Sweep All The Ashes Away

by kittykatthetacodemon

Summary

Lee Christmas trusts Barney Ross with his life. It's the rest of it he has trouble with, these days.

Or: post-Expendables 3, Lee has trouble dealing with how easy it apparently was for Barney to toss the team (mostly him) aside. Nobody at all is happy about this.

Notes

I'm way late to this party, but I'm also on an unstoppable Jason Statham kick, and now we have this. I don't have a problem, stop looking at me like that. Unbeta'd, as always, because I have no friends. Feel free to point out any blinding errors you run across.

See the end of the work for more notes.

The first time Lee called Barney by his last name outside of an op, he almost didn’t realize he’d done it.

It was only a few months after they’d killed Stonebanks, and they’d just finished one of the first few serious jobs they’d done as one big group of Expendables, old mixed with the new. The whole lot of them were climbing off the plane, unloading their gear, and thinking about heading home to try to catch some midday shut-eye. Lee was tired, too, and ready to get some goddamn uninterrupted sleep, so he wasn’t thinking too hard about what he said or how he said it, the way
he’d been doing so carefully for the last few months.

Instead, he’d just yawned and opened his big fat mouth, and out it came.

The kids didn’t catch it. The new additions to the Expendables didn’t know the rhythm and flow of the team just yet, so they didn’t know just how strange it was to hear Ross instead of Barney coming from Lee. Hell, most of the new set still called him Boss, or sometimes even Gramps, affectionately mocking or respectful in turns.

The old guard would never have missed it, but none of them except for Doc were close enough to hear, and Doc couldn’t give less of a shit about what came out of Lee’s mouth unless he could take it as an excuse to start a fight.

So, the only one who noticed was Barney, and by extension, Lee, because when Lee said, “Well, I’m heading out. Call me if you need me, Ross,” he hadn’t made it halfway through turning to walk out of the hangar before Barney had tripped over his own fucking feet and almost fallen over.

Lee spun back around, only barely keeping his jaw from dropping, because what the actual fuck. “You doing all right there?” he said, raising an eyebrow and doing a quick sweeping head-to-toe check over every inch of Barney he could see, because the overdramatic bastard was a lot of things, but clumsy wasn’t one of them.

Barney didn’t look injured, though. He looked—something, that was for sure, eyes wide and face pale, but he wasn’t guarding himself anywhere and there wasn’t any blood Lee could see. “Yeah, yeah, fine,” he said eventually, a few seconds too late. “Just—what’d you say?”

“Your hearing going, old man?” Lee said, amused, and then, about to open his mouth to repeat himself, he realized what he’d done. Luckily, his own surprise wasn’t enough to keep him from doubling down, running his mouth, and pretending nothing was wrong for all he was worth. “I said I’m going. Call when the next job’s lined up.”

“Aw, Christmas,” said Thorn, peeking out from around the edge of his locker, thankfully butting in before Barney could flounder his way through whatever confusion was twisting along the lines of his face. “Leaving so soon? Come on, Mr. Grouchy, we’re all going out tonight! Don’t be a stick in the mud!”

“Go ahead and drink mine for me,” Lee said, waving him off. He didn’t hurry to the exit, because no matter what he’d just done, the can of worms he’d just opened, he didn’t need anyone thinking he was running away. He also didn’t dawdle, because sooner or later Barney was going to get past that minute of blind confusion, and Lee had no idea what he’d do after that and absolutely no desire to find out. “You’re young enough, your liver can probably take it.”

And he escaped out into the sunshine before anyone could say anything else.

* * *

Thinking about it, that was probably Barney’s first clue that things were not going as smoothly as he’d thought.

Since things had been festering a good long while, for all that time since Barney had taken his righteous mission of revenge to Stonebanks’s front door, this was positive proof that Barney was a demented, emotionally-stunted idiot.

Since Lee had been desperately pretending to everyone, even to himself, that everything was just
fine, he didn’t really have room to judge. He was an idiot, too.

He called Barney by his last name three more times before the month was out.

* * *

Lee Christmas trusted Barney Ross with his life—always had, always would.

That part was easy. Barney wanted them alive, and safe, and he would do anything to keep them that way. Barney would send his people away and run with a team of reckless green kids, a bunch of untested strangers, rather than bring his battle-hardened, familiar maniacs with him on a suicide mission. Maybe those same kids were his now. Expendables in every way and therefore more precious to Barney than his own life or any amount of money, but that didn’t change the fact that he’d picked them in the first place because he’d gone into that fight expecting to die. He’d wanted to bring along a group not so firmly anchored together that they’d all go down with him. That they hadn’t actually died didn’t mean the intent wasn’t there.

