."

"Sounds to me like you have good plans for the house and the contents," Chris said.

Vin and Ezra exchanged grins. "We'll be able to make better plans once we get it cleaned up a bit," Vin said. "Glad you like it though, cowboy."

*****************************************************************************
Vin and Ezra spent the afternoon out at the ranch.

That night as they lay cuddled up in Ezra's big bed at the townhouse, Vin running his fingers through Ezra's hair he said, "Chris seemed to like the house."

"Yes. I was surprised to learn that his father had worked there in his youth."

"Strange coincidence, I reckon."

"Uhhmmm. He said that there should be a garden and fruit trees somewhere around the back."

"Trees are probably dead after this long without anybody taking care of them. Should be some nice wood though," Vin said.

Ezra chuckled, "More clocks?"

"Naw, boxes. Cherry wood, in particular, makes nice boxes. Pretty red color."

"Humm," Ezra sighed, settling closer, his head heavy on Vin's shoulder.

After a long moment of silence Vin said, "Sorry about the room."

"It doesn't matter... and Chris was right, as we are together now I would prefer sharing the guestroom with you to staying in the small room off the kitchen. Mary has every right to rearrange the house to suit herself. It is her home now."

"Still, he coulda warned ya that she had took your room before we got out there." Vin fell silent for a minute then sighed, "Looked strange to see that picture of her'n Stephen sitting on the mantle next to the one of Chris and Sarah... and then her and Chris' wedding picture sitting between them."

"I agree with that. It did seem quite strange. I suppose though that it was some kind of statement... that they both have their pasts but are together now...."

"Reckon." Vin turned his head to nuzzle against Ezra's hair, one hand caressing down his lover's bare side then gently gliding over smooth skin of a bare hip and buttock. "Like that you sleep naked now, Babe," he murmured before claiming Ezra's mouth in a long exploratory kiss.

Ezra's lips curved into a smile under the kiss as he reached to pull Vin over on top of him. "I like that you do, too," he grinned when Vin pulled back slightly to catch his breath. One hand slipped between them to caress Vin's rising shaft. "Is that for me?" he asked coyly.

Vin chuckled, "You bet it is, Babe. All for you."

Dawn was just coloring the sky when Vin slipped from their bed.

Ezra stirred and mumbled, wiggling to regain the contact that Vin's slipping away had ended, but a gentle stroke of Vin's fingers through his hair and a soft whisper that everything was all right settled him back down.

Vin made his coffee and padding barefoot across the thick carpeting of the townhouse, went to sit in the old rocker that Ezra kept in the guest room near the window that looked out to the east. Rocking gently Vin watched the sun come up, smiling to himself.

Lying with Ezra cuddled against him after they had made love, he had been overwhelmed by a
feeling of tenderness and possessiveness, tempered with a desire to protect and take care of the other man. It had made him realize that he truly did love Ezra, loved him tenderly, loved him passionately, loved him deeply.

He lifted his feet to prop them on the windowsill and leaned back in the old rocker sipping thoughtfully at his coffee.

So, where did that leave his feelings for Chris Larabee? He knew he had loved Chris... and he still cared deeply for him but did he still love him? Yes. He did still love him, he was sure of that, but maybe that wasn't the question. Maybe the question was, did he still *desire* him?

He thought back to the morning that Chris had returned from his honeymoon. They'd been alone together at the office for more than an hour before any of the others arrived and while he'd ached with knowing that Chris was married, somehow it hadn't been like he'd thought it would be. Maybe because he'd made his peace with it? Or maybe because he really had moved on.

He let a grin cross his face at the memory of how seeing Ezra bent over his desk had affected him that same morning. Then he frowned. Chris had bent over in front of him several times that morning but he'd hadn't gotten the instant hard-on that he got when Ezra did it. Come to think of it, he couldn't remember the last time he'd gotten hard for Chris.

Maybe it was just that he *knew* Ezra would let him fuck him. Ezra always let him fuck him. If he'd locked the conference room door that morning and demanded it, Ezra would have bent over the conference table and let him have it. They'd done it on the conference table before, back when they were just fucking around.

Hell! They had slipped into the office one night and done it on Larabee's desk. He grinned at that memory. Ezra writhing under him, whimpering and moaning, clutching at the edges of Chris' desk while Vin pounded into him, then shuddering and crying out Vin's name when he came.

He let his head drop back against the back of the rocking chair with a thud. He hadn't realized it at the time but it *had* been his name that Ezra had cried out when he came that night. That had been nearly a year ago that they had done it on Chris' desk. He'd been pretending he was fucking Chris. He had thought that Ez was pretending that it was Chris fucking him... but Ez had cried out his name, not Chris'.

Ezra. His sweet, gentle, tender lover. Ezra, who never told him no, who never made demands, never asked for anything, but always gave Vin whatever he wanted. Ezra, who had let Vin take him on Chris' desk, in Chris' hayloft and in the woods behind Chris' house. Ezra, who had let Vin use him and call out Chris' name as he came.

"Oh, Ez," he muttered, "I'm so sorry, Babe. I never even noticed that you had stopped calling Chris' name. God! How long have you been in love with me and I never even noticed? I'm a bad as Chris. Worse. At least he never took me. How it must have hurt you to love me and hear me calling his name when I took you!"

Shaking his head in self-disgust, he rose from the rocker and padded back to the kitchen, pouring the rest of the coffee down the sink and rinsing out the cup.

He walked back to the master bedroom and stood leaning in the doorway, watching Ezza sleep.

So beautiful. How could I have never noticed, how beautiful you are? How warm and gentle and giving you are? I don't deserve you... but I swear I'll do whatever it takes to make you happy.
He padded across the room a slow smile curving his lips, as he discarded his jeans and slipped back into the bed.

Ezra murmured and snuggled against him.

Sleepy green eyes blinked open, as Vin gathered him close.

"Vin?"

"Yeah, Babe," Vin pressed a kiss to his forehead. "I got a great idea, how about we spend the day in bed, Lover?"

Ezra's soft sigh of pleasure as Vin gently ran fingers through his hair was all the answer Vin needed.

Chris spent most of Monday morning questioning Thompson and his men. Shortly before lunch he stalked back into the office obviously upset. "JD! In my office. Now!"

The young computer expert frowned, wondering what he had done to earn Larabee's displeasure, but he jumped up and went.

A few minutes later he returned and sat down at his computer. When the others headed out to lunch, he shook his head and said that he had work to do.

Buck threw an unhappy look towards Chris' office and the impatiently pacing man within but he decided not to make an issue of it, just promised to bring JD something back when they returned.

JD nodded distractedly and went on with his search.

Chris paced in his office waiting for JD to finish up the search he had set him to do. He ran a hand through his hair.

Damn he didn't need this! After the relaxing and friendly weekend with the others visiting out at the ranch he was finally starting to feel like things were getting back to normal. It had taken him a bit to wrap his mind around the fact that Vin and Ezra were a couple now and accept it, but things had seemed to be going so well.

Now... now, if what Thompson said was true, Ezra had lied to him. Had told a major lie, about work.

The team went to Inez's for lunch. Vin and Ezra chatted happily with Buck and Josiah about the house. Nathan mostly listened until he began to realize what they were saying.

"Wait a minute. Are you telling me that the stuff in the house is worth more than what you're paying for the house?" Nathan demanded.

Ezra, too excited to catch the tone of Nathan's voice, grinned, "Indeed. The china, silverware and stemware, as soon as we can locate the stemware, should fetch enough to pay for the house."

"Aren't you concerned at all that you're cheating the sellers?" Nathan demanded hotly.
"We're paying the asking price, Mister Jackson. There's no cheating involved. It's hardly my fault that the sellers failed to do an inventory."

"But it's dishonest!"

"No, it is not, Mr. Jackson," Ezra explained patiently.

Nathan glared, "You are stealing, plain and simple. If those people knew what was in that house they wouldn't be selling it so cheap to you."

Ezra sighed, "They have had ample time to inventory the contents. Years in fact. It is not my fault they failed to uphold the responsibility entrusted to them. If anything, it is they who should be ashamed of abusing the trust and faith placed in them."

Nathan sputtered, "Abusing? Why you little... bastard! I still think you should let them know. It's not right."

Ezra stiffened and said formally, "I am abiding by the agreement signed by both parties. They had time to review the document before affixing their signatures to it."

Nathan glanced around to the rest of them. "I'd expect this from the likes of Ezra, but the rest of you... I can't believe that you'd go along with this. Aren't the sellers the Humane Society? How can you let him cheat a charity?"

"Not precisely. The proceeds of the sale go to the Humane Society, but Miss Stillwell's attorney is the Executor of the Estate. He is selling the property."

"Then he should have done an inventory!"

"Again, that is *not* *my* problem," Ezra snapped in exasperation.

"Dammit! Josiah, don't you have anything to say about this?" Nathan turned to his partner for backup.

"It's not a crime to get a bargain, Brother Nathan," Josiah said trying to be reasonable. "Like Ezra said, it is the seller's responsibility to do an inventory. If they can't be bothered why should Ezra point out their mistake?"

"But it's dishonest!" He broke off as Ezra rose and moved away from the table and the argument. "Where are you going?" he demanded, jumping up to grab Ezra's arm.

Ezra jerked away. "Away from here!" he snapped back at Nathan, continuing towards the door, turning back at the door to see if Vin had followed.

Vin was on his feet confronting Nathan. He grabbed Nathan's arm when the larger man would have gone after Ezra. "Leave him alone!" he snarled. "He ain't the only one that's buying that house, in case you've forgot. I'm half owner. You got anything else to say, you say it to me! Like 'Siah said, ain't no crime to get a deal on something! Ezra loves that house! And I'm telling you right now, you do anything to queer the deal before we close on Friday and you'll answer to me!"

He released Nathan's arm with a shove and stalked after Ezra. Ezra, seeing him coming, stepped out on the sidewalk and headed back towards the Federal Building.

"Hey! Ez! Wait up," Vin called as he hurried to catch up.
Ezra slowed, letting Vin catch up with him. When the other man came even with him he said with a sigh, "I'm sorry, Vin. I shouldn't have let him get on my nerves. I didn't mean to cause trouble between you and him. I know you're friends."

Vin slung an arm around Ezra's shoulders, "Might be, but you are my partner, Ez. Ain't nobody coming between us. Now, you want ta head over to Mamacita's for a bite to eat, seeing as how you didn't get anything at Inez's?"

Ezra sighed again. "I'm sorry, Vin but I just don't think I could eat anything at the moment."

"Quit saying you're sorry! Ain't your fault. Nate shoulda kept his mouth shut."

"The man has a right to his opinion."

"May be but he ain't gotta express it at the top of his lungs in a public place!" Vin snapped. Then added in an angry mutter, "Getting you so upset you can't eat. Man don't think."

As they neared the Federal Building, Vin noticed a small cafe that served herbal tea and croissants. "How about some tea? That might settle your stomach a bit. Maybe a croissant?"

Ezra looked doubtful then nodded, realizing that Vin hadn't eaten either. "Very well. I will give it a try."

***************************

Chris stared down at the report JD handed him.

*Shit.*

Ezra had lied plain and simple. Thompson hadn't called him at the wedding reception for a meet. He couldn't have. He was in California and there was no record of a call to Standish from there.

He bowed his head, then straightened. "JD!" he called.

When the young man stuck his head back in the door, Chris said, "Get over to Ezra's and pull the tape out of that phone recorder you installed last year... the one that records outgoing and incoming calls."

JD hesitated a frown on his face, "Shouldn't I let Ez know first?"

"Just do it, JD. You don't need a warrant. It's not going in evidence or anything. I just need to know if I'm right."

JD still frowned but nodded and hurried out. If he were lucky he'd be back before the guys got back from lunch. He felt guilty about what seemed to him to be an invasion of Ezra's privacy.

***************************

Forty-five minutes later, Ezra was somewhat calmer and when he and Vin saw the others making their way back to the Federal Building they rose to join them. Vin and Buck bracketed Ezra and Josiah steered Nathan clear of him as they walked down the sidewalk. Nathan seemed subdued and Vin figured that maybe Josiah had given him a piece of his mind after they had left.

They had barely cleared the door to the bullpen when Larabee stepped out of his office and snarled, "Standish! Get in here!"
Vin caught Ezra's arm as the undercover agent raised a brow and turned to head for the office. "Ez?"

"It's all right, Love," Ezra said, too softly for the others to hear. "Whatever it is I can deal with it." He gave Vin a smile that said everything was going to be all right and headed for the office where Chris stood holding the door for him.

Vin stared after him a moment, hoping that Ezra was up to dealing with Chris. He seemed to be calmed down from the confrontation with Nathan, but Ezra was good at hiding things and Vin was sure that Nathan's angry accusations had hurt him.

As soon as Ezra was through the door, Larabee slammed it with enough force to rattle the glass in it.

He didn't even bother going to sit behind his desk before turning on the undercover agent and yelling, "What the hell are you playing at?"

Ezra raised his eyebrows, straightened his jacket and calmly seated himself in the chair in front of Chris' desk, clasping his hands to hide the faint tremor in them. He did not need this on top of Nathan's verbal assault. "I beg your pardon, Mister Larabee, but I have no idea what you are talking about."

"Thompson never called you at the wedding reception! That call came from your home phone!"

Ezra kept his poker face firmly in place, asking calmly, "And you know this how?"

Instead of answering Chris turned to his desk and pushed a button on a tape recorder sitting there.

Ezra heard his own voice come out of it.

"Mister Thompson."

A long pause then: "This is hardly a convenient time."

Another pause then: "Very well. I shall be there."

Shit! Ezra somehow managed to keep his poker face intact. How did....? Aw hell, I forgot about the recorder that JD installed when I was getting the death threats last year.

"Sound familiar?" Chris demanded triumphantly.

Ezra shrugged, "I suppose it might."

"Suppose nothing! That is the call you supposedly got from Thompson at the wedding reception. The tape is from the recorder that JD installed on your phone line last year, the one that records outgoing calls as well as incoming ones. Now," he moved to lean menacingly over the man seated so calmly in the chair, "I want to know what the hell you were playing at and I want to know now!"

Ezra stared blandly back at him, not answering, until Larabee moved away in frustration. "Dammit, Ezra! Answer the question."

"Very well, I wished to leave the reception and did not wish to insult you by simply blowing off your wedding reception so I set up the little drama."

"Why the hell did you want to leave?"

"That is my business, Mister Larabee."
"Not when you dragged Vin off with you! You didn't have to ruin--"

"Mister Tanner was aware of the deception... " Ezra snapped.

"And he went along with it?"

"He was as ready to leave as I was!"

"For what? So the two of you could run hop in bed?"

"Certainly not!"

"Why not? That is what you two do isn't it? Why not blow off my wedding reception to go get you a little bit?"

"I resent the implication that mine and Mister Tanner's relationship is based on nothing more than sex! Mister Tanner was the one who desperately needed to retreat. He had had all that he could take."

"What the hell is that supposed to mean? Vin was my best man--"

"Hardly his choice."

"He agreed."

"You badgered him. If you will recall he wanted you to get Buck to be your best man. You are the one that insisted it be Vin. You wouldn't take no for an answer and you couldn't find sufficient reason to continue refusing without revealing his feelings for you."

"What?" Larabee stepped back looking shocked. No, it couldn't be. Vin was his best friend. Maybe he was bisexual but that didn't mean, couldn't mean, what Ezra was implying.

"Good Lord!" Ezra snapped jumping up out of the chair and beginning to stalk Larabee, "You really are that fucking blind, aren't you? You have no idea that the man has been in love with you for years!"

He backed Larabee up against the wall and poked a finger in his chest. "Your wedding was hell for him! And being your best man! Do you have any idea how much that hurt him? What pure unmitigated torture it was for him to have to stand up there with you, hand you the fucking ring, watch you put it on her hand, up close and personal! You're a bastard, Larabee! You don't deserve Vin's love or his loyalty! Or mine either! Go to hell!" He suddenly spun away and stalked out of the office, slamming the door behind him.

The glass cracked.

The other five members of the team stared at him in disbelief.

Ezra Standish did not slam doors. He certainly didn't slam them hard enough to crack the glass in them.

Ezra stomped past them and retreated into the conference room, closing the door behind him as he tried to gather his thoughts and calm down.

A moment later the door opened and he looked up to see Vin standing there.

*Oh, God! What had he done?*
"Vin," Ezra slumped back to sit on the edge of the conference table. "Oh, god, Vin, I'm sorry. I'm so very sorry. Please, you have to understand, I didn't mean to."

"Sorry for what?" Vin's voice was soft, soothing as he moved closer.

"I didn't mean to. It just... I lost my temper. I shouldn't have--"

"Shouldn't have what? C'mon Ezra, tell me what's wrong. Whatever it is, we can fix it."

"I told him."

"Told him what?" Vin kept his voice quiet, still trying to get Ezra to calm down as he gently pulled the distraught man into his arms.

"I told him that you love him." It was barely more than a whisper, then Ezra pulled back to look up at him. "He found out that the phone call from Thompson was a fake and--"

The door opened. Larabee stood framed in it. "I need to talk to you, Vin," he said quietly, his face unreadable.

Vin turned, moving unconsciously to put Ezra behind him. "Maybe you should talk to both of us, Cowboy."

Ezra remained where he was, frozen to the spot. He couldn't believe that he'd told Larabee about Vin's feelings for him. Oh, god! Everything was going to go to hell. He'd lose Vin for sure now that Larabee knew that Vin loved him.

"Vin, I think we should talk in private."

"I got no secrets from Ez. Don't plan to have any either," Vin said firmly.

"God! I don't know what to say to you...."

"Ain't nothing to say."

"But... he said that you're in love with me."

"Was. Don't matter none, now. You're married. I'm with Ezra. I made a commitment to him. I ain't going back on that."

"You don't love him."

"Not like I loved you, no... but I do love him. Reckon we can make a go of it. Sure intend to anyhow."

"Vin...."

"No. I waited near to five years for you to notice I was in love with you. You never did. Reckon that was cause you didn't want me to love you that way. I always knew you weren't into men, that what I felt for you wouldn't ever be returned. Just took me a while to accept it. I got Ezra now and you got Mary. I wish you every happiness with her, 'cause I plan to be real happy with Ezra."

"Vin, I can't help wondering...."

"What coulda been? Don't matter. Let it lie, Cowboy. Things worked out for the best," he stared his boss down, his face resolute. He could feel Ezra lay a hand on his back just above the waist, slowly
the fingers tightened, clutching at his shirt. He didn't break his gaze to turn and look at Ezra. He knew that the hand in his shirt would be the only sign of his lover's tension.

After a moment Chris ran a hand through his hair and looked away from the implacable gaze, his eyes wandering around the room. Finally he muttered, "Okay... okay," and turned, walking out of the room.

Vin stepped forwards enough to swing the door closed.

Ezra moved with him, unable to release his grip on Vin's shirt.

Vin turned back, swinging one arm up and over Ezra's head to gather him close without Ezra having to release his grip. He didn't think that Ezra could release the hold he had on Vin's shirt.

Ezra was shaking, almost sobbing, "You chose me. You chose me." Then he was sobbing, helplessly, clinging to Vin.

Vin pressed a kiss to the top of his head. "Course I did, Babe. Told you. Thick and thin, sick and sin. You'n me against the world." He moved back catching Ezra's face between his hands and bending to kiss away the tears. "Nobody else, Ez, not ever. Just you'n me. Together. Forever. My word as a Tanner. I'll never leave you, not for anybody."

"Oh, God! Vin," he buried his face back in Vin's chest, but Vin could still hear him repeating, "Your word as a Tanner," Ezra sobbed again. The relief, of hearing Vin declare his intention to stay with him, was overwhelming. "You're really mine. Nobody can take you away from me now."

He pulled back and smiled, reaching up to wipe away the tears. "I love you, Vin... and I swear, I will never give you cause to regret that promise."

Drawing back from Vin a bit more, he reached in his pocket for a handkerchief, "Lord, I must look a sight," he muttered, wiping at his face with the handkerchief. "I need to go wash my face."

Vin smiled as he watched his lover pull himself back together. A quick trip to the men's room and no one would ever guess that he had been distraught just moments before. As Ezra started past him to head to the men's room, Vin caught his arm. "I love you, too," he said quietly.

The blinding smile that Ezra flashed him made his heart soar.

***************************

Chris heard the door close behind him and stopped dead still. He raised his head to see the rest of the team staring at him.

JD's mouth hung open. Nathan looked stunned. Buck and Josiah were regarding him with almost hostile expressions.

His eyes met Buck's and he knew instantly that his oldest friend had been aware of Vin's feelings for him.

"Why?" he demanded. "Why didn't you say anything?"

"Wasn't my business... 'sides you and Vin..." Buck shook his head, "It woulda ended badly. Better not to ever start than to ruin your friendship with something that would never work out. Vin and Ezra fit together."


"They're as different as night and day!" Chris snapped. "Vin and I have a lot more in common than him and Ezra!"

"Nope. Just looks that way on the outside. Inside where it matters, Vin and Ezra are a lot more alike than you and Vin. Starting with the fact that they're both bisexual and you're pure out macho, heterosexual."

"Vin's my best friend."

"And all you'll ever be is friends, Chris. Don't throw that away on 'might have been'. Hell! Man, you just got married! You want to throw that away for something that you never even considered till a few minutes ago? Vin's accepted that you're married, that there can't ever be anything like that between you. He's working real hard to put the feelings he had for you in the past, make a future with somebody that can give him what he needs. Don't go throwing a monkey wrench in that just because you're confused right now."

Chris looked around, confusion clear on his face, "I just don't understand, Buck. I feel like I've stepped through the looking-glass and nothing's the way it was a minute ago."

"Ain't nothing really changed, Pard. You're married to Mary and you love her, right?"

"Yeah. I love her."

"Vin's still your best friend, right?"

"I... yeah, I guess."

"Then just file this under useless information and get on with your life. Be happy with what you got and let Vin be happy with what he's got," Buck said.

"That simple?"

"Life is as simple or as complicated as you make it, Chris. Think about how many lives you'd be messing up if you decide to make an issue of this." Buck fell silent as the conference room door opened.

Chris turned back to see Ezra emerge.

The undercover agent had his poker face firmly in place but it couldn't hide the red-rimmed eyes and splotchy complexion that clearly showed he'd been crying. He moved quickly towards the men's room, his head down, plainly not wanting the others to see how distraught he'd been.

Chris stared after him until he disappeared into the men's room. Their black sheep. His black sheep. His because he'd gone to Atlanta and practically dragged the man back to Denver with him. He'd felt like a hero, rescuing the former FBI agent from the hell he'd been trapped in and Ezra had been grateful, showing his gratitude with undying loyalty and willingness to do whatever Chris asked of him. He went into situations that no other undercover would even attempt, facing horrendous odds without flinching, because Chris had asked him to.

Now, he'd been crying and Chris knew that he'd brought the proud man to that. Knew that he could destroy Ezra so very easily... and he couldn't do that, because, if he faced his heart, he did love Vin... and Ezra as well... but not the way they loved each other.

He didn't want to hurt either one of them, couldn't *bear* to hurt either one of them. He took a deep breath and straightened. "Let's get back to work, people." He moved past Buck to his office door
then turned back to meet each of their eyes in turn. "I don't want to hear another word about this. Understood?"

One by one they nodded.

He nodded back and went into the office and closed the door.

Nathan Jackson ducked his head and stared down at his desktop. Well, that explained Vin's reaction at lunch. Man was so besotted with the little cheat that he couldn't see that what Ezra was doing was wrong.

********************
Warning for this section:

Attempted sexual assault. Repeat *ATTEMPTED* sexual assault. There is no actual rape. Also Mary's being a bitch and Chris is being a drunken bastard.

Nathan Jackson paced nervously. He wasn't sure he should be doing this, but his conscience just wouldn't leave him alone about it. It wasn't right. There had to be someone that was getting cheated in the deal Standish had made for that house. He had to say something to somebody. He hated going behind Vin's back, but the man was being blinded by his feelings for Ezra. He just couldn't see that there was something intrinsically wrong with what Ezra was doing in buying that house without telling the sellers that it was filled with antiques that were worth more than he was paying for the house.

He glanced up as the receptionist spoke.

"Mister Jackson? Mister Piedmont will see you now."

He swallowed hard and moved to the large, heavy wooden doors leading into the office where the attorney for the late Gaylene Stillwell waited.

Arthur Piedmont, attorney at law, was a tall, thin, white-haired man in his late fifties or early sixties. He rose behind the wide expanse of his desk to shake Nathan's hand. "Mister Jackson, what may I do for you today?"

"Well, I thought I might be able to do something for you. You know that house of Miss Stillwell's that you have for sale?" Nathan offered as they sat down.

"Indeed, I do. Are you interested in buying it?" Piedmont leaned back in his chair and smiled.

"No! Uh, no... but I know the man that is trying to buy it and he's something of a shrewd operator, if you know what I mean. I think you ought to know that he's... well to be blunt, he's cheating you on that deal," Nathan blurted out and hurried on to say, "I heard him talking and the antiques in that house are worth a lot more than he's paying for the house."

"Really." The old man's voice was dry and he regarded Nathan with a slight smile. "Tell me, Mister Jackson, have you seen the house?"

"Well, uh, no," Nathan reluctantly admitted.

"Do you know about the restrictions that Gaylene Stillwell put on the sale?"

"Restrictions?"

"Restrictions. That house is a white elephant, Mister Jackson. It has been on the market for more than
ten years. Gaylene specified that it cannot be sold to a developer. The land cannot be subdivided. The house cannot be torn down. Neither can any of the out buildings. There cannot be any other buildings erected on the property. The person buying the house must agree to live in it for a minimum of five years and should they then sell it, they must place the same restrictions on its sale as were on it when it was bought. Frankly, Mister Jackson, I despaired of ever selling it. Mister Standish is the first person to show an interest in years. As for the antiques, I can't sell them separate from the house. Gaylene's will specified that the house must be sold "as is" with all contents. Hell! I tried to sell it to the city for a park. They turned it down, saying it would cost too much to restore the house and keep it up."

He rose from behind the desk and held out his hand to Nathan. "I appreciate your concern, Mister Jackson. However, I don't feel that I am being cheated. I feel sorry for the man that is buying the place. He may very well go broke trying to get it up to code."

Nathan stood, shaking his head as he reached for the lawyer's hand. "If it was anybody but Ezra Standish, I might agree with you, but that man could spin straw into gold. I'd bet twenty bucks that he not only won't go broke, he'll find a way to turn a profit on the place."

Piedmont grinned, "All I can say is more power to him. I'm just glad to get rid of the place."

The next morning at work, Nathan approached Ezra hesitantly. "Ezra... I... I'm sorry."
"For what, Mister Jackson?" Ezra asked, regarding him coolly.
"What I said yesterday, about the house. I went to see that Miss Stillwell's attorney--"
"You what?" Vin jumped up from his desk where it faced Ezra's, stepping around it to confront Nathan, moving between him and Ezra, backing Nathan away from Ezra. "What the hell did I tell you, Nate? If you've queered this deal, I'll---"

"Hold on, Vin! I didn't. I mean, the lawyer guy, Piedmont, he wasn't upset about the deal. Said he just wanted to get rid of the house. That it had been real hard to sell. So, I reckon that maybe..."

"Maybe? You reckon that maybe-- what? That maybe Ez wasn't cheating anybody after all? That maybe you were wrong, you sanctimonious son of a bitch!"

In the background, the others looked up at Vin's angry voice. JD stared, open-mouthed. Buck stood up and moved closer, Josiah did the same. Chris' door opened but he stopped and stood in it, choosing to let them work it out for themselves if possible.

"Vin! Please!" Ezra pleaded catching Vin's arm. "It's all right."

"No! It ain't! I'm real tired of him jumping to conclusions about you. He's always whining about bigotry and prejudice. What the hell does he think the way he treats you is? He's a bigger bigot than you could ever be! And a hypocrite as well! Cause he can't even see what he's doing."

He turned to look into Ezra's eyes. "You bend over backwards to make things easy for him, not to offend his sensibilities, while he treats you like dirt. Well, I ain't gonna put up with it no more. It's past time somebody called him on it!"

"Vin," Ezra tried again. "Mister Jackson has had a hard life..."

"That don't give him the right to treat you like he does. You ain't never done nothing to him. If he
can't look past your accent and where you were raised, what right has he got to ask you to look past the color of his skin? Huh? As for him having a hard life, I don't reckon it was any harder than some white folks have had. Least he had a loving family to raise him... not like me... or you...."

Nathan opened his mouth to make a retort to that when Vin turned back to him.

"Don't say it, Nate! You ain't got no idea what Ezra's childhood was like! Maybe his ma did have money, but I never figured you for fool enough to think that money could make everything all right. Why don't you try using that brain of yours for a change? Ezra's got five stepfathers... and Maude's working on getting number six. Does that sound like a stable childhood to you? He's thirty years old, and his dad died when he was five, that means that, on an average, each stepfather lasted five years... or less, cause you got to figure the time it took Maude to reel them in and to get her divorces. Reckon the marriages actually averaged more like a year and half maybe two years each. Real stable environment. And that ain't counting the ones she didn't marry!" His voice dripped with sarcasm.

"And I don't figure all them stepfathers was exactly great husbands and fathers either, else Ez and Maude wouldn't react the way they do to raised voices and angry tones. Ya know, the only time I ever got pissed enough at Maude to yell at her, she backed off and threw up an arm like she expected me to hit her... and Ez moved real fast to get between us. Reactions like that come from being hit, hit often enough to associate somebody raising their voice, with them raising their hand."

He shook his head and slumped back against the edge of the desk. "Hell, I'm upsetting him now. Cause I'm yelling at you. Ain't you ever noticed how he always tries to smooth things over, tries to be the peacemaker? Ain't you got sense enough to see that that's a standard coping mechanism for a child raised in an abusive environment? They try to make peace, keep things from escalating into violence. It's what they learn when they're little, cause it's all they can do to stop the violence. Distract, redirect and pray that nobody hits them."

"He don't look upset to me!" Nathan sneered and turned, moving towards Ezra only to freeze, when Ezra shied away before seeming to catch himself and turning to face Nathan, his chin coming up, his jawline hardening and his shoulders squaring as he drew himself up to his full height and shifted to balance on the balls of his feet, clearly ready to defend himself.

Nathan blinked. If it hadn't been for the reflexive flinch, he would have assumed that Ezra was preparing to attack, not defend. He swallowed hard. How many times had Ezra flinched when he'd reached out a hand towards him? How many times had the man pulled away from him? And how many of those times had Nathan responded with anger, assuming that it was because he was black.

*Dear God! Ezra was afraid of him!*

He felt sick. He'd always prided himself on being a kind and gentle person, a caring person, but one of his team mates, a man he called his friend was *afraid* of him.

Ezra hid it well. Nathan might not have ever realized what the reaction actually was, if Vin hadn't spelled it out for him.

He stepped back, spreading his hands in a placating gesture. "Ezra... I'm sorry. Truly sorry. I never meant to hurt you. I never meant to prejudge you. I don't know what else to say... Except that I *am* sorry."

He watched as Ezra visibly relaxed.

The smaller man sighed. "Apology accepted, Mister Jackson," Ezra said softly and held out his hand.
Nathan stepped forwards and reached to take Ezra's hand.

"Dammit, Ez!" Vin snapped, straightening from his slumped position against the desk and stepping forward. "How can you forgive him, just like that? After all the times he's shit on you?"

Ezra turned away from Nathan with a sigh, to regard Vin with a long-suffering expression. "Vin, what did you just say about coping mechanisms?"

Vin shook his head, "That you're a peacemaker. That that's your coping mechanism."

"Exactly... and this," he waved a hand to indicate the rest of the seven, "is my family. Forgiving him will keep peace in the family."

"But you shouldn't always be the one to make the sacrifices to keep the peace," Vin insisted.

"Oh, I doubt that I shall be. Mister Jackson takes great pride in being a fair man. Now that you have pointed out to him that he has treated me unfairly and he has truly realized it, and I believe he has, he will take great care to treat me fairly from now on. He's a good man, Vin, if a bit self-righteous. But we all have our faults."

He reached out to lay a hand on Vin's arm, leaning a bit closer to the other man. "Mine, I fear, is that I have hidden myself too well from my friends, out of fear that if they knew the real me that they would reject me. You have given me the confidence to believe that they might accept me as I truly am, but you can't fight my battles for me, or make friends for me. It doesn't work that way. At least, I don't think that it does. I'm just learning how this friendship thing works, but I believe you're going to have to let me struggle through it on my own."

Vin let out a long sigh, "All right... guess you're right about that. I can't make friends for you... but if he hurts you again, I'm kicking his ass."

Ezra laughed, "Oh, Vin, what am I going to do with you?" He flashed Vin a sly smile that said he had a very good idea of what to do with him, then turned back to Nathan.

"Mister Jackson?" he held out his hand again, "friends?"

Nathan took the offered hand gratefully. "Friends... And thank you Ezra... for still being willing to be my friend. I promise you, I'll do better."

"All I ask is that you try," Ezra said quietly.

With a sigh, Chris stepped back into his office, grateful that he hadn't had to intervene. Buck slapped Vin on the shoulder and Josiah guided Nathan away from Ezra. JD turned back to his computer.

Ezra turned to face Vin. "Are you all right?" he asked softly.

Vin shook his head, "I'm fine. I oughta be asking if you're all right."

Ezra smiled, "I'm more than just all right, Mister Tanner." He stepped closer, lowering his voice, "I have someone that loves me enough to stand up for me and defend me and I have now taken a step closer to turning a colleague into a real friend. Thank you."

Vin felt himself relaxing at the smile that touched Ezra's eyes, leaning closer he said. "You're welcome," then added, "reckon we might take a long lunch today?"

Ezra's smile widened, "We do have comp time coming for the three days we spent undercover
twenty-four hours per day at Mister Thompson's estate week before last. I think we could arrange it."

"I'll tell Chris that we're taking the afternoon off."

"The whole afternoon?" Ezra grinned. "You are incorrigible, Mister Tanner."

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Shortly before lunch, Vin stuck his head into Chris' office. "Chris? If it's okay with you, me'n Ez are going to use some of our comp time, take the afternoon off."

"What are you planning to do?"

" Been looking at a truck. Thought I might take Ez by to see it. We're going to need one. We close on the house Friday and I want to get started on the clean up right away."

Chris nodded, "Okay... but make sure Ezra's in here first thing in the morning. Thompson's rolled over on his supplier. Sounds like it might be the guys who pulled the armory heist. He's willing to introduce Ezra to them in exchange for a reduced sentence."

"Nine o'clock?"

"Yeah."

"Thanks, Cowboy. We'll be there."

Vin was grinning when he rejoined Ezra at their desks. "Get your stuff straightened up. We got the afternoon off."

Ezra cocked an eyebrow at him. "What did you tell Mister Larabee?"

"The truth... I'm going to take you to see a truck... course I didn't tell him that we were going straight there."

"It might be best to make that stop first." Ezra smiled at him, adding softly, "You know how we are when we get in bed together."

Vin grinned, leaning down to whisper, "Yeah. When I get you in the sack, I just can't seem to let you go." Straightening he spoke louder, "Let's grab lunch, then we can stop at the Chevy place and I'll show you the truck I've got my eye on."

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Lunch was a leisurely affair. They ate at a Chinese buffet, Ezra sticking to steamed vegetables and seafood while Vin dug in, eating copious amounts of virtually everything on the buffet.

Ezra watched Vin with a smile as the other man ate with knife and fork. Ezra wielded his chopsticks with finesse, taking his time with the vegetables and salad that he had chosen.

He did consent to eat one of the biscuits coated with powdered sugar that Vin thrust at him, while Vin eagerly devoured several. "I truly do not see how you stay so slim, when you eat like you do," he chided gently.

Vin just shrugged. "I don't know either. Just always been skinny and how much I eat don't seem to make any difference."
Ezra smiled, "You work it off, I'm sure. Between the job, your helping out at the Youth Center, teaching self-defense at the Rape Counseling Center, helping your neighbors, helping Chris at the ranch, and helping Mrs. Wells maintain her home, you are never truly still."

Vin grinned and leaned closer, taking one of Ezra's hands, "Left out one of the best ways I work off calories..." his voice went husky, "making love to you."

Ezra blushed and grinned back at him, "In that case, perhaps we should move on to looking at that truck, so that we can get finished and head home so that you may work off some calories."

Vin chuckled, then nodded, saying, "Let's go."

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The truck Vin 'had his eye on' was a full-size Chevy with a long wheelbase and a bed that was wide enough and long enough to lay a four-by-eight foot sheet of plywood flat in. It had dual back wheels, a club cab with four doors and four-wheel drive. It also had air-conditioning, a CD player and booming stereo speakers. It was a deep ruby red in a metallic finish.

Ezra gawked. This was not the kind of truck he had expected Vin to want to show him. He never expected his practical lover to have been looking at something so new, shiny and expensive.

"Vin, are you sure this is the truck?"

"Oh, yeah!" Vin breathed obviously delighted with the vehicle. He walked around it and pointed to the bed liner. "It's got a sprayed on bed liner. Won't have to worry about it getting torn up or out. They're real durable. We'll need the big bed for hauling stuff. Lumber and such. Got four-wheel drive. That'll get us into those hard to reach places on the property. Got a club cab. We'll need the extra seating for hauling the guys around to help out."

He flashed Ezra a grin, "I'm counting on you to get the price down."

Ezra smiled back at him and walked round the truck to check the sticker price. His eyebrows rose. It was nearly sixty-five thousand dollars. True, it was a nice truck, but that was ridiculous.

By the time the salesman had materialized at his elbow, Ezra had his game face on and an acceptable price range in mind.

The salesman, a short, balding man with faded blue eyes virtually ignored Vin, focusing on Ezra as the one with the money.

With a wicked grin, Vin sidled up to Ezra and turned pleading blue eyes on him. "Please, Ez," he pouted, "I really like it. I'll make it worth your while," he promised with a heated look, having apparently hit on playing the role of a poor boy begging his sugar daddy for the truck.

Ezra had to fight to keep a straight face. Forcing himself to frown he declared, "It's entirely too much."

"I'll do extra work around the ranch, I promise," Vin wheedled.

The salesman spoke up, "It is an excellent work truck. Has a half-ton payload, V-8 engine with overdrive and a towing package is included. A real workhorse of a truck... and it looks good, too."

Ezra kept walking, moving around the truck, "Should I decide to gift my... friend with a vehicle today, I'll be paying cash, perhaps a discount would be in order..."
The salesman brightened. He could do that. The markup on this particular truck was pretty high. "I might be able to work something out," he said. "How about five percent...."

Ezra gave him a withering look. "That wouldn't cover the taxes. Twenty-five percent."

The salesman balked, "I don't think that my boss would let me go that."

"Ask him," Ezra ordered, disdainfully.

The salesman hurried off returning shortly with a tall, heavy-set man with black hair and blue eyes. He swept a glance over Vin then turned to Ezra. "I'm Guy Falks. Henry tells me you'd like to buy this truck."

"My friend would like for me to buy it. I have not decided as yet," Ezra stated firmly.

"I see, well, I can't go twenty-five percent off. We have to make some money, you know."

"I know. I also know that the factory invoice on this vehicle is around forty-thousand dollars. You won't be losing money on the deal, just not getting the almost fifty percent markup that you normally do."

The man shook his head, "I still can't go twenty-five percent. How about ten percent?"

Ezra walked around the truck again. Turning to Vin, he asked, "Have you driven it?"

Vin grinned happily, "Last week. Handles like a dream! Got power to spare."

Ezra shook his head, "You really want this?"

"Yeah... please, Ez..." Vin pleaded softly playing his role to perfection.

Ezra heaved a put-upon sigh. "Fifteen percent... and you fill the gas tank."

"It's got dual gas tanks," Vin supplied helpfully.

"Both tanks," Ezra specified.

The salesman and his boss exchanged looks. "If you'd care to come inside, we can do the paperwork while Henry gets it gassed up for you," Falks said.

Vin grinned, then frowned, "You know, I'd really like a light bar...."

Ezra turned to regard the manager with a calculating look.

The manager sighed, "A light bar."

"Installed... before we sign the papers," Ezra added, looking ready to walk away, if it wasn't forthcoming.

Vin put on his best stricken look, trying to appear afraid that Ezra would leave if the light bar wasn't included. "Ezzzzz...," he whined.

Ezra fixed him with a hard look. "Don't whine, Vin. You know I hate it when you whine."

"Yes, sir." Vin scuffed a toe against the lot's asphalt paving and pouted.

The manager hesitated, looking from one to the other then after a moment he said to Henry, "Take it
around to the shop. Tell Mike to install a light bar... immediately. We'll be in the office."

Henry sighed but did as he was told, knowing full well that Guy was going to take the credit for the sale and the commission that went with it. Damn.

Vin and Ezra followed the manager into the office, exchanging looks and trying not to burst out laughing. They let the man fill out all the paperwork, making sure that he put the truck title in Vin's name. Just over an hour later, Henry returned with the keys and they went out to inspect the installation of the light bar and make sure that both fuel gauges read full before returning to sign the papers and close the deal.

When the manager pushed the papers over to Ezra to sign, he pushed them to Vin. "Mister Tanner will be paying for the truck," he said calmly.

Vin pulled out his wallet and handed the man his bank card, "That's a debit card, go ahead on and run it through. It'll cover the truck."

Falks sat back and regarded them for a moment, shaking his head. "Damn."

Ezra laughed. "You saw what we wanted you to see and you aren't completely wrong. We are a couple, just not the way you thought. While Mister Tanner does not have as much money as I do, he can certainly afford to buy himself a truck."

"Figured Ez would get me a better deal than I'd get by myself. He's real good at that sorta thing." Vin grinned, the look softening as he turned to look at his partner.

Falks shook his head again. "Well, as long as the card goes through."

"It will," Ezra assured him.

And it did.

Vin drove his shiny red truck home to the townhouse and Ezra followed him in the Jag.

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"Ez. Come on, Ez, you gotta get up." Vin shook his lover again.

Vin was already dressed to go in to work.

Ezra lay curled in a ball wrapped around the pillow that Vin had substituted for himself when he got up. He mumbled something and snuggled down more.

"Ez! Come on! We got a meeting!"

"Meetin'?" Ezra rolled on his back and blinked up at him, "Since when?"

"Damn! I forgot to tell you. When I told Chris we were taking the afternoon, off he said to make sure you were in by nine. Thompson rolled on his supplier. We've got a meeting to plan what we're going to do."

"Aw, hell," Ezra swore softly without any real feeling to it. He knew that he couldn't miss the meeting and he really wasn't angry with Vin for forgetting to tell him. He knew how excited Vin had been about getting the truck and after they had gotten home neither of them had been thinking about work. "What time is it?"
"Seven-thirty," Vin said as Ezra threw back the covers and sat up on the edge of the bed. He handed Ezra a cup of coffee. "Yours," he said, letting Ezra know that it had come out of the pot he'd put on the night before, rather than the one that Vin habitually made in the mornings.

"Thanks."

"You got plenty of time yet. Didn't want you to have to rush." With a shy look at Ezra he added, "Thought we'd drive the truck...."

Ezra chuckled, "Planning to give Mister Larabee a heart attack first thing this morning, are you?"

Vin grinned wickedly. "Can't wait for the guys to see it!"

Ezra chuckled again and set his coffee cup down on the bedside table before rising to give Vin a hug and say, "Neither can I." He leaned against Vin for a long moment then sighed. Stepping back he looked Vin up and down, then pouted, "You've already showered."

"Yep. We'd never get to work if I'd waited to shower with you."

Ezra smiled, "You look good." He ran a hand down the red shirt that Vin wore. "Not quite the same color as the truck, but close."

Vin had on indigo jeans with the red shirt and his good black boots. A bolo tie with a large red stone banded with black completed the outfit. His new, black cowboy hat sat on the dresser, ready to be grabbed before they headed out.

Ezra showered quickly and dressed in a dove gray suit with a pale, jade-green silk shirt. As he adjusted his tie in the mirror, Vin came up behind him, slipping his arms around his waist and bending to nibble at one ear.

"You look good, too, Babe," he murmured.

Ezra turned in his arms to claim a gentle kiss. When they parted he said quietly, "I love you."

Vin smiled, "I know. Love you, too." He kissed Ezra again, gently then moved away to grab up his hat and head for the door.

But not the way you love Chris. Ezra sighed and followed him out to the truck.

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He parked the shiny red truck in the underground garage and got out slowly, dragging his overnight bag with him. It seemed that he did everything slowly these days. He carefully locked the doors and checked them, running a hand lightly over the gleaming, freshly washed and buffed surface, before trudging across the garage to the elevator and pushing the button to call it.

Seventeen floors up and out into the cold, hollow hallway, then down it to the sterile room where his lover awaited him.

Stepping through the door, it only took a glance to show him that there had been no change.

Miss Nettie lifted her head from where she had been sitting, knitting, when she heard the door open. Tucking the half-finished sweater, a burgundy red one with heavy cabling, into the bag that sat beside her, she rose and came to greet him, giving him a hug.

He held on a long moment, soaking up the comfort of the touch. Finally he stepped back, "No
"change?" He had to ask, even though he already knew the answer.

She shook her head with a sigh, "No." She stepped close to the bed and smoothed back a strand of the long hair from Vin's face.

The doctors had wanted to cut it, saying a coma patient wouldn't know the difference and it would be easier to take care of, but Ezra had refused to allow it. They had shaved a portion of it, over the skull fracture, but even that was growing back now.

Ezra washed it himself every other day, using shampoo that he had brought from home. The shampoo along with Vin's favorite soap sat on the bedside table in the small plastic basin that was used to give Vin his sponge bath. Ezra's spare razor and shaving cream, toothbrush and toothpaste occupied the narrow shelf over the sink, which was in the main part of the room. His shampoo and soap were in the shower in the tiny bathroom as he often bathed and changed there.

Nettie moved to the other bed in the room, turning it down, getting it ready for Ezra.

He put his bag on the chair beside the bed and moved to Vin's side. Bending, he pressed a kiss to his lover's cheek, then straightened, gently fussing with the blankets and rearranging the IV and monitor leads.

He didn't know how long he stood there, before Nettie came to guide him away, quietly asking, "How are things going at the house?"

"Leonard called. The china sold today."

"He get you a good price?"

Ezra smiled wanly. "Good enough. Two hundred and fifty thousand... of course that was included the silverware and glassware."

She nodded. "He say who bought it?"

"Some Englishman, a Lord Hepplewhite, I believe."

She shook her head. If Vin didn't wake up soon they were going to lose them both. She pressed on. The house was the only thing that Ezra paid any attention to besides Vin. He had decided that he needed to have it ready for Vin to come home to and was single-mindedly pursuing that end. He spent every night at the hospital, camped in Vin's room, and every day at the house, working on getting it ready for Vin's homecoming. He only stopped by his townhouse once or twice a week to get clean clothes or throw a load in the washer. "How's the clean up going?" she asked.

"Father Alfred and the boys from the Youth Center have cleared the underbrush from the trees near the road and the house. The younger children have cleaned up most of the aluminum cans and glass bottles. They have started some sort of fund with the recycling money. I'm not sure exactly what they plan to do with it. The pressure washing company finished the last of the outbuildings today. The inside cleanup is going as well as can be expected. The paintings have been sent to the Gallery for cleaning and the ladies have cleaned the downstairs and are working on the second floor. Mister Hernandez and his sons are cataloguing the rest of the stuff in the basement. Miss Casey and Miss Raine came by and they are working in the attic. Josiah is stripping the wallpaper in the main downstairs hallway. The electricians are due in the morning to start rewiring. The plumbers are working in the kitchen."

He paused to rub his temples. "The downstairs bathroom has already been re-plumbed. The main sewer line and the incoming water lines have been replaced as well as a new gas water heater
downstairs. We plan to add point-of-use water heaters in the upstairs bathrooms."

She stepped behind him and rubbed his shoulders. He still said 'we' whenever he spoke of the house, as if Vin were still helping him make the decisions.

"You need to get some rest," she said quietly.

"I'll lie down after I talk with Vin a while. I expect the others will be dropping by. Visiting hours don't end until nine."

She shook her head. *Talking with* Vin. *Like the boy can talk back.* She sighed. It was almost eight o'clock. Gloria Potter had said that he had been up and already dressed at six when she had arrived for the morning shift to sit with Vin. Ezra had no doubt been on the move ever since then.

Still, he was right. The others would be coming... at least, most of them.

She squeezed his shoulders, noting how thin they had grown, then leaned down and said, "All right, but soon as the last of them leaves, it's straight to bed with you. Understood?"

"Yes, ma'am," he said so quietly she had to strain to hear it.

"Okay, then. I'm going now. Inez called. She's bringing you supper when she comes. You eat it. You hear me?"

"Yes, ma'am," again the voice was very quiet and empty.

She gathered up her things and departed, shaking her head, quietly praying to herself. *Dear Lord, please let our Vin wake up soon. That man is gonna grieve himself to death if he don't.*

She had known for a long time that Vin was bisexual, leaning more to the gay side than the straight one. She's hoped he'd find someone, not caring if it were male or female, as long as they loved Vin. Still, she had been surprised that Ezra was Vin's choice. She hadn't thought that the apparently self-centered man was a good choice. Now, she had had to revise that opinion.

Ezra Standish had been a rock since Vin's injury. He'd stayed at Vin's side night and day in the beginning, before deciding that he needed to get the house ready for Vin to come home to. He was paying the hospital bills that went above what the ATF insurance covered. He was paying for the private room. She knew that that was so that he could stay with Vin, but he *was* paying for it and paying her and Gloria to sit with Vin during the day.

She'd protested in the beginning, saying she'd be there anyway, but he had insisted, saying that he knew that, but that she deserved to have some recompense since she had quit her part-time job at the library to stay with Vin. She hadn't argued too much since she had needed the money.

She had no idea how much money he was spending on the house. She knew it was a lot. While the others helped when they could, they were spread too thin right now to do as much as they would have liked, and Ezra was a better supervisor and manager than a worker. Things that Vin would have done himself, Ezra had to hire done.

She needed to stop by and see Mary. She hoped the woman was in a better mood than she had been yesterday, but she wasn't expecting her to be.

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After Nettie left, Ezra sank down in the chair beside the bed, pulling it closer and taking Vin's hand.
He kissed the back of it gently.

"How did it all go so wrong in just under three months, Love?" he asked quietly, knowing that Vin could not answer.

Three months ago they had been on top of the world. They had bought the truck that Vin wanted. They had closed the deal on the house. They had been closing in on the gang that had engineered the armory heist that had put rocket launchers on the streets of Denver.

Then disaster struck.

During the raid, when they had brought down the gang, Ezra had taken a hit, not a bad hit since the vest had stopped the slug, but it had sent him sailing over the edge of the loading dock towards the concrete below. Vin, standing next to him, acting as his bodyguard during the sting, had reacted instantly, grabbing Ezra as the undercover agent went over and twisting so that Vin was on the bottom when they landed. Cushioning Ezra's fall, Vin had prevented any major injury to Ezra, but had fractured his skull when he hit the concrete. X-rays at the hospital had revealed broken ribs, a fractured collarbone and a fractured pelvis as well.

All of the fractures were healed now, even the skull fracture, but Vin remained comatose. The doctors said that he should wake up, but they couldn't tell him when. There didn't appear to be any brain damage, as the EEG showed brain activity, but he hadn't woken.

Ezra pressed the hand he held to his cheek and held it there, unaware of the silent tears sliding down his face, "Oh, Vin, I miss you, Darling," he whispered.

In the beginning he had been eaten alive with guilt, blaming himself for Vin's injury, then he'd slowly come to realize that he would have done the same for Vin had the roles been reversed. Finally he had seen the truth behind it all. Vin loved him, truly loved him, just as he loved Vin. With that realization all his doubts and worries about their future together had evaporated. Vin would get well. He would come home and he and Ezra would live happily ever after. Which meant that Ezra needed to get their fairy tale castle ready for that homecoming.

He had thrown himself into the project wholeheartedly. He'd organized the cleanup, utilizing not only the seven and their many friends, but also the friends that Vin had in Purgatorio to help. They all felt helpless, just as he had, and had been happy to have something to do to show how much they loved Vin.

"Leonard sends his regards. He's in England at the moment. That lump of cobwebs and dust from over the dining table was, indeed, a chandelier. He has set the opening bid at a quarter million. The base is solid silver and the crystals were imported from Italy, that island where they make the glass. Why can't I recall the name of the damned island? My mind is like a sieve these days."

He paused to kiss the back of Vin's hand. "He has two Tiffany lamps to sell as well. I kept the one in the bedroom, the one that you liked so much. It will be beside our bed when you come home. I'm having frames built for the three quilts that we are keeping. You remember the applique one of the mountains, don't you? Well, I found two more that I am sure you will love. One has a pair of eagles over the mountains, the other has wolves in a meadow with a rainbow in the background. Whoever made them was a true artist. They are exquisite."

He fell silent for a long moment, fiddling with the blanket that covered Vin then went on. "I can't decide whether I want the eagles or the wolves in the bedroom. What do you think? The eagles?"

He tilted his head as if listening to something, then went on. "They make my spirit soar, like they
soar above the mountains, so wild and free, like you, My Love."

He paused again. "But the wolves are a family. The parents lie close together, the cubs, there are two of them, are climbing over them. That makes me think of us. You told me that wolves mate for life, as we have done."

In the doorway, Josiah gripped Inez' arm to hold her back and keep her quiet as they listened to Ezra talking to Vin as if his lover could respond.

Tears filled both their eyes.

After a moment Josiah moved quietly into the room, stopping several steps inside and clearing his throat to get Ezra's attention.

Ezra looked up and smiled through the wetness on his cheeks. "Josiah, Miss Rocillos, do come in. Vin welcomes your visit. I was just telling him about the quilts we found."

Josiah moved the rest of the way into the room to stand beside Vin's bed, looking down at the sharpshooter. "I'm sure he was pleased with the discovery," he said quietly.

Inez had moved to set the bag with Ezra's supper on the tray table. Opening it she removed a plate and silverware, then took out the food, removing it from the Styrofoam container and arranged it on the plate. "I have brought you fajitas," she said, "your favorite, with the shrimp."

Josiah walked around the bed and slipped a hand under Ezra's arm, "How about you come eat the meal that Miss Inez fixed for you and let her visit with Vin for just a bit?" The big profiler phrased it as a question even as he gently, but firmly urged Ezra from his seat and guided him to the other bed where he urged Ezra to sit down on the side of the bed and pushed the tray table over in front of him.

Ezra blinked at the food as if he didn't know what it was.

"You have to eat, Ezra. Vin will be upset when he wakes up, if you are nothing but skin and bones." Josiah wasn't loath to use whatever it took to get Ezra to eat.

Ezra picked up his fork and began to methodically eat the food, giving no sign that he even tasted, it.

Josiah and Inez exchanged sad looks. Josiah sank into the chair nearest Ezra to insure that he did in fact eat the entire meal that Inez had brought, while Inez took the chair beside Vin's bed that Ezra had vacated.

Josiah sighed and began to speak quietly to Ezra, "I finished stripping the wallpaper along the hall. It's all down now. You were right, the wood will be beautiful once it's refinished. I think that Vin will love it. The entrance hall floor turned out to be blue granite. The mountain quilt will go well in there." He paused, but Ezra said nothing.

He went on, "Mister Hernandez and his boys found a doorway in the basement. Seems you've got a wine cellar. Some real old wines in it, too. You might want to check that out tomorrow. Some of them could be valuable."

He tilted his head and sighed again at the lack of response. "Ezra, son, help me out here. It's kind of hard to carry on a conversation when the other person doesn't say anything."

Ezra looked up at him and blinked then finally said, "I think... I think that I will hang the wolves in the bedroom and the eagles in the entry hall. They will complement the mountains. The mountains on one side of the hall and the eagles, soaring over mountains on the other. The color schemes are
very similar."

Josiah grinned, "Excellent choice." He waited. Ezra's mind would catch up to the conversation in a minute or so.

After another moment Ezra said. "I'll check the wine cellar tomorrow." He fell silent again and his gaze wandered back to Vin. He sat limp and still, reminding Josiah of the way the human-shaped droid in Star Wars slumped when turned off.

Josiah shook his head, sighing again. Please, Lord. He prayed silently. He didn't even think what he was asking for, figuring that the Lord knew after nearly three months of his heartfelt prayers... and there were so many things he wanted... for Vin to wake up, for Vin to be all right and not brain damaged, for Ezra to come back to them, the old Ezra, bright, articulate, funny... and happy, so very, very happy, the way he had been for the three weeks between Chris' return from his honeymoon and Vin's injury.

After several moments of silence, Ezra slowly sat up, his head coming up and his back straightening. He lay his fork down and looked at Josiah. "You should get some rest, too, Josiah," he said softly, "you're working too hard between the office and the house."

Josiah smiled gently at him. "I'm fine, Ezra. Keeps my mind occupied," he paused, then with a slight nod to himself took a deep breath and added, "I put in my papers today. I'm retiring."

Ezra's eyes closed for an instant then he opened them and gave Josiah a sad look. "I'm sorry. You shouldn't have to retire just to help me. I hate to be the reason for the team to break up."

"That's not the only reason I'm retiring... and the team is already broken up." He watched Ezra as he carefully explained. "You've resigned. Vin is on Medical Leave. Chris has gone on Family Leave to take care of Mary, since the doctor ordered her to bed for the duration of her pregnancy. Buck, JD, Nathan and I have been reduced to paperwork and backup for other teams. Team Seven doesn't exist at the moment and I'd rather be with my family in this time of trial than sitting around the office doing make-work. I need to be needed, son, and you and Vin, Chris and Mary need me more than the ATF does."

He grinned suddenly, "Besides, I've fallen in love with that house of yours, too. You may have to throw me out, when it's complete enough for you and Vin to move in."

Ezra chuckled, the first time that Josiah had heard that dry, wry sound in a long time. "Never," he said softly. "I'm sure we can spare you a room. There are what? Six bedroom suites upstairs? Each with a sitting room and two with private baths. Not to mention that there are three rooms downstairs that could possibly be used as bedrooms if necessary... and of course the servant's quarters in the attic... not that we would ever consign you to the attic."

He paused, reaching out to take Josiah's hand, in a gesture that the big profiler knew he would have never made before all this had begun. "Besides," he said softly, "it might be nice to have you there." His voice broke as he added, "Especially, if the house should be ready before Vin awakens. I plan to take him home in that event. I'm interviewing nursing staff to that end."

Ezra blinked rapidly and Josiah knew he was fighting back tears. It was the first time since Vin had been injured that Ezra had admitted that Vin might not awaken before the house was done. He still hadn't faced up to the fact that Vin might remain comatose for as long as he lived, but it was a step towards that. Josiah didn't think, even for a minute, that Ezra wouldn't take Vin home or keep him there, for the rest of his life. He knew that no matter what happened, Ezra would never abandon his lover.
The moment was broken as the door opened again to admit Buck with Nathan and Raine on his heels and JD and Casey following after. Ezra quickly pulled his hand back, releasing Josiah's.

Buck, JD and Casey went straight to Vin's side, greeting Inez quietly. Nathan headed straight for Ezra with Raine just a step behind.

Dropping into a squat a step away from Ezra, careful to give Ezra space, he asked, "How are you doing, Ez."

Ezra gave him a wan smile, "As well as can be expected."

Nathan glanced at the nearly empty plate of food that sat in front of Ezra, "You done with that?"

Ezra nodded.

Nathan nodded, asking quietly, "You ate most all of it?"

"Yes, Mister Jackson. Mister Sanchez knows how to guilt me into eating almost as well as you do." The smile was a bit stronger that time.

"Long as you eat." He reached out and squeezed Ezra's arm, then rose and turned towards Raine who reached into her handbag and handed him a small bottle. "I brought you some vitamins. I want you to take them now," Nathan said, beginning what had become a nightly ritual. "You still ain't eating like you should and they'll help."

Ezra sighed but held out his hand and Nathan shook the contents of the bottle into it. Ezra gazed down at the small array of pills and began turning them over in his hand, counting them.

"Same as always, Ez," Nathan assured him, as he did every night. "The big orange one is the multivitamin. The capsule is B-12. The white one is calcium. The brown one is Vitamin D. The dark red one is iron. The other four are Vitamin C. Now take them."

Ezra sighed but reached for his glass and downed the pills, carefully swallowing them in two batches.

"Good," Nathan smiled at him, "now let's get you into bed."

"I can't possibly go to bed yet," Ezra protested.

"Yes, you can," Nathan said firmly.

"But everyone's still here."

"Just like last night, and the night before that, and the night before that," Nathan reminded him. "Now, get on in that bathroom and get changed into your pajamas."

Ezra pouted, but pushed the tray table aside and rose. Picking up his overnight bag he crossed to the bathroom door, greeting the others as he went.

Once the door closed behind him, Nathan sighed. "He looks awful."

The others nodded their agreement. Nathan walked over and picked up the chart at the foot of Vin's bed and began to peruse it.

Buck slipped an arm around Inez and she leaned against him. He pressed a soft kiss to her forehead. "Thanks for bringing his supper, Darling."
"It is the least I could do. There is so little that anyone can do. I feel so helpless." She buried her face in his shoulder and he hugged her in silence. There was nothing to be said.

They stood there, surrounding the bed, the women standing close to their men, the men reaching out to put an arm around them. The men were all painfully aware that it could have so easily been any one of them in that bed and the women were equally aware that it could have been any one of the them in Ezra's place waiting and praying.

Josiah moved up quietly to join them, taking the place nearest Vin's head. He said, "Let us pray, brothers."

He reached for Raine's hand and she took Nathan's, each person reaching out to take the hand of the one next to them. Buck reached across the bed to take Josiah's other hand, closing the circle.

They bowed their heads and Josiah intoned quietly, "Dear Lord, we give thanks that we are all here and alive and well so that we may help our brothers through this time of trial. We thank you for the strength to get through this and we beseech you to look after our brothers, Vin and Ezra. Please, heal Vin's body and Ezra's heart. Bring them back to us, whole and happy. In Christ's name, Amen."

A quiet chorus of "Amens" answered him.

They visited quietly for a few more minutes until they heard the shower cut off in the bathroom, then Josiah and Nathan herded the others out. Raine promised to wait downstairs for Nathan and Nathan promised that he wouldn't be long.

Ezra emerged from the bathroom, his hair dark and damp, wearing sweats rather than the silk pajamas he would have worn at home. They hung loosely on him. He stopped beside Vin's bed, seeming to sort of get stuck there.

Josiah moved to put an arm around his shoulders and guide him to the other bed. "You just climb in here, now," he ordered gently, thinking as he did it that it was like putting a child to bed.

Nathan stepped up on the other side to pull up the blanket and tuck it in around the desolate figure. "I'll leave the light over Vin's bed on so you can see him when you wake up. Okay?"

It was the same offer he made every night and Ezra gave back the same answer.

"Thank you, Nathan."

"You're welcome. I'm going to turn the rest of the lights out. Okay?"

"Okay," Ezra said very softly.

Nathan only just resisted the urge to bend over and kiss his forehead. His heart broke at the devastation that Vin's injury had wrought on Ezra. He could barely believe that just three months ago he had thought that Ezra was like Teflon, that everything just slid off him. Watching him slowly disintegrate in the weeks following Vin's injury had been heart-wrenching, but painful as it was, it had shown Nathan how much Ezra loved Vin and how little he, Nathan, had known the man he had worked with for nearly five years.

Josiah couldn't resist the urge to reach down and smooth the damp curls back from Ezra's face. "Sleep well, son. I'll stop by in the morning."

Ezra looked up at him and murmured, "Good night, Josiah."
Nathan moved around the room, turning off the lights, making sure that the small fluorescent light at the head of Vin's bed remained on, then moving to the door and holding it open until Josiah joined him. He closed the door behind them, and the two men walked slowly down the corridor to the elevator.

Once inside and riding down to the parking garage, Nathan said, "According to Vin's chart he's showing an increase in brain activity."

Josiah looked at him, "You think he's waking up?"

"Could be."

"Why didn't you say something," Josiah reached for the stop button, "Ezra would-"

"Josiah," Nate captured the hand, pulling it away from the stop button, "I can't be sure... and false hope is worse than no hope. How do you think Ezra would react, if I told him that I think Vin may start to wake up in a few days, then he doesn't wake up for say another week or two? God! Look at the shape he's in now. He can't take having his hopes gotten up just to see them dashed. Better to say nothing and let it come as a pleasant surprise. He still believes that Vin will wake up... but he doesn't need me to give him a timetable that could very well be wrong."

"He needs to know that Vin will wake up."

"He knows that... better than anyone. He's the one that has always known that," Nathan argued firmly.

Josiah rubbed his temples. "Then why tell me?"

"Because you can hear everything I'm saying. Ezra will lock on to the fact that Vin should wake up soon and never hear anything else. You can hear me when I say that I can't be sure how soon Vin will wake up. But if you know that it is going to happen you can give Ezra the support he needs to keep going until it does even if it turns out to be as much as another month."

Josiah raised his head and studied his old friend for a long moment. "You really believe that Vin will wake up soon?"

"Yes, but I can't give you a date."

"Why now? Why not a month ago or six weeks?"

"Maybe... maybe he needed to be comatose until now. Think about it, Josiah. They just took him out of a full-torso cast, from shoulders to mid-thigh. His pelvis was fractured. He had broken ribs and a fractured collarbone. He had to be immobilized to heal. You know how Vin hates being tied down. Since he was comatose he didn't fight having to be bedridden for nine weeks straight, unable to move. It would have made him crazy, if he'd been conscious for it."

Josiah blinked, "It would have..." he said thoughtfully. "So, now that he's out of the cast...."

"He needs to wake up, so that they can begin the physical therapy to get him back on his feet," Nathan completed the thought for him.

"And he is showing signs of waking up," Josiah took a deep breath and smiled. "Thank you, Nathan, for restoring my faith. The Lord does, indeed, move in mysterious ways. While this has been no less of a trial for it, it has done some good. Vin's action in saving Ezra at the warehouse convinced him, as nothing else could have, of Vin's love. Ezra's actions, his devotion, since then
have proven his love for Vin to everyone who had doubts about it. And the coma spared Vin the nightmare of being in total confinement in the torso cast. Now we need only wait for Vin to wake up."

"Which is just what we have been doing, but now I'm pretty sure it won't be much longer." Nathan assured him.

"I'll add a few extra prayers in that direction," Josiah avowed.

The elevator reached the lobby and the two men stepped out to find Raine and head for the parking garage to get their cars.

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"Chris! Chris!" Mary Travis Larabee's shrill voice cut through the otherwise quiet house.

Chris Larabee leaned over the sink where he had been washing up the supper dishes. They had eaten in Mary's room, on tray tables, so that she could join Billy and him.

He straightened and rubbed his temples.

"Chris!" she called again.

He sighed and yelled back, "I'm coming! Give me a damned minute!" then he sighed. He hadn't meant to snap.

It wasn't her fault that the doctor had ordered her to bed. She was almost six months pregnant... with triplets. Three weeks ago they had had a scare. She had started bleeding and the doctor had been worried that she was going to miscarry. To prevent that he had given strict orders. She was to stay in bed, flat on her back until further notice, possibly for the duration of the pregnancy. She was allowed up only to go to the bathroom and then only if someone was there to escort her. For a woman like Mary, accustomed to going wherever she wanted, whenever she wanted and doing whatever she wanted, being confined to bed was hell. She was cranky, argumentative, demanding and in short being a real bitch about it.

It didn't help that her editor had put her on leave, saying that an investigative reporter couldn't do much investigating from her bed. That had really pissed her off... and she was taking it out on Chris.

Since she couldn't be going up and down stairs, they had fixed up the back den for her a bedroom. It was just off the kitchen and close to the downstairs bathroom, unfortunately it was also next to the small room that now housed her office, making it an ever-present reminder of what she wasn't allowed to do.

He rubbed his temples one more time, then plastered a smile on his face and walked into the room. "Yeah," he said, tiredly, "what do you need?"

She smiled up at him, resting a hand on her swollen belly, stretching the other one out towards him, "Come here."

She looked more than six months pregnant. She was bigger than Sarah had been just before Adam was born. He pushed the unwanted thought away and moved to sit on the edge of the bed, letting her take his hand.

After a moment's silence she said, "I'm sorry. I just... I hate this... not the being pregnant part," she rushed to assure him, "I want this baby... these babies... our babies. I just hate having to stay in bed. I
don’t mean to take it out on you."

He nodded with a sigh, "It's okay." He paused, then asked, "You need anything else, Mare?"  
*Mare. Brood mare. Belly full of babies.*

He shook his head. Where had that come from? It was an awful thing to think about his wife... but how had she gotten pregnant in the first place? He knew he had been careful. He'd always used protection. Well, maybe the condom had broken a couple of times. He did like to be a bit rough... but even if the condom had broken, she had told him she was on birth control pills and she was thirty-six years old now, her reproductive processes should have been tapering off, her biological clock running down, so to speak. So, how did she get pregnant with triplets? Unless she had helped it along a little, quit taking her pills, maybe boosted her fertility? Taken fertility drugs? Counting on his being rough enough to break the condom and get her pregnant? So that he'd marry her. She had always been the one that wanted to get married. He had been satisfied with the way things had been. After all he had had the best of both worlds. He had had her when he wanted her and when he didn't he just didn't go.

"Lie down with me for a while?" she asked.

He drew back a little. "I need to finish the dishes... and lock up," he said, "then I'll come lie down for a while before I go upstairs, okay?"

She frowned then sighed and gave him a pout, "Okay."

He leaned over and brushed a light kiss to her cheek, then rose to go back to the kitchen. She wouldn't be happy with him laying with her for long. She would start wiggling and pushing at him, saying she wasn't comfortable, then he could go on upstairs to his own bed. They hadn't had sex since the doctor had ordered her to bed. It was against the doctor's orders.

He glanced towards the front den and the wet bar there. He needed a drink, but he'd better wait until after she kicked him out of bed. She'd really bitch if she smelled whiskey on him when he came to lay down with her.
stainless steel flatware that had been found in the second pantry.

Ezra had just stepped out on the back porch, talking quietly with Josiah.

"Mister Ezra! Mister Ezra!" Little Rosa Garcia ran up the steps waving a small bottle in her hand. "Looky... looky... it's purple!"

Ezra dropped into a squat and caught the six-year-old, sitting her on his knee. "Indeed it is, Miss Rosa... and quite an unusual shape as well, octagonal, I believe."

She looked at him with wide brown eyes, "Octa... Octa... what?"

"Octagonal, darling. It means having eight sides."

"Oh." She turned her wide eyes back to the bottle and began turning it in her hands counting the sides. "One... two... three... four... and five and six and seven and... eight!"

Ezra chuckled, softly. "Why don't you take that into the kitchen to your mother. I believe it would make a lovely vase and she has cut some wildflowers to take home with her."

"I... I can have it?" Rosa asked.

"Yes, darling. You may have it." He sat her back on her feet.

She squealed in delight and threw her arms around his neck giving him a hug before scampering away to show her mother the bottle.

Ezra stood up with a sigh and turned back to Josiah, "I have to stop at the townhouse for some clean clothes and I need to do a load of laundry before I go to the hospital."

"Why don't I stop and pick up some supper and meet you there? We can eat before you go to see Vin," Josiah suggested.

"That sounds good. Please don't get anything too spicy. I don't think that my stomach can handle it."

"Sweet and Sour Chicken?"

"That would be fine."

"Okay. I'll call ahead so that it'll be ready. See you in about an hour?"

Ezra gave him a small smile and a nod before he headed out to the red truck.

Josiah smiled as he watched Ezra climb into the cab and pull away. Ezra hadn't driven the Jag since he had started working on the house. Josiah believed that driving Vin's truck made Ezra feel closer to his injured lover. It was something of Vin's that Ezra could keep with him when he wasn't at the hospital with Vin. The big profiler had noticed that Ezra had left the radio set to Vin's favorite station and Vin's favorite CD was still in the player.

Josiah ambled down the walkway and climbed into his old suburban. Pulling out his cell phone, he called in his order to the closest Chinese Garden, getting Sweet and Sour Chicken for both Ezra and himself. He also ordered a large serving of steamed broccoli and a cup of plum sauce, which he knew was one of Ezra's secret vices. He'd never known anyone else that dipped broccoli in plum sauce, but if he could get Ezra to eat by indulging one of his little idiosyncrasies, he would.

He was in the drive through at the Chinese Garden when his cell phone rang.
He flipped it open. "Sanchez."

"Josiah? It's Buck." The big ladies' man sounded upset. "Can you grab Nathan and help me look for Chris?"

"What's the matter, Brother Buck?"

"Chris and Mary had a big fight. Hes drunk and took off. Left her'n Billy at the ranch alone. He knows the Doc said Mary wasn't to be left alone! I figure he's making the rounds of the bars. Me'n JD are taking the east-side of town. Can you check the bars on the west-side?"

"I've got to stop at Ezras for just a minute, then I can. I'll call Nate to meet me there."

Buck signed off and Josiah snapped the cell phone closed. Damn! He'd known trouble was brewing between Chris and Mary, but he'd hoped it would hold off until Vin was better, at least.

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Ezra toweled his hair, rubbing it vigorously to get as much water as possible out. He had just emerged from the shower and had one towel wrapped around his waist as he used the second one to dry his hair. He tossed the towel aside and grabbed a comb, smoothing his hair.

He let the other towel fall and stepped into a pair of blue silk boxers just as the doorbell rang. With a smile he grabbed his bathrobe. Josiah had said an hour. He must have not had any trouble with the raggedy old vehicle for a change.

He hurried down the hall, calling, "Hold your horses, Josiah. I'm coming."

He quickly flicked the locks and swung the door open. "What did you---" he broke off abruptly as he saw that his visitor wasn't Josiah. "Mister Larabee? What are you doing here?"

The black clad leader took a couple of staggering steps into the room, making a grab for Ezra, catching his arms.

As the other man leaned into him, Ezra realized that he was drunk. He reeked of alcohol. As he swayed away from the taller man and tried to twist out of his grip, Chris yanked him close and bent his head to plant a slobbery kiss on his cheek, only Ezra's violent jerk away made it miss his mouth.

Ezra twisted, bringing his arms up and over Larabee's where they gripped his biceps and broke the grip, knocking Larabee's hands away and shoving the man back.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" he yelled, backing away.

Chris just grinned drunkenly at him. "Aw come on, Ez. You know you want it," he slurred and lunged towards the other man, grabbing him again. This time he wrapped both arms around Ezras waist, trapping Ezras arms against his body and turning them to slam Ezra into the wall behind him as he tried again to kiss the smaller man.

Trapped against the wall and held fast Ezra had nowhere to go. That didn't stop him from fighting. He hooked a heel behind Larabee's leg, driving it into the back of the taller man's knee and bringing his head forward, slammed it into the leering man's face, smashing his nose.

With a yelp of pain, Larabee fell backwards but didn't release his hold. They landed in a heap on the entry way floor.
Ezra quickly squirmed out of Chris' grip but as he rolled away from the other man and tried to get to his feet, Larabee launched himself at him and landed on top, driving him into the floor and covering him.

"What are you fighting for? Huh?" Chris demanded. "You know you want it. Heard what you said in the office that day. You want me too... just like you said Vin did. Know you're doing without. Same as I am. Vin ain't in no shape to give you what you need."

"You son of a bitch! Get off me!" Ezra twisted and slammed an elbow into the side of Chris' head knocking him off balance.

Infuriated, Chris grabbed Ezra by the hair and slammed his forehead into the carpeted floor, temporarily stunning the other man. He rose up off the other man enough to grab the sash of the bathrobe, ripped it loose and started tying Ezra's hands behind his back.

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Josiah swore as he pulled up in front of Ezra's townhouse. Chris' black Dodge Ram was parked across the driveway, blocking Vin's red truck. As he slammed to a stop and leaped out of his vehicle, he saw that the door to the townhouse was standing open.

He ran.

Charging across the small front lawn, he hit the front door with his shoulder, knocking it back against the wall as he desperately searched the entry hall and the living room beyond for his friends.

He was just in time to see Chris yank the sash of Ezra's bathrobe free and start to bind the stunned man's hands.

With a roar he lunged at his boss, grabbing him by the arm and his collar he hauled him up off of the barely conscious undercover agent and slung him across the room.

Chris hit the wall hard, and slid down it.

Josiah turned away from him and bent to help Ezra to his feet. Ezra looked up at him, dazedly fumbling with his bathrobe, trying to get it wrapped back around him. He looked at the sash, which was looped around one wrist, with a puzzled expression.

Josiah carefully took the sash from Ezra's wrist and reached to slip it around the smaller man's waist, but Ezra shied away from him.

Josiah backed off and held the sash out to Ezra, who took it and slipped it around his waist with trembling hands. Josiah could see the bruise starting to form where Ezra's forehead had been banged on the floor. He slowly raised a hand saying softly, "Ezra, look at me. I need to check your eyes. See if you've got a concussion."

Ezra raised his head and Josiah sighed in relief that his pupils looked even. Still he'd feel better when he could get Ezra to the hospital and get someone to check him over.

Chris groaned and sat up, staggering to his feet. He regarded the two men with a sneer. "Reckon maybe you ain't been doing without after all! He keeping you happy while Vin's in the hospital?"

Ezra flew at him, screaming, grabbing him and shaking him. "You bastard! Just because you don't know the meaning of fidelity, doesn't mean that I don't." He stepped back, shoving Chris against the wall, watching him crumble to the floor.
He shook his head, looking at his former boss. "God! I don't know what I ever saw in you! You're pathetic! A selfish, grasping little man with no concern for anyone else." He backed away from Larabee, "You don't deserve any of us. Not the team's loyalty, not Buck's devotion, not Vin's friendship, none of it... none of it... you bastard!"

Josiah stood frozen, so shocked by what Chris had implied that he hadn't been able to react. How in God's name could Chris think that he would do that? That he would betray his friendship with Vin and his paternal feelings for Ezra by... by... he couldn't even think what Chris had suggested.

As Ezra backed away from Chris, Josiah said, "I'll call DPD."

"No!" Ezra turned on him, "Absolutely not! Vin can't hear about this!"

Chris had staggered back to his feet. "Hell! Vin ain't gonna hear anything, you little fool. You think he's gonna come back to you? He's as good as dead!"

"No!" Ezra sprang forwards again, swinging a hard right that dropped Chris like a sack of potatoes. "You bastard. You bastard!" he screamed, kicking out at the unconscious man. "You take that back! You take it back! Vin's coming home! He's going to be fine! He is! He is...."

Josiah shook himself out of his shock and sprang forwards, dragging Ezra off Chris before he could do anymore damage.

Ezra turned in his arms, crying hysterically, sobbing over and over, "He is... he is... he is...."

Josiah moved him to the couch and sat them down, rocking Ezra until he wound down some.

After a few minutes Ezra sat up, pulling away from Josiah, wiping his face with the back of his left hand.

Josiah noted that the right one was swelling. He reached for it, but Ezra pulled it away, standing and moving away from him.

Still wiping at his face with the left hand he mumbled, "I have to get dressed. I have to go to the hospital. Vin's waiting for me." He stumbled away down the hall towards the bedroom.

Josiah debated going after him, then shook his head. Ezra would get dressed, then Josiah could drive the distraught man to the hospital. It might take some doing to get him to let the doctors tend his hand, but Josiah would manage it, somehow.

Right now he had to do something about Chris. He stood and looked down at the battered and unconscious man. His first aid training took over and he bent down to make sure that Chris could breath and to check the extent of his injuries. It looked like his nose was broken and he had a bruised jaw from where Ezra had hit him. His ribs were probably just bruised. Ezra had been barefooted when he kicked him.

He caught the damaged nose between his fingers and gave a yank, straightening it.

Chris would be fine to just be driven to the hospital, but there was no way that Josiah was going to take him in the same vehicle with Ezra. He reached for his cell phone. Let Buck deal with him. He'd been doing it for years. He paused before he hit the speed dial for Buck's cell phone, remembering what Ezra had said about Chris not deserving Buck's devotion. Did Ezra know something that the rest of them didn't?

He shook his head, time to think about that later. Now, he needed to get someone here to look after
Buck answered and Josiah said, "Buck. I found Chris. He's at Ezra's. You better get over here. It got pretty ugly."

"Shit!" Buck swore softly and tossed the phone to JD as he whipped the truck into a U-turn and headed for Ezra's condo.

"Hello?" JD asked cautiously.

"JD. Josiah. I found Chris. He's at Ezra's. He jumped Ezra and it got pretty ugly. Ezra won't let me call the cops. We'll handle this in house. Understood?"

"Yeah," JD said, swallowing hard. It had to be bad, if Josiah was asking them to keep it quiet.

Josiah hung up and dialed Nathan, forgetting that the other man was already on his way to meet him at Ezra's.

A few minutes later, Ezra came back into the room. He was dressed but it was obvious that he had had trouble dressing himself. He wore sweatpants and a T-shirt with a matching sweatshirt jacket over the T-shirt. His shoes were loafers. He held his right hand cradled against his chest.

"I'm going to the hospital," he declared.

"Wait a minute and I'll drive you," Josiah told him.

"I have to go. I need to see Vin," Ezra insisted.

Josiah stepped in front of him. "You need to have that hand set, son," he said firmly. "It's broken. You know it is."

Ezra looked down at the swollen hand that was starting to turn black and blue. "I need to see Vin," he repeated.

"How about I drive you to the hospital and you go up and see Vin for a few minutes, then come back down to the ER and get that hand taken care of?"

Ezra stared at him a long moment then looked down at his hand. "It hurts," he said finally, as if he had just noticed the fact.

"I'm sure it does. Now, Buck and JD will be here in a few minutes to see about Chris, then we can go to the hospital. How about I go get our supper out of the car?"

"Not hungry. Sick," Ezra said softly.

Josiah nodded. That confirmed that Ezra's hand was hurting him badly. He always got nauseated when he was in a good deal of pain. It was one of the reasons he always lost weight when he was in the hospital.

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Fifteen minutes later Buck pulled up out front. Nathan's SUV had just pulled up and Nathan was getting out. The two bigger men moved towards the door shoulder to shoulder. JD tagged a bit behind, more than a bit anxious about what they would find inside.

What they found was a groggy Chris Larabee, an impatient Ezra Standish and a seething Josiah
Sanchez. With a few well-chosen words, Josiah filled them in on the events of the evening. Buck swore fluently. Nathan tried to check Ezra's hand but gave up when Ezra just kept pulling away, demanding to be allowed to go see Vin.

"Check Larabee," Josiah ordered the team medic. The use of the team leader's last name told Nathan just how angry Josiah was with the man. "I promised Ezra that he could see Vin before I took him down to the ER. You guys take care of things here."

As Ezra hurried out the door and Josiah turned to follow him, Buck caught his arm. "You're sure that Chris... tried to... well, you know."

"Absolutely. I had to pull him off Ezra. Ezra had answered the door in his bathrobe, thinking it was me, I guess. Chris was tying Ezra's hands behind his back when I got here."

"God! I know he can be a bastard when he's drinking but... shit! How could he do this?"

"I don't know," Josiah said softly, "but we're going to have a long talk when he sobers up. This can't go on. He's hurting too many people. I don't want to report this to Travis, but if he doesn't agree to get help with his drinking... I may have to."

Buck sighed and closed his eyes, then he opened them and nodded. "Do what you have to Josiah. Lord knows, I can't take much more of dragging his sorry ass out of the trouble he gets into when he's drunk."

"And you shouldn't have to," Josiah patted his shoulder and followed Ezra out to the red truck where the other man was waiting impatiently. Josiah smiled. At least, Ezra hadn't taken off on his own. He went to the suburban and grabbed the take out sack with their supper. He'd try to get Ezra to eat after his hand was set and he'd been given something for the pain.

Ezra never said a word as Josiah put the truck into gear, engaged the four wheel drive and cut across Ezra's carefully manicured lawn to get to the street since Chris' Ram still blocked him from backing out the driveway.

The ride to the hospital was made in silence. As a profiler, Josiah knew that Ezra wasn't dealing with the attack. He had simply pushed it aside, focusing on Vin again, but sooner or later the shock of being assaulted by a man he had once thought he loved would hit him. He was hanging on by a thread. The stress of the last couple of months had already worn him down, now this had happened. Josiah felt a certain amount of pride swell inside him. His boy was a lot stronger than anyone had given him credit for.

There was steel under those silk suits and that fastidious manner.

Ezra would survive, even thrive. He was, after all, the consummate survivor. In the days following Vin's injury, Josiah had learned more about the man he thought of as a son than he had in the almost four and a half years since Ezra had joined the team.

Ezra Standish had survived five stepfathers, ranging from indifferent to abusive and five divorces. He'd survived being dumped in one boarding school after another, seldom spending more than one term at any of them. He had thrived in a lifestyle that would have sent another child to the bottom of his classes. He had gotten a superb education, despite never knowing when he would be snatched up and thrown back down somewhere else.

Josiah had to believe that it was that very lifestyle that had made Ezra so resilient, so versatile, so quick-witted and adaptable. True, he had started out ahead of the game, he had a quick mind and a
high IQ, but without his indomitable spirit those would not have done much good. Josiah had seen too many bright, articulate children fall by the way, to think that intelligence alone could have seen Ezra through his turbulent life.

Ezra and Vin were well matched. Both were survivors who hadn't let the hardships of their lives turn them bitter or angry. Josiah prayed that this wasn't the straw that broke the camel's back.

"Lord," he whispered softly, "Now would be a really good time to let Brother Vin wake up."

At the hospital, Ezra sat unmoving in the truck and Josiah knew he had finally succumbed to the shock of the night's events. He went around and opened the passenger's side door. "Come on, Ezra. Let's get you out of there, son."

He held the door and reached to help Ezra down. Ezra stared at him for a moment then, let him take his elbow and guide him out of the truck.

Deciding that with Ezra as shocky as he was that it might be best to take him into the ER first he asked gently, "Can we go to the ER now, Ezra? You really need to see the doctor. If you pass out they'll put you in a separate room from Vin."

Ezra stared at him with glazed eyes, "I want to see Vin."

"You will, in just a little bit. I bet Nurse Harrison will take you right in, when she sees who it is. You know she likes you and Vin. She'll understand that you have to get up to see Vin. Doctor Miller's on ER duty tonight, too, I think. They'll make sure you get up to see Vin really soon."

"Okay," Ezra whispered. His hand did hurt abominably, and Doctor Miller was nice, at least as nice she could be and still be a doctor.

An hour later, Josiah guided a groggy Ezra down the hall to Vin's room. After X-raying and setting the hand, the doctor had given Ezra a shot for the pain and told Josiah to get him up to bed ASAP.

Miss Nettie was still sitting with Vin when they arrived, but it was clear from her expression that someone had been by and given her at least a partial explanation of what had happened. She took one look at Ezra and got up from her chair, knowing that he would want to sit with Vin for a minute before he would allow Josiah to put him to bed.

As Ezra sank into the chair, reaching to take Vin's free hand with his good one, she turned to Josiah. "How'd he break that hand?" she demanded.

Josiah briefly considered lying then shrugged, "He punched Chris out."

"Good! Damn that man! What was he thinking?"

Her anger told Josiah who had been by to talk to her. JD could never stand up to her, he had undoubtedly told her everything he knew, including what Chris had tried to do to Ezra.

"He was drunk. I don't think he was thinking at all."

"No excuse. Man needs a good talking to."

"He's going to get one," Josiah said grimly. He looked over to where Ezra sat beside Vin's bed, clutching his lover's hand.

The broken hand, in its cast, lay on the edge of Vin's bed and Ezra had rested his forehead on it. He
was mumbling something that they couldn't quite understand, then a soft sob escaped him and suddenly he was crying, brokenheartedly.

Josiah was not surprised that he had finally broken down. He had cried very little in the weeks since Vin had been injured and when he did, it was mostly silent tears that seeped out without any sobbing. Now, in the wake of the night's events, the shock of Chris' attack combined with the emotional upheaval during and following it, the pain of his broken hand and the painkillers that the doctor had given him, he had simply reached the end of his rope. Josiah took a step towards the bed then froze, his eyes locked on the hand that Ezra held. The fingers twitched... flexed and tightened on Ezra's hand.

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Someone was crying, sobbing as if their heart was broken. He drifted up out of the darkness, trying to find whoever it was. He knew he should know the person, knew he needed to find him.

Him? How did he know it was a man crying? A man? His man. Ezra... Ezra was crying... but Ezra never cried. Never. He had to get to him. Something must be terribly wrong for Ezra to be crying.

He struggled to move. His fingers twitched... flexed then tightened around something. What? A hand. Ezra's hand.

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"Nettie? Did you see that?" Josiah breathed.

She moved up beside him, "What?"

"His hand. Vin's hand. He moved it!"

"Are you sure? It wasn't just Ezra's grip on him?"

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He tried to blink but couldn't make his eyes open. He tugged at his hand, trying to free it from the one holding it. He needed to get Ezra's attention.

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Ezra felt the tug on his hand and lifted his head, tears still streaming down his face, his face was puffy, but his eyes widened, "Vin?" he gasped. "Vin?"

"Ez..." It was little more than a croak, but Vin's head was turned towards him and the hand was still tugging at his, drawing it up towards Vin's face.

With a sob, Ezra clambered onto the bed, crying out his lover's name again. "Vin!" he released the hand, letting it fall onto his back as he burrowed into Vin's side, burying his face against Vin's shoulder, he wept uncontrollably as he wrapped his right arm around Vin's waist, the cast falling to the bed on the other side of his lover.

Josiah hurried to the bedside, grabbing up the water glass and guiding the straw into Vin's mouth, "Here, Vin take a small sip." He glanced back at Nettie, "Get the nurse!"

Nettie rushed from the room, grabbing the first nurse she saw. She smiled through tears as she happily cried, "He's awake! He's awake!"
Buck prowled the ER waiting room restlessly. Nathan was in the exam room with Chris. JD sat nearby, flipping blindly through an ancient magazine.

They both looked up as Nathan emerged from the room and headed towards them.

"Well?" Buck demanded.

JD sprung to his feet and was right beside him.

"The doctor says it's a wonder he could still stand up and walk. He's damn near got alcohol poisoning," Nathan shook his head, "Buck... he needs rehab. The man has got a problem."

"He don't get drunk all that often...," Buck protested.

"I know that. He's a binge drinker, but a binge drinker is still an alcoholic, Buck."

Buck bowed his head and let out a deep sigh. In a way he blamed himself for this. He'd dragged Chris out of a lot of bars over the years, sobered him up and straightened him out, only to have to do it all over again a few days or weeks or months later. The frequency of the binges had decreased since Team Seven had formed and Buck had hoped that Chris might have gotten it under control but this evening had proven beyond any doubt that he hadn't.

He needed help and maybe if Buck hadn't been there for him to lean on all those years he would have gotten it sooner.

He straightened and looked at Nathan, "What do we do?"

"When he wakes up, we try to get him to check himself into the Substance Abuse Center. If he won't, we have to tell Travis what happened and get him to order Chris to get help, if he wants to keep his job."

"What if he decides to quit the job?" JD asked the question no one wanted to hear.

Nathan looked down at the floor, "Then we wait until he goes on another bender and have him committed to the psych ward."

Buck ran a hand through his hair, "Dammit Nate! He's not crazy!"

Nathan shook his head with a sigh. "Maybe not, but he is self-destructive... and he's hurting a lot of people, not just himself. We have to do something." He paused then went on, "What if he gets drunk and starts beating on Mary? How will you feel if he hurts her? She's already having problems with the pregnancy. It wouldn't take a lot to make her lose the babies. How do you think he would feel then? When he soberes up and realizes that he killed his babies."

Buck hung his head, "It'd kill him. He still feels guilty over Sarah and Adam..."

"Exactly... and that wasn't his fault. What he did tonight, he did. Drunk or sober, he's responsible for what happened tonight and all the ramifications of it."

"Ramifications?" JD asked with a puzzled frown.

"Ezra is in denial, at the moment, but sooner or later he's going to have to face up to the fact that his former boss, a man he admired, respected and looked up to, tried to rape him. And do you really think that Vin isn't going to find out about this, when he wakes up? Ezra can't keep anything from
that man. He's going to be one pissed-off sharpshooter. And Mary... what about her and the babies? Chris may have just destroyed his marriage, his friendship with Vin and his relationship with Ezra. Not to mention destroying the team, as well. Josiah is really unhappy with him and I've got to tell you that the man I saw tonight is not the man I signed up to follow. I'm glad he's on leave right now, because there's no way I could walk into the office tomorrow and take orders from the man I saw tonight."

Buck looked at the floor. Hard truths, but truths none the less.

"They're going to admit him. Keep him overnight at least. We can talk to him tomorrow when he's a little more sober," Nathan said.

Buck raised his head and asked, "Do you think he'll remember tonight?"

"I doubt it... but he'll have to be told. He has to be made to see what he's doing, to himself and to the people around him," Nathan's voice was firm. He sighed and gestured towards the exam room. "You want to stay with him? I need to go up and check on Ezra."

"Yeah," Buck said, "I'll stay." He turned to look at JD raising an eyebrow in question.

JD looked around avoiding Buck's gaze. "I need to go pick up Casey. She's at the house." He didn't need to specify that he meant Vin and Ezra's house. It had quickly become 'the house' to them all. "She'll want to stop by and check on Vin and Ezra and drive Nettie home. I'll check in with you when I get back."

Buck nodded. He could see that JD wasn't ready to face being around Chris yet even if the other man was unconscious.

They split up, Buck going down the hall to the exam room where Chris was, Nathan heading for the elevator to go up to check on Vin and Ezra and JD heading out the ER door to go get Casey.

Buck shook his head sadly as he walked down the hall. It seemed here lately, they were all always going in different directions. It didn't seem right somehow. They needed to get back to being 'the seven'.

Maybe when Vin woke up.

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Nathan stepped off the elevator and knew immediately that something had happened. It seemed every nurse and orderly on the floor was either in Vin's room or clustered around the doorway. With his heart suddenly in his throat, he rushed towards the room, shoving his way through the gathered crowd, afraid of what he'd find, then just before he broke through into the room he heard an annoyed Texas drawl.

"Dammit! Leave me alone! Josiah! Bring Ez back here! Shit! Why the hell am I so weak?"

Nathan chuckled with relief, blinking back tears. Vin was awake, awake and pissed off. He had never been so glad to hear that raspy voice. Pushing his way between the last two nurses blocking his path he stepped up beside Vin's bed. Fixing the head nurse with a glare, he asked, "You called Doctor Sadler yet?"

"Yes, sir. She'll be here as soon as she can."
"Well, in the meantime get these people out of here." He jerked his head to indicate the other nurses and orderlies who still crowded around the open doorway. "They can't be any gladder than we are that he's awake, but they got work to do and Vin don't like being crowded. Ya'll are gonna upset him."

Vin glared at him. He was damn well already upset and every minute that they kept Ezra from him he was getting more so. He fixed on Nathan. "What the hell is going on?" he demanded.

"Vin, just calm down. You ain't gonna be able to do much for a while. You've been in a coma for a couple of months."

"Months! What happened? Where'd 'Siah take Ezra? Dammit Nate! Answer me."

"Give me a minute and I will!"

Vin gave his head an annoyed shake. "All right. All right. Just tell Josiah to bring Ez back over here... please?"

Nathan looked over to the other bed where Josiah sat beside a sleeping Ezra. "Vin, he's asleep and he really needs the rest."

"He can rest right here next to me... and I really need to know that he's all right," Vin insisted, trying to wiggle over to make room for his lover on his bed and cursing mentally at how little movement he actually achieved.

Nathan sighed and looked around. The nurse had cleared the room and there was only him, Josiah, Nettie, Vin and Ezra left in the room. The nurse had gone to see about getting Doctor Sadler. He nodded.

"Josiah, reckon it won't do any harm to let Ezra lay with him for a bit."

Josiah nodded and picked the limp form up, carrying the smaller man easily. He lay him down on the bed next to Vin.

Vin lifted one hand to caress the bruised forehead. "What happened to him?" he asked, noting the bruising and the cast on the right hand and wrist.

"He broke his hand."

"Can see that." Vin's annoyance was clear.

"It might be best, if you heard the story from Ezra," Nettie put in.

Vin looked from one to the other. "That bad?" he asked quietly, his voice much calmer than he felt. Everything felt disjointed, unreal. How could he have lost two whole months? What had happened during that time? How had he gotten hurt in the first place? And what had happened to Ezra?

He looked around again. Where was Chris? It was damned unusual for him not to be there when Vin woke up in the hospital. Had his relationship with Ezra changed things that much? He was still running through questions in his mind, trying to find a place to start asking them when Doctor Sadler arrived.

The elderly woman doctor quickly took control. "It's so very good to see you awake, Mister Tanner," she said, using the formal address to inform him that they were on a doctor-patient footing at the moment and while she might be his friend, she wouldn't tolerate any foolishness. She made no
comment on the fact that Ezra slept tucked tightly against his side.

"What's wrong with Ezra?" Vin demanded.

"Doctor Miller in ER gave him a sedative when she set his hand. He was quite upset and in a lot of pain. He should sleep through until morning. Now, let's get down to business, shall we?"

Vin sighed and nodded, knowing that he was just going to have to wait for Ezra to wake up for details. Obviously whatever had happened was going to upset him badly and no one was going to tell him about it until Ezra was aware enough to keep him calmed down.

"First, do you know where you are?"

"Yeah, Denver Memorial, since you're here."

"Do you know what day it is?"

"Nope. Nate said I've been in a coma for a couple of months, so I know it ain't when I think it is."

"What is the last thing you remember?"

"We was on our way to bust the guys that pulled the armory heist. Ez was a buyer and I was his bodyguard."

"You don't remember the bust itself?"

"No, ma'am."

She nodded. "It's not unusual for someone with a head injury not to recall the events immediately before the injury," she paused, then asked, "Does your head hurt?"

"Yeah."

"How badly? On a scale of one to ten?"

"Eight," he tossed the number out without even thinking. Anything to shut her up so he could concentrate on Ezra.

She nodded again, making some notes on his chart. "You seem to be doing as well as can be expected. You will be weak for quite some time. You had a fractured skull, broken collarbone, pelvis and several cracked ribs. You were in a body cast until last week. I'll set up sessions with a physical therapist to get you back up to speed. I can give you something for the headache, if you want."

"Don't want nothing that's gonna put me back to sleep."

"Extra strength Tylenol? It won't get rid of the headache, but it will take the edge off."

"That'll do. I want to talk to Nate and 'Siah for a while."

"Very well... but don't wake Mister Standish up. He needs his rest."


She shook her head and turned to Nathan. "I'll have the nurse bring the Tylenol. Don't talk too long."

Nathan nodded and she left.
Finally! Vin turned his attention to the people remaining in the room. After a moment's thought he decided to change directions with his questions, maybe that would get him some more information. "Where's Chris?"

All three of the remaining people exchanged glances, then Nettie spoke, "Maybe I should go let the others know that Vin's awake."

Nathan and Josiah nodded. Someone did need to do that, and it might be best if she weren't here when Vin found out what had been going on with Chris and Ezra.

She brushed a kiss to Vin's forehead and smiled at him, "I'll be back in a bit. You take it easy... and remember there's nothing you can do about anything at the moment."

He sighed then nodded, "Yes, ma'am."

After she left, he turned his gaze to the two men. "Well?"

They exchanged looks then Nathan began. "You don't remember how you got hurt do you?"

"No. Wanna tell me?"

Again looks passed between the two older men.

"Dammit! Somebody tell me what the hell is going on!" Vin snarled.

Nathan held up his hands in a placating gesture, "All right. All right." He took a deep breath. "You were hurt at the bust. Ezra got shot. The vest stopped the bullet, but the force knocked him off the loading dock. You were standing right next to him. When you realized he was going over, you grabbed him and both of you fell. You twisted to get on the bottom and hit the concrete hard with Ezra landing on top of you. Chris went ballistic when he saw how bad you were hurt. Lit into Ez something awful. Said some real nasty things... things Ezra didn't need to hear, with you lying there unconscious and all broke up. He was already scared half to death that you were going to die and feeling guilty because you were hurt protecting him."

Josiah's deep rumble cut in, "It got physical. Chris was pounding on Ezra. I had to drag him off."

"Then when we got to the hospital, Chris tried to say that they shouldn't honor the Medical Power of Attorney you had given Ezra because he said it was Ezra's fault that you were hurt. Doctor Miller finally ordered him out of the hospital. Threatened to have him arrested if he didn't leave. Josiah and I took him home," Nathan said.

"He came back the next day and started up again," Josiah growled. "Ezra was in a terrible state. Chris' badgering was making him feel even more guilty about your getting hurt. We got Chris out of here again and persuaded Ezra to use his authority as your legal next of kin to have Chris barred from coming back."

Nathan picked up the tale again, "So Chris started using *his* authority as Ezra's supervisor to try and keep him away from you. Ezra would put in for a day off, comp time, whatever he could get to stay at the hospital with you and Chris would deny it. Ezra would go over his head to Travis and Travis would grant it. Finally Ezra ran out of time off and put in for Family Leave. Travis denied it, saying that the ATF didn't recognize same sex relationships as a family unit."

"And that was when Ezra resigned," Josiah rumbled, anger apparent in his voice. "He gave Travis his badge and gun and walked out. He threw himself into getting the house ready for when you were able to come home and seeing to it that you had everything you needed here."
"And Chris?"

"Mary started bleeding about three weeks ago. The doctor ordered her to bed and Chris took Family Leave to stay with her."

"But he and Ez are still going at it, aren't they?" Vin stated, reaching up to touch the bruise on Ezra's forehead.

Nathan and Josiah exchanged looks again before, Josiah sighed and said, "Yes, son. They are still going at it. Mary's being a real bitch about having to stay in bed and Chris has gone back to drinking heavily."

"Chris did this?" Vin touched the bruise again.

Josiah nodded.

"And his hand?"

Josiah grinned suddenly, "That Ezra did himself... of course he broke it on Chris' jaw."

"Ez don't normally get physical. What'd Chris do?"

The men exchanged looks again, then Nathan said, "He was drunk, really, really drunk."

"You know how nasty he can get when he's drunk," Josiah put in.

"He said a lot of nasty things and he attacked Ezra. They struggled a bit," Nathan paused, then went on, "Then Chris said that you might as well be dead, that you weren't coming back to Ezra."

"And that's when Ezra punched him," Josiah said with grim satisfaction.

Vin studied the bruise, noting that it was recent. "Happened tonight?"

"Yeah," Nathan confirmed.

"So, where's Chris."

Nathan sighed. "Downstairs. ER. Doc says he's near to having alcohol poisoning. They're going to keep him at least tonight. We're going to try and get him to sign himself into the Substance Abuse Clinic tomorrow."

Vin scowled but then nodded. "He better be glad I can't get my hands on him. Didn't have no right to try and come between me'n Ez."

Nathan and Josiah exchanged looks again. They had expected this. Vin would only get more angry when he discovered what else Chris had tried to do. They were glad that Ezra had insisted that they not tell Vin. They didn't want to have to tie the sharpshooter down to keep him from killing his best friend.

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Nettie had gone to the ER to find Buck and JD. The nurse at the desk directed her to the exam room that Chris was in and she stepped inside.

"He awake yet?" she demanded, nodding towards Chris.
"Nope. Doctor says he'll most likely sleep through until morning." Buck frowned, rising to regard her worriedly, "Something wrong."

"No," she said, then couldn't help the grin that spread across her face.

His eyes widened suddenly, hope flaring at the sight of the smile.

"Vin's awake," she said, her smile widening.

"Hallelujah!! Praise the Lord!" He couldn't help the exuberant exclamation. He grabbed her in an enthusiastic bear hug.

She reared back and slapped his arm. "Put me down this instant Buck Wilmington!"

He did but continued to grin and chuckle in delight that Vin was finally awake. "Jesus! That's the best news we've had in months. Hell! Best news we've had since Vin was hurt."

After a long moment he seemed to gather himself up and said, "Maybe now things can finally start getting back to normal."

Her face turned serious and she jerked her head towards the examining table where Chris lay unconscious. "That's going to depend a lot on what that man there decides to do when he wakes up." She couldn't keep the disgust out of her voice.

Buck turned to look at his oldest friend and sighed, nodding. "We're going to try to get him into rehab." He reached out to lay a hand on Chris' arm. "He never really got past Sarah and Adam's deaths...."

"Know it was hard on him, but he needs to deal with it and get on with his life. It's been near to ten years now."

"I know... but God! He loved her so... and that boy was the light of his life. When he lost them, he lost a big piece of himself. This..." he stroked the arm gently, "this ain't the Chris Larabee that was married to Sarah. Ain't even the Chris Larabee that was a Navy SEAL."

JD and Casey arrived just then, cutting off the conversation. "Aunt Nettie? What are you doing down here? I thought you were sitting with Vin."

Nettie turned to the two young people with a smile. "Vin woke up. I came down to tell you all, but JD was gone when I got here."


"Ezra finally broke down and started crying. Vin must have realized on some level that Ezra needed him and woke up."

"Can we see him?" Casey asked.

"Of course, child," Nettie said, then fixed JD with a stern look. "We ain't told him any more than just that Chris and Ezra had a fight. You take care what you say up there."

"Yes, ma'am." JD looked chastised. He knew he had told her more than he was supposed to tell anyone.

Casey gave him a questioning look. All she knew was that Chris and Ezra had had a fight.
He shook his head, mouthing 'later' at her.

She nodded.

Nettie looked at Buck, "If you want to go up for a few minutes, I can stay with Mister Larabee until you get back or they move him to a room."

Buck hesitated then nodded, "Thanks Nettie. I won't be long. Just want to see for myself that Vin's okay."

She nodded and they departed. She moved to stand next to the bed, a frown on her face. "I know you've had a rough time of it, but you ain't the only one. Time you got yourself together and stopped taking your pain out on the people that care about you."

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Chris Larabee floated in an alcoholic haze, not really aware of what was going on around him and not completely unconscious either, even though he couldn't open his eyes or seem to make his body work. He could feel the tone of the voices, floating past him. Some were angry and upset, others calm and professional.

Memories and imaginings floated by as well, fighting with Ezra, the feel of the firm body trapped under him. Vin's face, slack and unresponsive, blood matting the long honey blonde hair. Then the face changed, turned angry, blue eyes glaring at him, Ezra pushed protectively behind him.

The vision swirled away, and another took its place. Sarah... his Sarah, standing looking at him, a sad expression on her face, Adam beside her.

He started towards her and her stance changed. She pushed Adam behind her and stepped towards him, arms folding across her chest, 'that' look settling on her face, the look that said, 'Now you've done it, Chris Larabee.'

But what had he done? How had he disappointed her now? He hated disappointing her.

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Continued in Part 4
Warnings for the next few sections: There will be some fast-forwarding here. I don't have the medical knowledge, the time, the patience or the inclination to do a blow by blow accounting of Vin's recovery, Chris' rehab or Mary's pregnancy. I'm concentrating on the events significant to Vin and Ezra's relationship.

Nettie looked up when JD, Casey and Buck returned to the exam room. "They're gonna move him to a room in a few minutes," she informed them.

Buck nodded and, sighing wearily, sat down in the chair beside the examining table.

Nettie turned to JD and Casey. "Who's with Mary?"

"Mrs. Potter came by," Casey said, "She said she'd stay the night. I don't know who's going to be there tomorrow."

Nettie nodded. "JD, can you take Casey home? I want to check on Mary."

JD looked uncertain.

Buck spoke up, reaching in his pocket for the keys to his truck, "You can take the truck. I'll stay here tonight. Don't want him waking up alone. Call Inez for me, will you? Tell her I'll see her tomorrow."

"Sure, Buck." JD took the keys, then gave Buck a brief hug. "You going be all right?"

Buck nodded. "I'm used to this, Kid. At least here, if he wakes up violent and ranting, they can sedate or restrain him."

JD stepped back, regarding his best friend with a slight shake of his head. Buck looked worn out. For the first time, he began to realize just what being Chris Larabee's oldest friend entailed.

"I'll be back in the morning," he promised. As disgusted as he was with his boss at the moment, he'd do whatever he could to make things easier for Buck. He knew that there was no way that Buck would abandon Chris. He was just plain too loyal.

JD, Casey and Nettie left.

It was nearly midnight when Nettie pulled into the yard at Chris' ranch, but there was still a light on in the kitchen. She parked and climbed the back steps to let herself in the back door, knocking briefly to announce her arrival.

Gloria Potter looked up from where she sat at the kitchen table when the door opened. "Hello, Nettie."
"Gloria," Nettie responded then nodded her head towards the room where Mary was ensconced. "How is she?"

Gloria shook her head, "Napping. She doesn't sleep much really. Too bored with not being able to do anything, I think."

"Gloria!" Mary called from the other room, "Who's there?"

Nettie crossed to the doorway. "Just me, Mary." She walked on into the room as Mary struggled to sit up. "Here, let me help you."

She helped the other woman sit up and turned on the bedside lamp for her.

"Thank goodness, you're here, Nettie. Maybe now I can get some straight answers. Where is Chris and why won't anyone tell me anything?" Mary demanded.

"He's in the hospital. Drunk as a skunk. Got a broken nose and some bruises. Reckon they figured you didn't need to be getting upset."

"I'm more upset not knowing what has happened to my husband," Mary snapped. "Tell me how he got a broken nose."

"Ezra punched him."

"Ezra? Ezra punched him?" Mary asked in disbelief.

"Yep." Nettie sounded very satisfied about it.

Mary raised a brow at her.

"He had it coming," Nettie declared. "About time somebody quit taking his crap and nailed him one."

Mary chuckled suddenly. "I have to admit there have been times when I'd have liked to punch him one."

"Reckon every wife feels that way from time to time," Nettie said, then regarded her seriously for a moment before asking, "Do you love him?"

"What? Of course I do!"

"Better be sure about that. It's going to be a rough row to hoe for a while at least. Nathan and Josiah are going to try and get him to check himself into the Substance Abuse Center."

"Is that necessary?"

"Mary, he assaulted Ezra. Attempted to *sexually* assault him." She stopped, letting Mary absorb that.

"Oh, Lord!" Mary breathed. As hard as it was for her to accept, she knew that Nettie wouldn't lie to her. Nettie was the one person who would tell her the truth and not pull any punches. Still, she had to be certain. "Are you sure?"

Nettie nodded. "Josiah was there. Pulled Chris off him. They're planning to keep it quiet, though. Ezra refused to press charges, but I don't know what will happen if Chris refuses rehab."
Mary nodded, her face serious. Her mind was racing. If it came out that Chris had attempted to sexually assault one of his men, or rather a former member of his team since Ezra had resigned, it would destroy his career. Hell, it could destroy her career as well. Now she understood why Nettie had asked her, if she loved him. She would have to decide if she loved him enough to stand by him through the scandal that would erupt if it became public knowledge.

She sighed, one hand going unconsciously to rub her swollen belly. She loved him. Had loved him almost from the first moment she had seen him. She loved him enough to risk a pregnancy at her age, even if she had gotten more than she bargained for. She closed her eyes, then opened them to look at Nettie. "For better or worse," she said quietly.

"Don't reckon it'll get much worse than this," Nettie said.

Mary nodded. "If Chris goes into rehab, I'm going to need someone to stay with me. It'd be easier for everyone if I moved back to my house in town, but I don't want it to look like I'm abandoning Chris, because I'm not."

"We can work something out, if you want to stay here." Nettie blinked, "Oh! In all that's going on, I forgot to tell you the good news! Vin's awake."

"Oh! Thank God! Is he going to be all right? I mean...." She trailed off not wanting to ask if he was all right mentally.

"Yes. Seems fine. Don't remember what happened but the doc says that's not unusual with a head injury. He's weaker than a kitten. Pissed off about that."

Mary smiled. She could well imagine how upset the independent man was at not being able to do what he wanted. She knew how he felt about that. She sighed. Two and a half months to go before she could be up and around.

They talked a while longer, agreeing to call Casey, Inez and Raine the next morning to set up a schedule for the five of them to stay with Mary. Since Vin was awake he wouldn't need Nettie and Gloria to stay with him although they would both stop by and see him until he was released.

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Chris Larabee came awake slowly. His head felt like it was going to fall off, if he moved it, and his mouth tasted like shit. He groaned. Hangover hell. He knew it well. Had been awhile, though.

Finally forcing his eyes open he groaned again at the sight that greeted him. He was in the hospital. It must have been a bad one. He hurt all over. Damn! He couldn't breathe through his nose. He reached up groggily and touched it. Taped. Broke. Damn!

Finally his eyes settled on his oldest friend, waiting patiently for him to get the world into focus. "What time is it?" he moaned.

"Might do better to ask what day is it," Buck informed him as he held the cup of ice water and directed the straw into Chris' mouth. "Just sips. You ain't been keeping it down."

Chris sipped slowly taking just enough to wet his mouth good. Then asked, "Okay. What day is it?"

"You've been here three days," Buck informed him.

Chris blinked and silently thanked Buck for the fact that the room was dimly lit, knowing that his friend would have been the one to see to it that the blinds were closed and only a small light was on.
"What happened?"

"Aside from you getting drunk out of your mind, you mean?"

"Who broke my nose."

"Ezra... and you had it coming. You're lucky you're not in jail. Josiah wanted to call DPD. Ezra refused to let him. You owe that man for that."

"Don't owe that man for anything after what he did to Vin!"

"Ezra didn't do a damned thing to Vin! By the way, Vin's awake. He ain't none too happy with the way you've been treating Ezra. If he finds out what you tried to do while you were on this bender, I don't know as how he'll ever forgive you."

Chris froze. Vin was his best friend, there wasn't anything that he wouldn't forgive Chris... at least he didn't think there was. After a long moment of silence he asked, "Just exactly what am I supposed to have done?"

Buck stood, turning his back to Chris unable to face him as he told him, "You went to Ezra's, blind drunk. He had just got out of the shower, didn't have on anything but his bathrobe and boxers. You had him face down on the floor, his bathrobe up and his boxers half down. You were tying his hands behind his back with the belt from the robe when Josiah pulled you off him." He turned to face Chris. "Legally that constitutes sexual assault. Attempted rape."

Chris' face went white. "I... I couldn't have..." it was little more than a whisper.

"You did." Buck's voice was hard and implacable.

**************************************************

Vin Tanner sighed as he lay in the hospital bed. He'd just gotten back from physical therapy and ached all over from having muscles that hadn't been used in over two months put through the range of motion exercises. He hated how weak he still was. He watched as his lover paced back and forth between his bed and the spare one that Ezra had been sleeping on.

"Settle already, would ya?" He demanded irritably.

Ezra gave him an apologetic look and came to sit in the chair beside the bed, reaching up to take his hand. "Sorry, Love," he murmured.

"What you been up to while I've been sleeping? Josiah said something about you getting the house ready to move into?"

Ezra eagerly launched into a long and detailed description of what had been done to the house since Vin had been injured, ending with, "We should be able to move in when you are released next week."

"That's good," Vin said, then added, "Now tell me what you all have been dancing around ever since I woke up."

"Excuse me?" Ezra turned innocent eyes on him.

"Don't give me that, Ez. There's more to this," he carefully took Ezra's right hand in its cast in his, "than just you and Chris tussling. I want to know what he did to you. I already know it's bad or you
wouldn't be trying to hide it from me."

Ezra's eyes dropped. "Vin... I..."

"Ez, please, just tell me. Can't be worse than what I'm imagining. Not knowing is the worst thing."

"Vin, please. It will only upset you and as he did not achieve his goal, I hardly thi--"

"Didn't achieve his goal? Shit Ez! He tried to rape you, didn't he? That son of a bitch!" Vin surged up on the bed, trying to get up.

"Vin! Stop! You aren't strong enough yet to get up! You'll hurt yourself!" Ezra cried out in alarm, catching his lover and trying to push him back on the bed. "Please!"

"I'll kill the bastard!" Vin snarled pushing against Ezra. He hit the cast on Ezra's hand.

Ezra cried out, "Ow!"

Instantly Vin slumped back, "Oh, God! Ez, I didn't mean to hurt you, Babe."

"I know," Ezra quickly reassured him, "it's all right. You just jostled it a bit."

Vin reached out to caress Ezra's face. "Ain't all right. I never want to hurt you, not even a little. I love you, Ezra."

Ezra smiled, reaching up to capture the hand with his left one, turning his head to kiss the palm. "And I love you, Vin," he avowed softly.

Vin grinned up at him, pulling their joined hands down to kiss Ezra's palm in a reciprocating gesture. "You'n me against the world, Babe...."

Ezra grinned, "Together, forever...."

"Through thick and thin...."

Ezra chuckled as he said the last, "and sick and sin."

They smiled fondly at each other for a long moment, then Vin said quietly, "If I promise not to get upset, or make a fuss, will you, please, tell me exactly what happened?"

Ezra sighed and closed his eyes for a moment then he opened them and nodded. "Yes."

Vin listened in silence as Ezra told him exactly what had occurred that night. The only sign of Vin's anger was the tightening of his grip on the hand that he held.

When Ezra finished he swore softly, "Shit! I'd like to strangle the bastard!"

"That bastard is your best friend," Ezra reminded him quietly.

"Not anymore!" Vin snarled.

"Oh, Vin! That is precisely why I didn't want to tell you. I know how close you two have been, what his friendship had meant to you and I hate thinking that I'm the cause of your losing that friendship. I already feel as if I have broken up the team... now, to know that I've destroyed your friendship with Chris... I'm sorry."
"You don't have anything to be sorry for! You didn't do anything!" Vin told him. "This is not your fault. Chris done this all on his own."

"Still, I can't help feeling that, if I had done things differently..." he shook his head. "I should never have let the others talk me into barring him from seeing you, that is when he turned truly nasty."

"No. I wouldn't've wanted you to let him keep tearing at you with words the way Josiah said he was. Ez, you got to know, you are the most important person in my life, now. Not Chris, not Nettie, not the rest of the team, you. I'd done figured that out before I got hurt. I was planning on taking you off for the weekend after the bust, was going to have us sort of a honeymoon. Was going to tell you that I still loved Chris, but I didn't desire him, anymore. That I reckoned what I felt for him was more like how brothers love each other. But you, you make me burn with need to make love to you. You make me ache with just wanting to hold you. I can't imagine waking up in the morning without you beside me or living to a ripe old age without you there to share those years with me. I love you, Ez, only you."

"As I love you... but we both still need other friends in our lives, Vin. You will always regret it, if you let this separate you and Chris. He was drunk. You know how he can be when he's drinking. I doubt that he even remembers what happened and he truly did nothing that he hasn't done before. He knocked me about a bit, bruised me some." He held up his hand in its cast, "This I did myself and I dare say that he has some bruises of his own this time."

Vin sighed, "All right. I'll try and forgive him. Try and salvage our friendship, but only because you asked me to... and he's got to get help for his drinking... and if he ever raises a hand to you again, that's it, he's dead. I ain't giving him no 'nother chance. You understand?"

Ezra nodded. He had barely dared to hope that Vin would give Chris another chance, but he knew that if he had let this destroy Vin's friendship with Chris, then sooner or later it would have come back to haunt them. Sooner or later, Vin would have blamed him for the loss of the best friend he had ever had.

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Several hours later, Ezra stood outside the door to Chris' room. He stood there several minutes before pushing it open and going in. He nodded to Buck, and jerked his head towards the door, indicating that he wanted the other man to leave.

Buck started to protest, and Ezra shook his head, "There is nothing to worry about, Mister Wilmington. Mister Larabee is in no danger from me."

Buck hesitated a moment longer, then gave a curt nod of his head and left.

Chris' eyes had popped open at the sound of that soft, honeyed drawl that he knew all too well. He stared in disbelief as Buck rose from his chair and just left, without a word to him, left him alone with a man who had every reason to hate him.

Chris watched Ezra like a cat watches a snake as the southerner slowly walked over to stand beside the bed where Chris lay.

Ezra's right hand in its cast was held bent, resting against his waist, as if in a sling, but not. For a moment Ezra just stared down at him, that damned poker face in place.

Chris swallowed hard and turned his face away. "How can you stand to look at me?" he asked, his voice tight with shame.
Ezra's face softened, became almost affectionate. He reached out with the uninjured left hand and brushed strands of blonde hair back off Chris' forehead. The fingers trailed down his cheek, turning Chris' face back towards him, the touch as light as a lover's caress.

"You were my hero, you know." The soft voice was sad. "A knight in black denim, swooping down to rescue me from the living hell that Atlanta had become."

The gentle fingers brushed across his lips. Chris closed his eyes, feeling a shudder go through him. The touch was so sweet, so intimate. He forced his eyes back open, made himself look up at Ezra.

Ezra smiled an infinitely sad smile. "I worshiped the ground you walked on. I would have followed you anywhere, done anything for you... but you barely noticed, passed it off as gratitude I suppose." He paused, the sadness in his eyes deepening. "And perhaps it was. I don't know when my feelings changed, when I ceased to dream of passionate nights in your arms, but there came a time when, while I still loved you, will no doubt always love you, I no longer wanted you."

He paused, the hand moving away from Chris' face to grip the railing on the side of the bed. "Vin and I... in the beginning it was just two friends consoling each other because the man they both desired remained blissfully unaware of that desire. In time, that changed, as my feelings for you faded, my feelings for him grew. He is everything to me, now. I do not believe that I can live without him." The last was barely audible.

Ezra took a deep breath and went on. "I would do anything to see him happy. Anything. You are his best friend and my friend as well. I do not wish either of us to lose that friendship."

"I don't want to lose that either, but I don't see how we can get back to being friends. If I did what Buck says, Vin's gonna kill me."

Ezra's smile widened, "Oh, he did want to, never doubt that."

"But...."

"You are the best friend he has ever had, maybe the first real friend that he has ever had, losing that would hurt him terribly. Sooner or later he would come to blame me for coming between you. Oh, I'm sure he doesn't think that he will, but I know how these things go." For a moment, there was old pain reflected in his eyes.

Then he sighed and went on. "He's angry with you now, but that will fade. He will begin to miss you, miss the kinship you share. In time he will look at me and all he will see is the reason he lost his best friend. He will begin to resent me, and our relationship will crumble. I will do whatever is necessary to prevent that. I am willing to forget and forgive... on one condition."

"Tell me what I have to do, Ez." Chris' voice was quiet and defeated. He and Buck had had a long talk. Until Ezra had stepped through that door he had thought that he had lost Vin's friendship forever. He hadn't even been able to conceive of Ezra ever forgiving him.

"Get help. Go to the Substance Abuse Clinic, AA, therapy, whatever you prefer, but get help. You're an alcoholic, whether you think so or not, and you need help. You have to deal with why you drink before you can stop, and you have to stop drinking if we are ever again to be friends. Because if you don't, you'll just do something like the other night again and Vin has already said that should you ever so much as raise a hand to me again he will kill you."

Chris swallowed hard. He had been told dozens of times in the years since he lost Sarah and Adam that he needed to get help with his drinking, but he had always resisted, believing that he could
control it, could control himself. But if he had done what they said that he had, then he was definitely not in control. He stared at Ezra for a long moment, taking in the bruised forehead and cheek and the broken hand in its cast.

He had done this, at least according to Buck, Josiah, Nathan and JD, all men he counted as friends and trusted. Vin believed he had done this. That in the end was the deciding factor. Vin was his closest friend, if the only way he could get that friendship back was to get help, then he would get help.

After a long moment he asked, hesitantly, remembering that Ezra had had him barred from Vin's room, "Can I see Vin? Talk to him a few minutes...."

Ezra closed his eyes then opened them again, "Very well.... However I cannot guarantee your welcome."

Chris nodded, "I understand that."

"I'll have Mister Wilmington get a wheelchair and bring you up. I shall need to inform Vin that you are coming. I do not believe it would be a good idea for you to simply appear." He turned and left to get Buck.

***************

Vin was sitting up in the bed, his arms crossed across his chest, a hostile expression on his face, when Buck pushed Chris' chair into the room.

"Vin," Chris said, feeling awkward.

The barest of nods was his answer. Vin wasn't going to make this easy.

After a moment Chris said, "Look I don't remember anything about--"

Vin cut him off, "Reckon you was too drunk to remember, but let's get something straight right now, Larabee."

Chris winced at the hardness in the voice.

"Ezra don't lie. Ain't never lied to me, won't never lie to me. You done what you done. Hell, he tried his best not to tell me, didn't want me setting out to kill you and I got to tell you that I was sorely tempted. I know you're a real bastard when you're drinking... that I understand. Reckon I can even forgive you for that, but Josiah told me how you treated Ezra when I got hurt and there weren't no excuse for that at all. What the hell were you thinking?" Blue eyes blazed at him.

Chris sat for a moment, his mouth open. He hadn't expected Vin to light into him about his reaction when he was first hurt. "I... I thought you were going to die, and it was..." he stopped realizing that Vin might not take too well to his saying that it was Ezra's fault, then went on, "I mean you were hurt saving him...."

"That was my choice, Cowboy!" Vin snarled. "I chose to try and keep him from getting hurt 'cause I love him. Reckon I love him as much as you loved Sarah. How many times have you told me that you wish you could have traded places with her and Adam? I got that chance, to trade places with the one I love, to be hurt in his stead, and I took it. Ezra didn't have any say in that at all. Was me, nobody else. You want to be mad at somebody for my getting hurt, you be mad at me 'cause it was entirely my choice. Understood?"
Chris bowed his head then nodded. "Yeah, I understand. I'm sorry, Vin---"

"Don't be apologizing to me! Ain't me you owe an apology. You apologize to Ezra!"

Chris shook his head, a smile suddenly blossoming, "God! You're a hard son of a bitch, Tanner," but he turned to look up at Ezra. "Ez, I don't know how I can ever make things right with you, but I am sorry... for everything."

Ezra smiled slightly, "I know... and all you have to do is what we discussed."

Chris nodded, then turned back to Vin, "Soon as they let me out of here, I'm checking into the Substance Abuse Clinic." He paused, then went on, "I guess I had better try and have a talk with Mary. Explain as best I can, let her know that I'm going to be there a while. She'll need someone to stay with her...."

"I believe that the ladies will take care of her, Mister Larabee." Ezra said quietly. "They have been staying with her the past few days and already have a schedule worked out."

Chris nodded, "Good... good... thank them for me when you get the chance, will you?"

"Of course... I see them almost every day. They are still helping out at the house," Ezra replied.

Chris nodded. He bowed his head a moment then looked back up at Ezra. "Thank you, Ez. I know I don't deserve a second chance--"

Ezra cocked his head at him, an enigmatic smile crossing his face, "Did I?"

Chris blinked, "Did you what?"

"Deserve a second chance? When I ran out on you during that first case, did I deserve to be given a second chance?"

Chris swallowed hard then nodded, "Yes. Yes you did... and you've proven yourself dozens of times since then. You're the best undercover operative I've ever known and I'm glad that I gave you the chance to prove it. And you're a better friend than I deserve."

"You are the only boss I have ever had that thought I deserved a second chance, let alone gave me one. Can I do any less than return the favor?"

"Thank you... and I hope I do as well with my second chance as you did with yours."

"We all hope that. None of us wants to lose what we have had in Team Seven. None of us."

Chris nodded then looked up at Buck, "Take me back to my room, please. Then find out what needs to be done to get me into the Substance Abuse Clinic."

"Sure thing, Old dog," Buck grinned using the old affectionate nickname.

When they were gone, Ezra came to sit on the edge of Vin's bed.

"Do you think it will do him any good?" Vin asked.

"Perhaps, at least he is going to try and get help this time," Ezra replied, "and he knows what is at stake here. He values your friendship highly and wants it back."

"What do you want, Ez?" Vin asked gently, pulling Ezra down to lie beside him.
"I want my family back. All of it, complete and intact. I love you, Vin. You are, as you said of me, the most important person in my life but the rest of the seven are my family, our family, and I want that family to be whole again."

"Then we'll just have to see to it that you get what you want," Vin said softly, pressing a kiss to Ezra's forehead.

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The next day, Chris Larabee sat in the passenger seat of Buck's truck and stared out the window. What was he going to tell Mary? What could he tell her? How could he expect her to understand what had happened when he didn't understand it himself? He was going to have to think of something to say and soon. They were turning into the driveway up to the ranch house. In a few minutes, he would have to face his wife and tell her that he had assaulted one of his own men while drunk. Then he would have to tell her that he was checking himself into the Substance Abuse Clinic, that he wouldn't be there for her for at least six to eight weeks maybe longer if the doctors didn't think he was ready to leave the clinic that quickly. He might miss the birth of their babies.

Buck pulled up beside Nettie Wells' small compact car and parked. Chris sat staring out the window at the house, afraid to get out and go in. Afraid that if he did it would be to discover that his world was destroyed, that Mary no longer wanted anything to do with him.

Buck came around and opened the door, "Come on, Chris. You got it to do. Just do it and get it over with."

"God, Buck! What do I say to her? What do I tell her?"

"Tell her the truth. It's all you can do. She's already heard all about it."

"I'm scared." It was little more than a whisper. He'd never admitted to being afraid before but now he had to.

"That's all right. You ought to be... and being afraid ain't nothing to be ashamed of. You could have lost everything... still could. You got a right to be scared. Are you ready for this, now?"

Chris shook his head and sighed. "No, but then I don't think I'll ever be ready, so I might as well get it done."

He climbed out of the truck and headed for the back door leading into the kitchen.

Nettie Wells was working at the counter when he opened the door and hesitantly stepped through into his kitchen. She turned to look at him giving him the briefest of nods in acknowledgment of his arrival.

"Mary's waiting for you. You know where she is," she said sharply. She didn't admonish him not to upset his wife, she figured that considering what they had to discuss Mary getting upset was a given.

He nodded and crossed the room to move into the back den that they had converted into a bedroom for Mary. He stopped in the doorway.

"Mary?" he said, then waited for her to invite him to come the rest of the way in. He felt like a stranger in his own house.

"Chris," She was sitting up in the bed. The doctor wouldn't approve. She was supposed to stay as level in the bed as possible but there was no way she was having this discussion lying flat on her
back.

She gestured towards a chair that had been positioned beside the bed so that they could face each other as they talked. Chris crossed the room and sat down, his head bowed and shamefaced.

After an awkward silence he asked, "How are you doing?"

"As well as can be expected, according to the doctor."

"Good."

Silence fell again. Finally he jumped to his feet and began to pace. "Mary," he said, then sighed heavily. "God! This is so hard!" He turned back to face her then said, "I'm checking myself into the Substance Abuse Clinic." He glanced at his watch. "I'm supposed to be there in a couple of hours."

"Why?"

"What?"

"Why are you going to the Clinic?"

"Dammit, Mary! You know why!" he snapped. "I reckon they've had a field day telling you all about it."

"Don't you think that I deserve to hear it from you? I am your wife after all."

He bowed his head. "I don't remember doing what they said I did. I sure as hell don't know why I did it. I've never--" he broke off.

"Go on," Mary's voice was implacable.

"I've never thought about a man like that. Never wanted one. I can't believe I could have done what they say, but they all agree that I did it." He hesitated, "and I do have flashes of fighting with Ezra that night, but not that. I don't remember anything about that."

Mary stared at him. It was obvious to her that he did, in fact, remember but was just in denial. He had an image of himself and trying to do what he had to one of his men didn't fit with that image, so he was refusing to accept that he remembered doing it.

"Do you think that the Clinic will actually do any good?" She asked.

He rubbed a hand over his face. "I'm an alcoholic. I've accepted that and I'm ready to get help. So, yes, I think the Clinic will help." He hesitated a long moment then asked, "Will... will you be here when I get out?"

"Yes."

He turned to look at her. "Are you sure that you can forgive me?"

"I love you, Chris and I'll have time to work things out while you are away. I can't say that I'm not angry or disappointed, but we made a commitment when we got married and I'm still willing to try and make our marriage work. However I think we need to see a marriage counselor after you come home from the Clinic. I'm planning to talk to a therapist while you're away to help me deal with all this."

He nodded. Running his hand through his hair again, he said, "I can't believe this is happening."
"I don't want to believe it either, but it has happened, and we have to deal with it."

Chris looked down at his feet, "You're handling this well... better than I am."

Mary glared at him, her mouth pulling into a tight flat line. "No. I'm not... but I can't let myself get do what I'd like to do. I'd love to yell and scream and throw things, but the doctor warned me against getting too upset. She said that doing so could cause me to lose the babies. She was concerned enough to give me a mild sedative to take before you came."

"Shit! You told her about this?"

"She's my doctor! She saw that I was distraught and needed to know why. It's completely confidential. She promised it wouldn't appear in writing anywhere." Her voice rose and she was becoming agitated.

Chris hurried to her side, falling to his knees beside the bed, "I'm sorry. I'm sorry. You're right. She's right. You can't get upset." He took her hand and buried his face in the mattress beside her.

Mary took a couple of calming breaths then slowly pulled her hand loose. When he raised his head to look at her, despair in his eyes, she reached up to touch his face. "Oh, Chris, I just don't understand how you could have done this...."

"I can't explain it, Mary. I just don't know why... how it happened. I just know that I'm sorry. I've hurt everybody that I care about. I've got a lot of fences to mend and I don't know how I'm going to do it, but I know that the first step is admitting that I have a problem, that I am the problem. You, Ezra, Vin, none of you caused any of this, none of you deserve any of this. I'm the one with the problem and I'm the one that has to get help and try to make amends."

Mary nodded slightly. "Just tell me one thing. Do you want to try and save our marriage?"

"Yes."

"Then I'll be here when you come home. I love you, forgiving you will take some time."

"All I can ask for is a chance to try and make things right."

She nodded again and he moved back a bit, then stood slowly.

"I have to go. I'm due to check in at the clinic," he said awkwardly.

"Take care," she said just to have something to say.

"You, too." He backed away a bit, then turned and walked out of the room.

She watched him go then slid farther down in the bed. God! Her life was falling apart.

***************

A week later

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"Easy, Darling."

The comforting sound of his lover's soft drawl did little to soothe Vin Tanner's annoyance. He hated being weak or feeling helpless and right now he was both. Between being in a coma for more than
two months and the barely healed fractures he was literally weak as a kitten. A week of physical therapy hadn't improved him nearly as much as he would have liked. While he understood what the doctors meant about taking it slow and building up his strength and endurance, it was still frustrating. He was used to being strong and capable, doing whatever he pleased. He had always been athletic and found the limits now placed on him almost unendurable.

He sighed and smiled at Ezra, as he let his lover guide him to the wheelchair. For Ezra he would endure it. He was going home. That was something to celebrate. He couldn't wait to be alone with Ezra, to cuddle up with him in their big bed. He might not have a lot of endurance yet, but he was bound and determined to at least try to make love to Ezra. The most they had been able to do in the hospital was kiss and cuddle.

Ezra eased him down into the chair then came around to kneel in front of him, "Are you okay, Love?"

Vin smiled at him. "Yeah," he reached out, cupping Ezra's chin and brushing a thumb across Ezra's lips, "can't wait to get ya home."

Ezra blushed then grinned. "I do believe, Mister Tanner that I am the one that is taking you home," he teased.

"Same difference," Vin avowed. "Me'n you, home alone...."

"Well," Ezra grinned, "we'll be home, definitely. Alone may take a bit more doing."

Vin raised an eyebrow.

"There are quite a number of people at the house, Darling. I hired a housekeeper. I believe you know her, Mrs. Garcia, little Rosa's mother."

"Yeah, I know her. She gonna be staying there?"

"Not at the moment but when the servant's quarters are restored, yes. I thought that it was a good idea. I worry about her and the children living in Purgatorio."

Vin nodded. He knew that Ezra had a soft spot for children and Mrs. Garcia was a widow with three small children.

"Uh, Ez... does she know...."

"About us? Of course, she does. I was quite up-front with all the employees about that."

"All the employees? Just how many people do we employ, Ez?"

"Well, it's a big house, Vin. Upkeep alone requires more than one person. I hired Mrs. Garcia as the housekeeper. She's in charge of everything inside the house. I also hired Mister Hernandez as the groundskeeper. He and his sons will take care of the grounds, tending to the yards, flowerbeds and garden. Mister Sanchez has offered his services as handyman. I know that he doesn't feel it's necessary for us to pay him, but I must insist, since he is retired from the ATF now, he needs the extra income."

"So, there's at least three people there most all the time."

"During the day," Ezra said with a smile, "only Josiah stays over most nights." He laughed softly, "Don't worry, darling. I believe they will all have the good grace to make a quick departure today so
that we may celebrate your homecoming in private."

"Good, cause I think we're going to need some privacy, Babe. I really miss being able to do more'n cuddle a little."

"Me too, Vin. Me too," Ezra said, then stood abruptly. "So, let's get you out of here. I have your discharge papers. Mister Sanchez is bringing the truck around, so, I believe that we are ready to go."

"Then let's hit the road, Babe." Vin grinned up at him.

As they turned into the long driveway, Vin noted that the underbrush had been cleaned out from among the trees that lined the drive. With many of the trees bare of their leaves it looked a bit stark, but it was autumn, so that was to be expected. Ezra would, no doubt, plan out flowerbeds come spring. As the house came into view, he stared in disbelief. The dark, almost black, facade had been cleaned to reveal the sparkling silvery gray granite beneath it. Their ugly duckling wasn't ugly anymore. It had turned into the beautiful swan that Ezra had sworn was hiding there.

With its twin turrets on either end of the front, reaching up three stories high, it looked very much like a fairy-tale castle. The multitude of windows, shone in the sunlight, the colored glass panels that surrounded the large, center glass panes, gleamed like jewels.

The lawn had been mowed and the bushes around the house had been cut back neatly. On one end of the wraparound porch, a sloping ramp had been installed so that it would be easy to roll his wheelchair up.

He waited as Ezra got his wheelchair out of the back and brought it around. Looking at it then at the house he said, "I'd like to walk in."

Ezra smiled at him then looked toward the house. They were parked a good thirty feet from the ramp and the porch stretched another forty feet to the door. "It's too far. You'd be exhausted by the time you got to the door. How about we compromise? Let me roll you to the door and you can walk into the house?"

Vin sighed then nodded. He hated being this weak.

Ezra smiled at him, "Don't worry, Vin. It's just a matter of time. You're getting stronger every day."

Vin sighed and shook his head, saying "Don't feel like I'm ever going to be back to full strength." But he let Ezra help him down from the truck and into the wheelchair.

Ezra rolled him across to the porch and along it to the door.

They had just reached it, with Josiah trailing behind them when Nathan opened it for them. "Welcome home, Vin," he said with a smile, stepping back as Ezra helped Vin up from the chair and supported him as he slowly stepped across the threshold into the house.

Vin stopped just inside the door taking in the sight of the wide foyer. He stood leaning slightly on Ezra as he took in the renovated entrance way.

To his right a small table held three Indian pottery pieces, all in tones of tan, blue and pink. Two were shallow bowls, one holding keys the other several pieces of mail. A tall, graceful vase stood between them, a sprig of what looked and smelled like cherry blossoms standing in it. All were reflected in the mirror on the wall behind the table. He recognized the set up from Ezra's town house
where they had sat beside the front door in that entry hall. It was nice to have something familiar in
the new house.

To the left a long bench, done in the same warm oak finish as the walls and padded with a thick
cushion in true blue, offered seating.

A wide carpet runner in the same color as the bench pads stretched across the wide expanse of the
gleaming blue granite floor to the arched doorway into the wide hallway and down the hall all the
way to the back door.

On either side of the archway into the hall hung a framed quilt, a mountain scene on the left side and
eagles soaring over the mountains to the right.

The ten-foot tall windows facing out onto the porch were covered with blue velvet drapes, tied back
to reveal the snowy white lace panels beneath and flood the room with light. Centered on the left
wall was a man-made waterfall. The soft sound of the water tumbling down the tiers was quietly
soothing. Greenery sprouted along the various levels. A series of plant lights in a track above it
indicated that the plants were live.

Vin blinked and grinned, "We've got a waterfall!"

"I love the sound and I thought, that as you would not be able to get outside as much as you would
like for a while, that we could bring a bit of the outside indoors." He chuckled, "I meant for the pools
at the bottom to be reflecting pools, ergo the flat rocks for seating around them however the children
have decided that they are wishing pools and are forever tossing pennies in them."

"It's beautiful," Vin assured him. He turned to the right, looking at the grand staircase leading up to
the second floor. The banisters gleamed softly, the treads were covered in the same thick blue
carpeting as the runner leading down the hallway.

The minimal furnishings should have made the foyer look bare but instead it simply looked open and
airy. He nodded in approval. "It's beautiful, Ez. I like what you've done with it."

Ezra beamed. Although he would never admit it, he had been worried that Vin wouldn't like the way
he had decorated the house.

Vin looked up and gave Josiah, who was waiting beside the archway into the hall, a nod.

Taking it to mean they were ready to proceed, Josiah led the way to the wide double doors into the
front parlor and pushed them open.

Vin couldn't stop a grin from crossing his face as he saw the room crowded with people and the
banner over the fireplace, proclaiming, "Welcome home, Vin. We've missed you!"

Buck and JD were at the front of the crowd with Inez and Casey at their sides. Nathan and Raine
were close behind them. Miss Nettie stepped around them to claim a hug and guide Vin to a seat.
Behind them, Vin could see many of his friends from Purgatorio, then there was a general surge
forwards and he was surrounded by well-wishers.

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Sometime later, Ezra guided a happy, but exhausted Vin down the hallway from the front parlor to
the back one where he had set up a bedroom for Vin.

"This is only temporary, Darling. As soon as you can climb the stairs without exhausting yourself,
we shall move into the master bedroom upstairs. The plumbers and electricians should be finished up there by then. I hope you will like it. I'm having a Jacuzzi installed in the master bath."

Vin turned, stopping Ezra, as he wrapped his arms around him. "I'll love it, Babe. If you designed it, it'll be beautiful, functional and easy to keep nice. 'Sides it'll have the only thing that's really important to me... you, Babe."

"Oh, Vin! I love you so much." Ezra paused, then taking a deep breath to calm himself, he added, "I thought... I thought that I was going to lose you. I'm so glad to have you home!"

"Ez, oh, Ez." Vin murmured, burying his face in Ezra's hair. "You ain't ever gonna lose me. If you go first, I'll track you to heaven or hell or wherever you end up. If I go first, I'll wait for you, won't go nowhere till you're with me."

Ezra drew back smiling softly. He reached up to caress Vin's face. "You're such a good man, Vin. You're sure to go to heaven, but I... well I have it on good authority that I am going to hell in a hand cart."

"You're as good a man as I am and I ain't going to heaven without you, so you better just make room in that hand cart for me!" Vin smiled down at him. "Sides, there's them that believe we're bound for hell just cause we love each other. I don't rightly care. I figure anywhere you are is heaven."

Ezra smiled up at him. "Likewise, Darling. Anywhere you are is heaven." He drew back, "Now, we need to get you to bed. You look like you're about to fall over."

Vin shook his head slightly, "Ain't going to bed unless you're coming, too."

Ezra hesitated.

"Everybody's gone aren't they?" Vin asked, drawing Ezra back into his arms.

"Well, yes, except Josiah, and he's staying over tonight."

"He won't disturb us," Vin said firmly.

Ezra chuckled, "No he won't. Very well. I'll lay down with you, but you must sleep first before we do anything more than cuddle. Agreed?"

"Ain't got much choice. I'm too tired to do anything else right now." He paused and grinned, "But I'm warning you, soon as I get rested up a bit, I'm gonna have my wicked way with you, Ezra P. Standish."

Ezra laughed. "I do hope that is a promise, Love."

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Two weeks later
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Maude Standish glanced out the window as her driver pulled up in front of her son's townhouse. She was startled to see the 'for sale' sign beside the walkway up to the door.

Instructing the driver to wait, she stepped out of the Lincoln Town-car and marched up the walk. Not bothering to knock, she used her key to let herself in. A frown crossed her face as she turned to key in the alarm code only to find that it wasn't set.
Her gaze dropped to where the small table usually sat, directly beneath the keypad, giving Ezra a convenient place to drop his keys and mail. It was gone.

Turning she stalked into the living room.

Ezra's big screen TV was gone, along with the surround sound speaker system. His stereo system, the white leather couch and chair that she always disdained while secretly admiring, all were gone.

She looked past the archway into the dining room. The glass-topped, chrome table and its matching chairs were gone. She crossed to the wet bar. Not a bottle of wine remained on the rack, not a bottle of whiskey or mixers on the shelves behind, no glasses or bar-ware. It was totally bare.

She moved into the kitchen and opened a cabinet. Empty. The next was empty as well. She pulled open the door to the refrigerator. No light. Empty and clean.

She turned and strode back to the living room and down the hall. A glance showed that the guest bedroom was empty, just the bare carpet on the floor. Then she stood in front of the master bedroom door. She had come here expecting to find her son curled up asleep on the big antique four-poster bed with its feather mattress that he loved so. She no longer thought that she would find him there, none the less she had to check.

She pushed open the door.

Empty.

No antique four-poster bed with its hand-carved headboard, no antique wash stand with its porcelain basin and pitcher, no huge, old, oak dresser with the six foot mirror hung on the wall behind it, no full-length mirror in its oak stand in the corner, no cedar-lined blanket-chest at the foot of the bed with the hand-carved wolf pack running along the sides and the mated pair on the lid.

The room was empty.

Ezra was gone.

Gone without a word, without so much as a phone call or a change of address postcard.

A strange and unfamiliar feeling of abandonment gripped her.

How could he do this to her? To his own mother?

She walked back out into the hall and down it to the living room. Looking around she spotted the phone sitting forlornly on the living room floor. She walked over and knelt gracefully, picking the receiver up. No dial tone. That explained the 'that number is no longer in service' message that she had gotten when she had tried to call Ezra from the airport.

She stood and pulled out her cell phone, dialing the ATF switchboard, she punched in Ezra's extension.

When someone picked up she was momentarily stunned that it wasn't Ezra's voice. "Ezra?" she asked in confusion.

"Sorry ma'am there's no one here by that name."

"To whom am I speaking?"

"Agent Winworth, ma'am."
"Team Seven?"

"No ma'am. Team Three. Team Seven has been temporarily disbanded."

"What!"

"Sorry ma'am, I'm new here. Heard about them but don't really know what happened."

"Who might know where I can get in touch with Agent Standish?"

"I don't know, ma'am. It's my understanding that Agent Standish resigned several months ago."

She paused, absorbing that tidbit of information. After a moment she said, "Thank you, Agent Winworth. Goodbye."

She snapped the phone closed, then re-opened it, dialing the main switchboard at the Federal Building. "AD Travis' office, please," she told the operator.

There was a series of clicks and then the sound of the phone ringing again. It was picked up immediately.

"AD Travis' office. This is Annie, how may I help you?"

"This is Mrs. Standish, Agent Standish's mother, I would like to speak with AD Travis."

"I'm sorry ma'am, the Assistant Director is in DC for the week."

"Could you tell me how to get in touch with Agent Standish?"

"I'm sorry, ma'am, Mister Standish resigned some time ago. I'm afraid that we don't have a forwarding address."

"What about his supervisor, Mister Larabee?"

"Mister Larabee is on family leave, ma'am."

"Could you give me his home number?"

"I'm sorry, ma'am, we're not allowed to give out that information."

"What about Agent Sanchez? Is he there?"

"No, ma'am, Agent Sanchez has retired."

Maude stood tapping her foot. "Wilmington? Is he available?"

"I'm sorry, ma'am. I believe he took his vacation this week."

Maude's lips tightened in annoyance. "Tanner?"

"Medical leave."

"Is he in the hospital?"

"No ma'am, he's no longer in the hospital."

Maude thought a moment, tapping her lip with a red lacquered nail, "Mister Jackson?" she asked
finally recalling the name of the black man that worked with Team Seven.

"He's on temporary assignment with Team Three. Hold on and I'll transfer you down there."

Before she could protest the phone clicked several times then rang again.

"ATF, Team Three, Winworth."

She rolled her eyes. Back to him again. "Agent Winworth, it's Mrs. Standish again. Might I speak
with Agent Jackson? AD Travis' secretary informed me that he is currently assigned to your team."

"Yes, ma'am he is... but he's out right now.... Can I take a message?"

"Yes. Could you please have him call Maude Standish as soon as he gets in?"

"Yes, ma'am. What's your number?"

She gave it to him and hung up.

Taking one last look around the apartment she shook her head then allowed herself a small smile.

Ezra had pulled a disappearing act truly worthy of the Standish name. Damn, but she was proud of
that boy.

Now, to find him.

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Continued in Part 5
Paul Winworth looked up as Nathan Jackson entered the Team Three Bullpen. "How'd it go?" he asked.

Nathan shrugged out of his jacket and tossed it over the back of his chair, a disgusted look on his face. "Not good. We got three men down, fortunately ain't none of them going to die. But our best bet for turning state's evidence was killed and Barstow got clean away."

"Rough."

"Yeah. Just another day in paradise," Nathan said sarcastically as he turned away to head for the break room.

"Oh," Winworth called after him. "You had a phone call. A Mrs. Maude Standish would like you to call her."

"Aw, shit! Can this day get any better?" Nathan turned back to grab the phone message form from Winworth. He stared at the message as he stalked into the break room, as if that could change how it read.

A few minutes later he returned and sat down at his desk. Picking up the phone he dialed a well-known number. "Hey, Josiah. Ezra around?"

He paused, rubbing his forehead then turning to fish in his desk drawer for some aspirin as he listened to Josiah talk for several minutes. After a few minutes he interrupted the flow of words. "That's all real interesting, Josiah, but I think Ez might want to know that his ma's looking for him. Left a message for me to call her. I need to know what he wants me to do about it."

He tucked the phone between his shoulder and his chin as he dumped a handful of aspirin into his hand and used the coffee he had just gotten from the break room to wash them down.

After a few minutes Ezra came on the line and Nathan said, "Yeah, Ez. Don't know how she tracked me down here, but I got a message to call her."

He paused listening. "Reckon she is. Message gives two numbers, one could be a cell phone but the other is for the Hilton Uptown, Room 1240."

Another pause, "You sure?"

"Okay. I'll give her a call and see what she wants. You want me to just bring her out to the house, if
that's what she's after?" He paused again, nodding his head, absently. "Okay. I'll give you a call back to let you know, if I'm bringing her out. How's Vin? Good. I'll be by in a while, in any event. Ya'll tell Raine to wait for me. Okay? Okay. Later."

He hung up the phone and leaned back in his chair, rubbing his temples.

Winworth, who had been eavesdropping shamelessly asked, "Standish don't want to see his mother?"

Nathan snorted, "Trust me, Paul, he's got cause. Hurricane Maude's got a real talent for tearing up his life and he don't need that right now."

"But he said bring her out to see him, didn't he?"

"Yep. Man's a glutton for punishment." Nathan sighed, then picked up the phone again. "Might as well get it over with."

Maude Standish let the phone ring four times before answering it. It wouldn't do to appear too anxious, although she was eager to know where Ezra had disappeared to and why.

She smiled to herself as she heard the polite voice of Nathan Jackson on the other end of the line. "Mister Jackson, how nice of you to return my call so quickly." She wondered at that, the members of Team Seven had never seemed to care very much for her.

He told her that Ezra's new home wasn't that easy to find, if you didn't know what you were looking for you could go right passed it. He then suggested that he come by and pick her up when he left work in a couple of hours.

She pressed her lips into a thin line at the delay but agreed, aware that the man hadn't really had to call her. He could have played phone tag with her for days.

Nathan hung up and immediately called Ezra back to let him know that he would be bringing Maude with him when he got off work.

Two hours later he listened in boredom to Maude telling him all about her latest trip to Europe, silently thinking that he should have just told Josiah to go pick her up at the hotel, at least the big profiler liked her.

She fell silent as he turned off the main street and into the long winding drive up to the house. He glanced over as the house came into view, wanting to see her face when she saw the house her son had bought.

Maude blinked as she stared unabashedly at the massive stone structure. *Good Lord! Ezra bought a castle!*

The wide porch was at least twelve feet across and it appeared to run almost all the way around the house, which was at least eighty feet across the front and possibly a hundred feet. The double doors of the main entrance were dead center of the front. To the right a huge bay window jutted out, the porch following the line of it and remaining the same width as the rest of the porch. It was three stories high, with round turret style rooms standing even higher on each end of the vast granite structure, their roofs rising above the third floor roof-line. Second floor balconies jutted out at
intervals above the porch roof-line, French doors opening back into the suites they adjoined.

The entire thing was built of silvery gray granite, sparkling in the late afternoon sunlight. It was a house truly worthy of a Standish. The kind of house her darling boy should have always lived in. She was going to love staying here.

Nathan parked the car next to Josiah's old Suburban and went around to hold the door for Maude, shaking his head at the fact that she expected it. He escorted her up the steps to the porch and through the huge oak doors into the entry hall.

He gestured to the bench seat. "If you'll just wait here ma'am, I'll see if I can find Ezra for you."

She started to protest then changed her mind and sat down looking around the sparsely furnished foyer. The style was eclectic; a simple oak table held Indian pottery, while framed quilts on either side of the archway to the hall served as the main focal point of the room. The quiet murmur of running water trickling down a man-made waterfall drew her eye to the far left wall and for a moment she was lost in thought staring at the anomalous creation. When she turned her attention back to the hallway it was to see a small child standing staring at her.

The little girl walked slowly towards her. She had dark brown eyes, wide in her small heart-shaped face. Black curls bobbed as she walked. Stopping in front of Maude she said, "I Wosa."

Noting that the child seemed to be missing her two front teeth, Maude correctly translated that to mean her name was Rosa. She smiled politely, "I am Maude Standish."

"Senow Ezwa is a Stanwish."

"Indeed he is. He's my son." She paused, then asked, "Would you happen to know where he is?"

"Senow Ezwa with Senow Vin," Rosa said, carefully.

Maude absorbed that. So, apparently Ezra had taken Mister Tanner in when he got out of the hospital.

Before she could say anything else Rosa went on. "Senow Vin owns half house and Senow Ezwa owns half. Do you know which half is Senow Ezwa's?" Rosa asked, carefully pronouncing each word.

"No, dear, I'm sure I don't. Perhaps you could tell me?" Maude filed away the information that Ezra shared ownership of the house with Vin. Staying here might not be as easy as she had anticipated when she first saw the house.

"I not know," Rosa said with a sigh.

"Mister Tanner was in the hospital wasn't he?" Maude fished for more information.

"He sleep long time. Senow Ezwa mucho unhappy. He stay hospital evewy night."

Just then Ezra appeared in the archway into the hall. "Mother, how are you?" he asked politely, crossing to greet her.

She rose and stepped past Rosa to place a perfunctory kiss on his cheek. "Ezra, darling!" She stepped back and looked at him, "Good, Lord child! You look awful! All skin and bones."

Ezra sighed, "I'm gaining the weight back, Mother, now that Vin is home."
She nodded taking in yet another clue as to what was going on. After a moment she said, "So, he's finally made an honest man of you, has he?"

Ezra blushed, "Mother!" He inclined his head toward Rosa indicating 'not in front of the child'.

Maude shrugged, "She's too young to understand what we're talking about." She smiled suddenly, "You thought I didn't know. Darling, I've known you were bisexual since you were fifteen, as for knowing about Mister Tanner, well, I make it my business to know who you are involved with, not that there have been that many people in your life."

She paused, then asked softly, "Are you happy?"

"Yes, Mother, I am happier than I have ever been in my entire life. Not that it has been easy, Vin's injury nearly took him from me just when we were finally getting everything together, but he is recovering nicely, and we are very happy."

"Good. I know I haven't been the best mother, Ezra, but all I've ever wanted was the best for you."

"There is nothing better than to love and be loved, Mother. I have that now. I'm never letting it go." There was a warning in his eyes, telling her that she had better not try and mess this up for him.

She nodded, letting him know that she understood. "Now, where is your Mister Tanner? And how is he doing?"

"He's resting, in his therapy room." He turned and led her down the hall towards the back of the house.

"The physical therapist just left. Vin is always exhausted after his sessions, but he pushes himself, wanting to get back to full strength. He is eager to do some hands on work on the renovations." He paused then said, "I would invite you to stay with us but there are only two bedrooms ready for occupation, mine and Vin's room and Josiah's room. The upstairs is still being re-wired and re-plumbed."

"Mister Sanchez is staying here?"

"He's going to live here, Mother. This place is much too big for just Vin and me. Josiah's selling his house." He guided her into the back parlor, where they had set up Vin's bedroom.

"Vin, Mother wished to know how you are doing."

Vin looked up from where he lay on the bed and began to struggle to sit up.

"Please, Mister Tanner, you do not have to get up on my account. Ezra has told me that you just finished your therapy for the day. I'm sure you need your rest."

Vin sighed, "Sorry ma'am but I am a mite tired."

Ezra had moved to his side and was helping him finish sitting up, tucking several pillows behind him.

Maude watched with an indulgent smile. She'd been aware of Ezra's relationship for a long time but the last time that she had visited, nearly a year ago, it had been obvious that although Ezra had been in love with Vin, Vin had not been in love with Ezra. Now, however, that had clearly changed.

Her eyes softened at the way Vin looked at Ezra, love clearly shining in his eyes. It was the way that
Ezra's father had looked at her all those years ago, in the all too brief time that she'd had him before his death.

She knew well that no one could change what was meant to be, if Ezra were doomed to lose his beloved the way that she had lost hers there was nothing that she could do about it. That didn't mean that she couldn't try to protect them. Perhaps it was time to settle down, make Denver the base of her operations. She was a hands on CEO of her company, Standish International Investments, Inc., but the home office could be moved. It would be expensive but to be here to keep an eye on Ezra and his beloved, to try and keep them safe, would be worth it.

She looked up as a young Hispanic woman stepped into the room.

"Senor Ezra, Senor Vin?" the woman said hesitantly.

"Mrs. Garcia, what do you need, my dear?" Ezra asked.

"I hate to ask Senor, you have done so much for us already, giving me this job..." she trailed off distress clear on her face.

"It's alright, Maria," Vin said gently, "just tell us what's wrong."

"I… that is the heat in our building… it is not working. It is supposed to be below freezing tonight. I wanted to ask if my girls and I could stay here. We could sleep on the floor in the kitchen..." she trailed off again but this time there was a hopeful note in her voice.

"You may certainly stay here," Ezra declared, rising and going to the woman, taking her hands, "but there is no need for you to sleep on the floor. We shall light the fireplace in the parlor and let the sofas in there out into beds. We have plenty of bed linens and pillows. You shall be quite comfortable."

"Gracias, Senor, mucho gracias!" Maria hugged him then blushed, embarrassed. "I will go and tell the girls." She hurried away.

Ezra called after her, "Tell Mister Sanchez that I said to light the fireplace in the parlor for you and let the sofas out."

"Si, Senor!" she called back over her shoulder.

Ezra turned back into the room with a sigh.

"Damn that man!" Vin swore, then looked over at Maude, guiltily, "Sorry, ma'am."

"It's quite all right, Mister Tanner. I've said worse." She looked at Ezra, "What man are you discussing?"

"The one that owns that crumbling tenement that was Vin's former home, where Mrs. Garcia and her dear girls still live."

"What is wrong with it?" Maude asked.

"Easier ta say what ain't!" Vin snapped, then quickly apologized again, "Sorry, ta snap. It ain't your fault."

It was Ezra that actually answered Maude's question. "The heat only works intermittently, usually when it is not needed. There is no central air conditioning at all. The tenants must provide their own
window air conditioners to have any relief from the heat in the summer. While only about half of them can afford to do so, the wiring in the building is so deficient that if they all run the air conditioners at the same time, the fuses blow, and the power goes off until the fuses can be replaced. The elevator is out of order more than it is working. The fire escapes are rusty and untrustworthy."

Maude interrupted, "Surely that is a fire code violation."

"It is and we have reported it, repeatedly. To no avail," Ezra told her.

"Wish there was something that we could do," Vin said with a sigh.

"Perhaps there is," Maude said thoughtfully. This might be just what she needed as an excuse to settle in Denver. "Would the gentleman in question be willing to sell the building?"

"I doubt it, he's making a fortune off it."

"What about empty lots? Are there any nearby?"

"About half the lots in Purgatorio are empty," Vin told her.

"Are they owned by the same person that owns the apartment building?"

"Don't know but I doubt he owns 'em all," Vin said.

"Then it is a simple matter of finding an empty lot that he doesn't own, buying it, building a new apartment building on the lot and moving the families from his building to the new one," Maude said with a triumphant smile.

"Mother it is not that easy. For openers we don't have that kind of money. Then the people in Purgatorio are distrustful of outsiders."

"I have that kind of money and Mister Tanner is not an outsider."

"To make a profit the rent in a new building would have to be exorbitant," Ezra pointed out.

"Not if it were built by a charitable foundation devoted to providing low rent housing for the poor," Maude stated firmly.

"Where would the money come from?" Ezra asked.

"Standish International makes a profit of several billion dollars per year. I could set aside one or two billion of that each year to go into a non-profit foundation with the mission statement of buying up property in tenement areas and building new low rent housing for the poor. We could start here in Denver, with the Purgatorio area."

She rose and began pacing.

Vin started to say something, but Ezra motioned him to silence. He recognized his mother's thinking mode. In just a few minutes she would have a clear outline of what needed to be done to achieve her goal.

She turned back to them with a smile, "How fortunate that neither you nor Mister Tanner are currently employed. You can head up the foundation. You decide how the money will be spent, what properties are bought and what personnel are hired. Mister Tanner can be the liaison with the people in Purgatorio."
She paused and turned to them, with a smile. "You could work out of this house if you wish. It
would be a simple matter to turn the parlor into a reception room, the study next to it into your office
and this room, once Mister Tanner no longer needs it, into a file room."

"And what do you get out of this, Mother?" Ezra asked.

"Tax breaks, darling. Standish International will get a two billion dollar per year charitable
contribution tax break."

"And except for donating the money you will keep your hands off the foundation and stay out of
Purgatorio?"

"If that is what you want."

"I want it in writing. No interference, none whatsoever."

Maude laughed, the sound free and happy. "Oh, Ezra, my darling boy, you have truly come into
your own these last few months."

She stepped close and drew Ezra into a hug. "I'm so proud of you, darling," stepping back, she
added, "and you shall have it in writing. The contract making you head of the foundation will
include a clause, forbidding me to have anything to do with the running of the foundation and
forbidding me personally or Standish International from buying property or investing in the
Purgatorio area."

She tilted her head and looked at Ezra, "So, shall we do this?"

"I am in complete control of the foundation?"

Maude nodded.

"I can hire anyone that I want to help me run it?"

Maude nodded.

"And you will not interfere?"

"I promise," Maude said solemnly, then smiling softly reached up to etch a cross over her heart,
"Cross my heart and hope to die."

Tears suddenly welled up in Ezra's eyes as he reached out to pull Maude into a fierce hug.

His mother had broken a lot of promises to him over the years but never one where she crossed her
heart and hoped to die.

When he stepped back he said, "Go ahead and start the arrangements to set up the foundation but
don't actually put it into motion until I call you. I want to talk to the others about this."

"Of course, darling. I expected that you would want your friends to come into this with you." She
smiled and stepped forwards to kiss Ezra on the cheek. "I'd better be going. I have a million things to
do."

Ezra said, "I'll walk you out," then looked at Vin who nodded.

"I'm not going anywhere, Ez. You have a good day, Missus Standish."
"I am having a wonderful day, Mister Tanner. You take care of yourself. And I'll see you both tomorrow."

As Ezra escorted her towards the front door, Maude asked, "Is Mister Sanchez about today?"

"Yes. He's here somewhere."

"Would he be available to drive me back to my hotel?"

"Certainly, but I thought perhaps you'd like to take the Jag. You said that you were coming back tomorrow and that way you'd have your own transportation. I'm sure there are stops you'll want to make."

"That would be convenient, darling, if you're sure that you don't mind my taking the Jag."

"I don't mind. I generally drive Vin's truck these days. The renovations require a great deal of hauling."

"Of course, then thank you."

Ezra stopped at the table in the foyer and fished the keys to the Jag out of the bowl that held several sets of keys.

"Here you go. Take care now."

Maude hugged him again. "I will, darling."

Ezra opened the door for her and watched as she crossed the porch and descended the steps going to the Jag which was parked in the driveway near the steps.

He turned and walked back to the room where Vin was waiting for him, a thoughtful look on his face.

Vin looked up as Ezra came in struck by the look on Ezra's face. "Ez, what's wrong, babe?"

Ezra looked up at him, his blank poker face in place, "She must be dying," he said softly.

"What?" Vin forced himself to sit up, turning to sit on the side of the bed holding out a hand to his partner. "Ezra, what makes you say that?"

Ezra took the hand and sank down to sit on the bed beside Vin. "She's hugged me more today than she has in the past five years and giving away money? Something has to be wrong!"

Vin chuckled and put his other arm around Ezra, squeezing his hand lightly. "Maybe she just realized what a wonderful son she has and how lucky she really is."

"I hope that's all it is. She may not have been the best mother in the world but she's mine. I love her and I don't want to lose her."

"You're not going to lose her and if you should, I'll be here for you." He hugged Ezra then said, "So, ya wanna call the others and get them over here so we can talk about this foundation thing?"

"You're not too tired?"

"Nope. The thought of being able to actually do something about conditions in Purgatorio has made me feel all energized and raring to go. Wanna get started and since Nate and Josiah are already here,
that only leaves JD and Buck to call."

"Miss Casey, Miz Nettie and Miss Raine are here as well." He chuckled at Vin's raised eyebrow.
"You don't really think that the ladies would let us do this by ourselves do you? Besides, I believe
that Miz Nettie would make the perfect Executive Assistant for me. Having been a social worker, not
only is she experienced with paperwork, she's acquainted with many of the families in Purgatorio,
familiar with government red tape and has contacts in all levels of Denver's bureaucracy. Miss Casey
would make a fine receptionist and clerk. I'm not certain exactly where Miss Raine and Nathan could
be placed in the organization but I'm sure we can find something. JD of course would be in charge of
setting up the computers and maintaining the Foundation's website. Assuming, of course, that they all
want in."

"Trust me they're all gonna to want in on this, babe," Vin said, smiling.

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They had gathered in the large front parlor to discuss Maude's proposition.

Nathan and Raine occupied the loveseat. Josiah, JD and Casey sat on one of the long sofas. Buck
and Inez, who had come with him, occupied the other loveseat. Miz Nettie sat in one of the parlor
chairs and Vin occupied the only recliner in the room.

Ezra hadn't even tried to sit down. He was too nervous to sit still as he explained Maude's idea and
his hopes that at least some of them would want to join him in the new venture. He finished up the
explanation and looked at them, "Well, what do you think?"

"It's great!" JD enthused. "It's not just a great idea but it'd be great if we could all work together
again!" He looked hopefully at the others.

"You'd be in charge of the money?" Nathan asked.

Ezra sighed. "I know that you don't trust---"

Nathan interrupted. "It ain't that, Ezra. I do trust you. I was just thinking that some of the people that
you'll need on your side in this might not."

"I have already considered that. I was thinking of setting up an advisory or oversight committee.
They wouldn't have control of the money, but they could review the projects and spending and make
recommendations. I thought that I'd ask AD Travis to chair it. He'll be retiring from the ATF at the
end of the year. I realize that he probably won't want to take on another full time job, but the
committee would only meet once a month or so."

"Who else are you considering?" Nettie asked.

"Missus Travis. She already works with several charitable organizations and would know most of
the people that we would be dealing with. I also thought about asking Sister Ernestine of the Sisters
of Mercy to be on it. Their church is in the heart of Purgatorio and she knows what needs to be done.
I was also considering Mrs. Travis, excuse me, Mrs. *Larabee* to be on the committee."

"She's a reporter," Nettie reminded him. "Why would you want her on the committee?"

"Because she is a reporter, specifically an investigative reporter. She wouldn't hesitate to blow the
whistle should she believe that I was not handling the money appropriately. Having these people
keeping an eye on me should allay any suspicions that I am planning to misappropriate the
foundation's money."
"What exactly do you want from us?" Nettie asked.

"I want you to come to work for the foundation in various capacities. I was hoping that you would be my executive assistant, Missus Wells. I'm going to need someone to keep me organized and I have no doubt that you can do the job. Furthermore, your knowledge of both the state social welfare system and the federal government regulations will be invaluable. I know little to nothing of either and will be heavily reliant on your skills to negotiate both. I thought that Miss Casey, when she completes her degree in office management in June, could become the foundation's office manager. It will take at least that long to get everything set up and ready to run. JD, you would be in charge of everything to do with the computer systems and also work with Mister Wilmington on setting up and maintaining security for the offices, construction sites and the buildings once they are built."

Nathan and Raine looked at each other. "What about us? We'd really like to be part of this, but I don't see where we'd fit in."

"I want each building that we build to have a first aid room. I was thinking of having a nurse in each building but that is impractical. So, I thought that we could build a clinic on the ground floor of the first building. It would be free to anyone in the neighborhood, of course. Then when we build the second building, we could hire a building manager who has first aid training or insist that the manager take such training. The manager's apartment would be on the ground floor, next to the first aid room making it convenient for the manager to man the first aid station. You and Raine could run the free clinic and oversee the first aid stations, checking them regularly to see that they have the supplies they need and are being taking care of by the managers."

"It's going to be a while until you have the clinic built, probably a year or more. I was hoping to leave the ATF when Buck and JD do," Nathan said. "It's not the same now with just us there. I'd really rather not be the last of the Magnificent Seven left in the ATF."

Vin sat up in the recliner. "There's lots of empty buildings in Purgatorio. Maybe we could rent one of them and set up the clinic first thing, just move it into the building when it's done."

Ezra smiled, "An excellent idea, Vin. I'll look into it."

"And what am I to do, son?" Josiah asked.

"I was hoping that you would ask. I didn't want to ask you to come out of retirement yet again, but since you are offering, perhaps you might work with Vin as our liaison with the people in Purgatorio. Change unsettles people. You could help them realize that this is a good change, that we do truly want to help."

"And me, Senor?" Inez put in, "what shall I do?"

"You own The Saloon, my dear I couldn't ask you to give that up to work for the foundation."

"You do not have to ask. I want to be part of this. I can promote my assistant manager to manager and be free to help you."

"Very well. If you would be willing to live in the building when it is built you could be the head building manager. You would manage the first building and be in charge of hiring and overseeing the managers for the other buildings as they are built. I assure you that the buildings will be secure. All outer doors will be locked at all times. The building residents will have a key to open the outer door and there will be a security guard in the lobby to open the door for non-residents who are coming to the clinic. The apartment doors will be steel and have deadbolt locks. The walls will be concrete and steel. Windows will be either fixed glass or too small for an adult to get through. The
fire escape exits will be doors that open with the push of a handle from the inside but require a key to open from the outside, locking automatically every time that it is closed."

Inez nodded, "I accept the position and will be ready to move into the building when it is finished."

"What about Chris?" Buck asked quietly. "I know he's probably not on your list of people to ask to go into this with you, but it'll feel strange, all of us working together again but him not here."

"When Mister Larabee finishes his rehab, if he's interested in joining us, I'm sure that I can find something for him to do. I doubt that the slumlords that own the tenements in Purgatorio are going to be happy about us building new apartments in the area and offering them at competitive rents. Perhaps I'll put Mister Larabee in charge of ensuring that they cause us no trouble and dealing with the trouble that they try to cause."

Vin chuckled. "Now that sounds like a perfect fit."

Ezra smiled at him, "Indeed it does."

He looked around the room. "If everyone is agreed that this is a good thing to do then I shall call Mother and tell her to proceed with the paperwork to set up the foundation."

As the others assured him again that they wanted to be part of the foundation, said their good nights and filed out, Vin stood up, going to stand beside Ezra. Slipping an arm around his lover he said, "We've gotta think of a name for this foundation. Can't just keep calling it the foundation."

"Why not?" Ezra asked. "That is what we're trying to do; lay a solid foundation to rebuild the community of Purgatorio. We capitalize the letters and make it 'The Foundation'. Simple, elegant and solid."

Vin looked at him a long moment. "You're right. It's perfect."

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Maude smiled to herself as she guided the Jag through Denver traffic, delighted with the way that it handled. This was the first time that she had actually had the opportunity to drive it although it had been more than five years since she had had it custom built for Ezra.

She had been afraid that the additional weight of the bulletproofing would have altered the handling enough for Ezra to notice, but he'd never made any mention of it.

All four windows and both windshields were bulletproof glass. The doors, engine compartment, trunk and gas tank were all shielded with a layer of a super-strong titanium alloy that would stop anything short of armor-piercing rounds at close range.

Perhaps he did know. He had, after all, kept the car in spite of all the trouble that her giving it to him had caused, and he took very good care of it. It looked like it had just come off the showroom floor.

She parked in the underground garage of one of the office buildings that her company, Standish International Investments, Inc., owned in downtown Denver.

She had started the company with the two office buildings in Atlanta that she had gotten in the divorce settlement from Ezra's first stepfather when they parted. Now the company held several hundred billion dollars in real estate, owning office buildings, resorts and estates all over the world and turning an annual profit of several billion dollars.
This building housed the Denver branch of Standish International. They would be quite surprised when she told them that they would need to expand as she was moving her headquarters there.

She always checked in with the head of the Denver Branch when she was in town.

The receptionist recognized her immediately and rose to greet her. "Mrs. Standish, what a pleasure to see you. Would you like me to inform, Miss Halstead that you are coming up?"

"Please do, Elaine," Maude said, smiling at the young woman.

"Would you like an escort?"

"That's not necessary. I know the way." Maude breezed past her towards the private elevator. The elevator was an express that went directly to the top floor, where Le Anne Halstead, the head of the Denver branch, had her office.

Had anyone cared to sit down and make a list of the Executive Officers in the company they would have discovered that there was a disproportionate number of women among them compared to other companies in the same business. Almost all of the Division Heads and department heads were women.

Many of them, like Le Anne, were also physically handicapped in some way.

Maude took off her gloves and coat in the elevator. Despite the rapidly dropping temperature outside, the building was pleasantly warm.

Le Anne met the elevator, sitting elegantly in her electric wheelchair, a smile on her face.

A car accident had left her paralyzed from the waist down shortly after she had come to work for Maude over twenty years before, when Maude was still just starting out in business. She had been terrified that she would lose the job that she had just gotten.

Maude, however, had simply said, "It's your brain that I'm interested in, my dear, not your legs. When you're ready to return to work, your job will be waiting."

The company had even paid all the medical bills that the insurance didn't cover. It had been a good investment. Le Anne was fiercely loyal to Maude and the company. She had worked alongside Maude in the early years when the company had struggled to survive and been Maude's first choice as her second-in-command when it finally took off. She had stepped down from that position, taking over the Denver office to be near her aging parents, just a little over a year before Ezra had been transferred to Denver.

She had also adopted Maude's philosophy of being 'interested in the brains' of the people that she hired rather than their physical limitations or gender. When all other things were equal, she would hire a woman over a man, while that might seem sexist, it just meant that the few men in the company were brilliant at their jobs.

She greeted Maude, accepting a kiss on the cheek in greeting and waiting until they were secure in her office to ask, "How are you really, Maude? Did everything go well?"

She put her wheelchair next to the chair that Maude had sat down in and turned it to face Maude reaching out to take her hands.

Maude accepted the show of concern with a soft smile.
"I'm fine, Le Anne. The doctor assured me that the cancer hadn't spread beyond the uterus and the cysts on my ovaries were benign. He did a complete hysterectomy and I am completely cancer free, now."

"Should you be back to work so soon?"

"I've been cleared to do whatever I please. It's not like when you had your hysterectomy, all those years ago. I don't even have an incision. He took everything out through the vagina. No incision, no scars, just one night in the hospital and a much shorter recovery period."

"I still wish that you had let me come and be with you. I was worried."

"I know dear, but I didn't even tell Ezra about this and he mustn't ever know. Even after the fact he would be frantic. Besides, you know what this business is like. If it gets out that I had cancer, even though the matter is resolved the company stock will plummet and the sharks will start circling ready to tear us apart. It's better this way."

She smiled at Le Anne and squeezed her hands before releasing them. "But enough about my problems. Let me tell you why I'm here."

When Maude finished explaining about Vin and Ezra's interest in Purgatorio and her idea for a foundation, Le Anne wheeled her chair over to her desk saying as she went, "I believe we already own some property on the edge of Purgatorio."

She pulled out her keyboard and tapped some keys. A large plasma screen hanging on the wall beside the desk came to life, showing a large map of Denver. The properties that Standish International owned were shown outlined in red. Le Anne quickly zoomed in until the map showed only the ten square block radius that Purgatorio occupied and a few more blocks bordering it.

Maude walked over to the display and pointed, "This is the back boundary of Vin and Ezra's estate."

"The old Stillwell estate? That white elephant has been on the market for years! With all the restrictions on it all they can do with it is live on it."

"I think that's all they want to do with it. Ezra is clearly in love with the place and the renovations are coming along beautifully. You should see what they've done just with the downstairs. There is a waterfall in the foyer. It takes up almost an entire wall by itself."

Maude turned back to the display pointing to a section outlined in red lying just inside the border of the Purgatorio area. It was two blocks long and one block wide. "We own this?"

"Yes."

"It's perfect. It starts just three blocks from the back edge of the estate." She pointed to another square on the map. "This is St. Michael's, the church that the Sisters of Mercy are associated with. It's just three blocks farther in. What were you planning to do with the lots?"

"Actually it was going to be housing, middle income apartments," Le Anne said.

"But you haven't actually started developing it yet have you?"

"No. We only acquired it a couple of months ago. We're still tossing ideas around."

"Good. Then we'll donate it along with the money to Ezra's foundation," Maude said firmly.
"That's a big hunk of real estate, Maude. Undeveloped, it cost us over a million dollars."

"Which is a drop in the bucket compared to the two billion annually that I promised Ezra for his foundation," Maude told her. "That property will go a long way towards starting the revitalization of Purgatorio. If we build the first building there and persuade Vin's people to move into it, it will bring his friends closer to him and Ezra as well as moving them out of worst part of Purgatorio. They will be safer and Vin will be happy to have them nearby."

"Well, the company can write it off as a charitable contribution once the foundation is up and running. When are you getting started on that?"

"I'll stop by and see Ashanti on the way back to my hotel. I'll tell her what I need, and she'll get the paperwork started," Maude informed her, smiling at the thought of getting to visit with another of 'her ladies'.

Ashanti McQueen was another of the women that Maude had helped out as she worked her way up in the business world. The fiery African-American was a petite five-foot tall dynamo.

When Maude met her, she'd been working in a New York law firm as an associate, little more than a glorified law clerk despite having a double Degree in International Business Law and International Finance. She'd hit the glass ceiling, unlikely to be offered a partnership in the firm which had only two African-American partners, both junior partners and neither female and only one female partner, again a junior partner. There had been no African-American's or females among the firm's senior partners.

Maude had offered her an annual retainer equal to her then current salary plus ten percent if she would open her own office taking on Standish International as her first client.

The first year or two out on her own had been rough for Ashanti but Maude had steered several of her business acquaintances her way and soon she had all the clients that she could handle.

For more than ten years Ashanti had lived the life of a high powered attorney, with little time or concern for a personal life. Then two years ago Ashanti had met Tony Two Hawks McQueen in a London airport and the two of them had fallen head over heels in love during a three-hour delay. Tony was a Native American rancher from Colorado. After a whirlwind courtship that involved them flying back and forth from New York to Colorado, they had set a wedding date.

Maude's assurance that Ashanti would remain on retainer for Standish International no matter where she lived had made Ashanti's decision to move to Colorado when she married Tony easier. Most of her other clients had chosen to stay with her, despite the move, as well.

She, Maude and Le Anne had worked together for years and she'd been delighted when she realized that moving to Denver would reunite her with Le Anne. She would be happy to hear that Maude was moving her Headquarters to Denver and would be settling there as well.

Maude was drawn out of her memories and back to the present when Le Anne asked, "Do you want to use our construction firm to do the building?"

"I'm rather afraid that won't be possible. Ezra insists that if he is to run the foundation that I, and Standish International, must not be involved in any way with the running of the foundation or the projects that they fund."

"He still doesn't trust you," Le Anne said sadly.

"I haven't given him a great deal of reason to," Maude admitted. "I'm glad that I've decided to move
to Denver. I think it's time that I stepped back a bit. I was hoping that now that your parents have
passed on that you might be willing to return as my second-in-command. You could take over more
of the running of the company if you are willing and I could focus on repairing the damage that my
workaholic tendencies have done to my relationship with my son."

Le Anne shook her head. "The damage isn't all your fault you know. Ezra's every bit as much of a
workaholic as you are and stubborn as a rock. As for taking over running the company, shouldn't
you be grooming Ezra to succeed you?"

"Ezra has never been interested in the company. He'll never want to run it. Besides he'll have his
hands full with the foundation. He will inherit Standish International, but I want people that I can
trust to run it for him. Which means that we need to start looking for our successors among the
younger generation in the company and grooming them to move up."

"I see, but what about Virginia? She's been your second ever since I left Atlanta to move here."

"She won't want to leave Atlanta, even if it means stepping down a notch in the company. Her first
grandchild is barely six months old and Virginia will want to stay close since the baby has so many
problems from being extremely premature."

"The baby's still having problems?"

"Yes, she's getting better every day, but the doctors think that she may always be a bit behind her age
group in development. Then there is the fact that the three months that the baby spent in the Neo-
natal ICU ate up every penny of both her parent's savings to pay what the insurance didn't cover."

"So, Grandma Ginny is taking up the slack financially and isn't about to get too far from her only
grandchild while she needs her."

"Exactly. So, when I move out here, I'm sure that she'll want to stay in Atlanta and the second-in-
command position will be available."

"In that case I'll take it, but you clear it with Virginia first,"

"I will." Maude looked at her watch, "Good Lord! Look at the time. I'd better go if I'm going to
catch Ashanti before she leaves the office."

"Call her. She'll wait for you." Le Anne told her gesturing to the phone. "She's number two on the
speed dial." She grinned at Maude and added with a cheeky grin, "My boyfriend is number one."

Maude laughed as she picked up the phone and dialed the number.

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The building that Ashanti McQueen had her office in was another of the buildings that Standish
International owned. Maude's heels clicked sharply on the marble floor as she crossed the wide
lobby. She smiled at the security guard manning the desk in the lobby and signed in, putting down
her name and that she was there to see Ashanti McQueen.

The guard glanced at the book, "Her office is on the top floor," he began to give her directions.

"I know the way," Maude assured him and strode off to the private elevator, using her key card to
gain access.

When she emerged from the elevator, the thick plush carpet that her heels sank into was a sharp
contrast to the marble of the lobby.

The lobby had echoed, coldly. Up here everything was quiet, her heels making no sound as she strode across the reception area and down the hall to the suite that Ashanti occupied. The receptionist had already left for the day as had Ashanti’s secretary.

Maude crossed the secretary's office to the open door of Ashanti’s office.

The petite woman turned in her chair and rose from behind the huge mahogany desk, coming to greet Maude.

They hugged and then stepped back.

Maude's eyes swept over the tiny woman noting that she had a slight bulge at the waist. Her eyes widened, "Ashanti McQueen! Are you pregnant?"

Ashanti laughed. "I am," she said smugly. "Nearly three months. I was going to call you, but I wanted to be sure first. The doctor only confirmed it today."

"Congratulations, my dear. Now that you're expecting, I guess you'll be glad to hear my news. I'm moving Standish International's headquarters to Denver. You won't have to travel as much as you do currently, although the baby may be born before the move is complete."

Ashanti smiled at her, "Good. That makes deciding which clients I'm going to hand off to my new partner a lot easier. I'll keep the clients based in Denver and she can take over the ones that are based elsewhere. Most of the move should be completed before I'm too far along to fly. I really didn't want to have to tell you that I was going to have to let her take on Standish International."

"Who is she?"

"Skyler Emory. You know her, Maude. She was one of my associates in New York. She moved out here to stay with the firm when I married Tony. I've got four associates besides her now. It was time I offered her a partnership. I'm glad that I did it before we found out that I'm pregnant. I wouldn't want her to think that I only offered it to her because I was pregnant and needed her to take over more of the business."

"Skyler's shrewd and tough. If you do need her to take on some of Standish International's business while you're pregnant, I have no objection. Now, I know that you want to get home to Tony so let me tell you why I'm here so you can go."

She quickly outlined the idea that she had for the foundation making sure that Ashanti knew that Ezra was to be in complete control of it and that it had to be totally separate from Standish International.

When she was finished the two women walked out together. It was already dark outside when they reached the lobby and as they signed out of the building the security guard suggested that he send one of his men to escort them to their cars. They gratefully accepted.

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"They're expecting you," Buck turned to look at Chris Larabee.

The other man was frozen in his seat, staring at the front of Vin and Ezra's house like it was the entrance to hell.
Buck blew out an exasperated breath. "This isn't just for them, Chris," he explained again patiently. "It's part of your therapy. Acknowledging the pain that your alcohol addiction has caused the people you care about is a necessary step in your recovery. The doc said so."

Chris swallowed hard, "How many people do you think are in there?"

Buck snorted, "Who knows. Between friends, family, staff, visitors and workmen the place is Grand Central Station most days. It don't matter. Vin and Ezra will find a private place for y'all to talk. So, quit stalling and just do it."

Chris nodded. "All right." He pushed open the door and stepped out, turning back to look at Buck, "You coming?"

Buck gave a quick bob of his head and got out as well.

As they walked up the steps to the porch, Buck grinned at the decorations. It was the day before Halloween and Vin and Ezra had clearly gone all out decorating. Jack O'Lanterns set all along the porch railing. Ghosts, skeletons, and giant spiders hung from the porch ceiling. A huge spider web covered almost one entire end of the porch complete with a huge black spider in its center. A witch rode her broomstick at the other end of the porch.

When he rang the doorbell, instead of the quiet and dignified chime he was expecting it howled like a wolf.

Ezra opened the door himself to let them in. "Mister Larabee, Buck, do come in," he greeted them.

Chris was glad to see that they had stopped decorating with the porch. The foyer was neat and clean, uncluttered and dignified. His eyes were drawn to the waterfall on the left wall. He couldn't help saying, "That's unusual."

"Yes. I knew that when Vin first came home he wouldn't be able to get outside much so I had that installed to bring a bit of the outdoors inside to him."

"Nice of you to be so thoughtful," Chris said. His tone was not complimentary.

Ezra turned back to him, his back straight and his face grim, and said, "Let us get something straight right now, Mister Larabee. You are here at Vin's suffrage and mine if you wish to remain welcome in this house I suggest you lose the attitude, now. Vin will not tolerate it."

"Where is Vin?" Chris asked.

"He's waiting for us in the library. Buck explained why you wished to see us, and I thought that would be the best place for us to talk. It's quiet and private." Ezra turned and moved off again leading the way to the library.

Vin was pacing in front of the fireplace when they entered but he came to Ezra immediately, standing at his side, one hand reaching out to rest at the back of Ezra's waist as he greeted Buck then turned to Chris.

"Chris," he greeted softly, but he didn't reach out to take the hand that Chris had automatically held out to him.

After an awkward second Chris let his hand drop back to his side, "Vin, it's good to see you up and around."
"Good to be up and around," Vin said, wry amusement in his voice as he gave Chris a small smile.

He turned away then, gesturing towards the seating arrangement in front of the fireplace. "Y'all sit down."

He stayed at Ezra's side as they walked towards the chairs and sat beside him on the small loveseat, leaving the two chairs for Buck and Chris.

Buck happily settled in the chair nearest the fire, stretching his long legs out towards the fireplace.

Chris, however, shook his head. "Don't think I can sit down." A small grimace twisted his face as he admitted, "I'm too nervous."

He sighed and looked at Vin, "Ezra said that Buck explained why I needed to see you?"

"Yeah. Said it had to do with your therapy," Vin said with a nod.

"That's right. Before you can solve a problem you have to admit that there is a problem. Admit it and accept it. I'm an alcoholic. I've done things while under the influence of alcohol that hurt people that I care about. Always before I've denied responsibility for my actions while I was drunk, expecting people to just overlook it and let it go because I was drunk. To recover from my alcohol addiction the doctors say that I have to face up to and accept responsibility for my actions while I was under the influence of alcohol."

He took a deep breath, "Drunk or sober I'm responsible for my actions. I've hurt you both, said and did things that I knew were wrong even as I said and did them. A lot of what I said to you, Ezra, I can't even blame on the alcohol. I wasn't drinking when I lashed out at you after Vin was hurt. I was just plain jealous. Yours and Vin's relationship had been thriving while mine and Mary's was deteriorating."

He hesitated, "That night at your townhouse," he broke off and paced agitatedly. "I remember what happened, but it's like I was standing outside myself watching me. I honestly don't know why I did it, but I do remember everything, and I acknowledge and accept that I attacked you. I'm sorrier than words can ever say, not just for that one incident but for the way that I treated you after Vin was hurt."

He stopped pacing and faced Vin directly, "I'm sorry, Vin. I'm apologizing to you because I know that my hurting Ezra hurt you, too. When you love someone you suffer when they suffer, and you love Ezra. I know that I don't deserve to be forgiven for what I've done to you, both of you, but I'm asking you both to forgive me and I'm hoping that in time we can be friends again."

He stopped talking and stood looking at them, waiting for their decision. It was all he could do not to bow his head, but they deserved to see his face. They were both experts at reading people's faces and he knew that they would be able to see how truly sorry he was.

They looked at him, studying his face, then after a long moment they looked at each other. Ezra gave the barest of nods and Vin nodded back.

Vin stood and held out his hand. "We accept your apology, Chris, and forgive you. You're welcome in our home."

When Chris reached out to take his hand, Vin shifted the handshake into the warrior's grip that they had always shared.

"Thank you, Vin, you don't know how much this means to me."
He broke the grip and Vin stepped back.

Chris turned to Ezra, "Ezra?" He held out his hand.

Ezra stood stepping forward to take the hand in a firm handshake, "Your apology is accepted," he paused then said, "Chris."

His grip tightened slightly, then he released Chris' hand.

Chris stood awkwardly for a moment then looked at Buck. "I have to go. I'm not done with my treatment. They only let me out to do this. I've got a couple of other stops to make, apologies to make, then I have to get back to the Center."

Buck stood up. "I'm sort of his chaperone on this little field trip, as well as his chauffeur. Like he said we've got a couple of more stops to make. I'll see y'all tomorrow."

Ezra saw them out, "Don't forget your costume," he reminded Buck as they reached the door, "the children are looking forwards to seeing 'The King'."

"You're dressing up as Elvis for Halloween?" Chris asked as they climbed into the truck.

"Yep. Vin's dressing as a mountain man. Ezra's dressing up as a riverboat gambler. They're going to line the driveway with Jack O'Lanterns from the road to the house."

"That'll take a lot of pumpkins."

"Vin bought a truck load. The kids have had a ball cleaning them out and carving the faces. The ladies have been baking pumpkin pies all week. The Sisters of Mercy are selling them and putting the money into the church roofing fund."

"They are really enjoying making a home together aren't they?"

"Oh, yeah," Buck grinned, "and they love the holidays like a couple of kids. They're already making plans for Thanksgiving and Christmas. I don't think that Ezra had many more holiday celebrations growing up than Vin did, and you know what his was like. We're all invited for Thanksgiving at their place. I'm sure that if you're out of rehab or can get a day pass you'll be welcome."

"I don't know if I should come even if they invite me, Buck. I'd hate to ruin their first Thanksgiving in their new home."

"If they invite you then the surest way to ruin it for them is not to come," Buck told him.

"I'll think about it, but only if they invite me," Chris said finally.

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Christmas Eve

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Vin Tanner stood beside the fireplace in the front parlor and watched the thong of people currently inhabiting his and his lover's house with an indulgent smile. He had never thought that he'd have a house full of family and friends to celebrate this time of year.

Until he had joined Team Seven, Christmas had always been a lonely time for him. Even afterwards when he had joined the others at Chris' for the holiday it hadn't been like this, like celebrating in his
own house surrounded by family and friends.

At the Christmas Eve supper they had just finished their guests had taken up nearly every seat at the long dining table.

Even Chris and Mary were here with their brand new, two-week old triplets. The babies had been nearly a month pre-mature and were still a bit underweight, but all were healthy. Mary was doing well, too, perhaps better than she would have been after the birth if the babies had waited for the doctor to take them by Caesarean section. The babies, three girls that Chris and Mary had named Hope, Faith and Joy, were not entirely identical. They all had blonde hair but Hope and Faith had blue eyes and Joy had green eyes.

Nettie and Casey were making over one of the infants while Inez and Raine had another. Vin wasn't certain who had which, but he was sure that it was Hope and Faith that they had.

Ezra was in the rocking chair with the third baby, and it was a sure bet that the one he had was Joy. She was the smallest of the triplets and both Ezra and Billy had taken a particular liking to her. Since Billy was leaning on Ezra's chair arm playing with the baby Ezra held that meant it was almost certainly Joy. If one of the others had had her, Billy would have been with them.

Casey was trying to get JD to hold the baby that she and Nettie were cuddling but he seemed reluctant. The young couple had gotten engaged over Thanksgiving and Vin was pretty sure that Casey was campaigning to start a family as soon as possible.

Vin suspected that Raine and Nathan had a little one on the way. Raine wasn't really showing yet, but she had that glow about her.

He watched as Buck happily took the baby that Inez was holding and grinned down at it. If the way Buck had been acting tonight, and the way that Inez was looking at him, was any indication, they were about to get another engagement announcement.

Maude was leaning over Ezra's shoulder cooing at the baby he held. Josiah stood beside her, a hand resting lightly on her back. He had escorted her to the Thanksgiving dinner that Vin and Ezra had hosted and taken her home afterwards. The couple had been dating hot and heavy ever since.

Ezra thought that it was funny. After all the years that Josiah had called him 'son' it was looking very much as if Josiah might just get to be stepfather number seven.

Maude was in the process of moving her company's headquarters to Denver and Josiah was helping her with house hunting.

Almost all the paperwork involved in setting up The Foundation was finished. They planned to start converting the parlor they were now in and the adjoining study into The Foundation's Headquarters right after New Year's. All of the Seven were part of The Foundation now. When Chris had finished his rehab they had explained about The Foundation and invited him to join them. He was the official head of Security with Buck and JD working directly under him and the rest of them, except Ezra who would be too busy running The Foundation, available as needed to deal with security problems.

Ezra stood up, giving the baby he held to Maude and holding out his hand to Vin.

When Vin joined him he cleared his throat then said, "My dear friends and family, Vin and I wanted to thank you all for coming tonight. I believe that I speak for us both when I say that this is the best holiday season that I have ever had, and it is your presence here and in our lives that has made it so. The New Year is bringing changes to us all, but one thing that will not change is how dear you all
are to us."

He paused while everyone clapped and cheered then continued. "Now, I hate to draw this party to an end, but it is nearly midnight and I know that you all have a big day planned for tomorrow. Remember that we are holding open house tomorrow starting at seven in the morning. There will be a breakfast buffet from seven to eleven and a lunch and dinner buffet from eleven until midnight. Please feel free to drop by and bring a guest or two."

After everyone was gone and Vin and Ezra made the rounds checking that all the windows and doors were locked and the security system was armed, Ezra wandered back to the foyer. He stood gazing up at the twelve foot tall blue spruce that he and Vin had cut off the back of their property for their Christmas tree.

It stood in the curve of the sixteen-foot wide bay window that jutted out from the front wall.

Vin had wanted a live tree and Ezra hadn't argued about it. The tree was beautiful. It was decorated simply with clear lights; red velvet bows and small silver bells that tinkled softly if the tree was disturbed. The tree topper was an angel dressed in snowy white trimmed in red with silver accents.

At the moment there were no presents under the tree. All the gifts to their guests at dinner had been given out hours before and Josiah was upstairs getting the ones for the in the morning.

The housekeeper's rooms had been finished just in time for Mrs. Garcia and her three girls to move in before Christmas. The groundskeeper, Mr. Hernandez, his wife and four sons had moved into the rooms above the stables the same day. They would be surprised when they woke in the morning to find gifts from Vin and Ezra, Josiah and Maude to them and all their children under the big tree in the foyer.

Vin stepped up behind him, slipping his arms around Ezra's waist. "What are you thinking, Babe?"
he asked quietly.

"I'm thinking how blessed I am. Six years ago tonight I was in Atlanta, drowning my sorrows alone in a bar. Back then I could not imagine that I would ever know the happiness and contentment that I feel tonight. I have a home that I love. I have a life mate that I love and that I know loves me. My mother has come back into my life and seems to genuinely want to be in my life. I have six of the best friends in the world and an extended family larger than I ever imagined. The Seven are whole again, reunited in running The Foundation. And I have The Foundation, a way to help those less fortunate. It's everything I've ever dreamed of."

He turned in Vin's arms, "But you, my love, are the heart of my happiness. If all the rest fell away and all that I had left was you and your love, I would still be happy. You are all I need."

Vin bent his head to rest his forehead against Ezra's. "I know what you mean. I have everything that I ever wanted, too, but if it all went away and all I had left was you and your love, I'd still be happy. You're all I need too."

The End

Chapter End Notes

I have some ideas for more stories in this AU. If y'all would like me to peruse them,
after I finish up my additions to Tequila Sunrise (Which has turned into the plot bunny that ate the world. It's up to six chapters with at least six more to go.) please leave a comment to let me know.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!