If he let them, then the original team would follow Barney on a suicide mission. And they’d go down with him, too, because that was what they did—lived and fought and fucking well died together, if it came down to that. But instead, when Stonebanks came back, Barney did everything he could, all kinds of reckless, stupid shit, to keep the old guard out of it. To keep Lee out of it.

It had always been meant to keep his people alive, and Lee never questioned that.

It was the other side of it that Lee was having trouble with, these days.

He honestly wished he could let it go. Barney didn’t want them dead: all well and good. It was just—the way Barney had gone about it went against everything Lee had thought he’d understood. Barney was in charge, sure, but it’d been years and years since Barney had felt like his boss and nothing more, and Lee guessed the rest of the old guard would agree. That Barney really thought he could get rid of them all, fire them, like they were office drones who hadn’t been turning in their proper paperwork, was—technically, legally correct, yeah. It was also fucking infuriating, and demeaning as all hell. They were Expendables, all of them. They’d sworn it in sweat and blood and ink.

And Barney thought he could just—hand them a pink slip? Send them on their merry way? They weren’t some loose collection of colleagues, forced together by money and circumstances. They were friends, more or less, most days, except the whole lot of them were fucked-up lunatics of the highest order, and actually on second thought Lee didn’t actually like them most of the time. No, they weren’t friends. They were family, closer than blood, better than any water-thin ties he’d ever had to his family at birth. Who cared if he liked them? Who cared if they liked him? They were a team. That was everything.

Lee had gone years of his life thinking that was a truth they all understood. Barney—the demented old bastard, the fixed cornerstone of the Expendables and the anchor that kept Lee from getting swept away by the shit in his own head—had never given him a reason to doubt that before.

Now he had.

Barney was his best friend—or Barney had been his best friend. Those two words were too damn small for what they meant. Barney was, had been, familiar and trusted and safe, always safe, the only goddamn person in the world that Lee let close to him like that anywhere, let alone the everywhere that Lee had given Barney. There was no part of him he wouldn’t have handed over to Barney, nothing he’d have kept back.
Barney had also stood there with Lee in the street, let Lee beg and put that friendship and faith out there on the line, and then still thrown it all away like it was nothing. He’d thrown Lee away, and he’d made it look easy.

Maybe he’d meant it; maybe he hadn’t. He probably hadn’t. Lee didn’t actually care. If Barney could have it all laid out in front of him like that and still brush it aside, then either way it clearly didn’t mean as much to him as it did to Lee.

* * *

“Trust,” Barney said out of the blue late one night. The plane was flying steady, making good time, and the squad seemed to have finally dropped off—it was quiet in the back, except for a few nonsense off-and-on mumbles from Galgo, who couldn’t shut his damn mouth even in his sleep.

“Hm? What’s that?” Lee said absently. He’d been halfway to nodding off himself; he had to pick his head up off the headrest and blink his eyes back to full focus.

“That’s it, isn’t it?” Barney said. When Lee turned to look over at him, he was staring intently off into the big black nothing out the front windscreen, his eyes fixed and blank. “That’s what’s wrong. You don’t trust me.”

Lee shook his head immediately. “Trust you with my life,” he said, without having to think about it. It was only the truth. “Always.”

“With your life, sure,” Barney said. His eyes, his head, his expression didn’t move, almost frozen in place. “But not with you.”

Lee couldn’t help it—he hesitated. It was as good as agreement and they both knew it.

“Lee,” Barney said, with a quiet agony that wouldn’t have seemed out of place if Lee had pulled out a knife and gutted him, instead. His knuckles had gone white where he was gripping onto the airplane’s yoke.

“Leave it,” Lee said, dropping his head back on the headrest with a sigh. He was too damn tired to deal with this. “It’s done.” And anyway, it wasn’t like it was anything Barney couldn’t bear to lose.

Barney didn’t say a word the whole rest of the flight, to Lee or to anyone else.

* * *

But Lee still sat in the copilot’s seat of the plane.

It was his place, it had been for years, and he wasn’t giving that up. Maybe that place wasn’t exactly what he’d thought, maybe it didn’t mean what he’d thought, but that didn’t change the objective facts of it. He sat in the copilot’s seat. He got shotgun in the car, when it wasn’t the sort of crazy explosion-filled action sequence where Barney had to admit Lee was the better driver and let him take the wheel. Barney always went in first, guns blazing, but Lee was always right behind, covering his blind spots, his weak points.

They still worked like a well-oiled machine. In the field, they could read each other’s minds. But when the job was done, when they weren’t hip-to-hip and ankle-deep in blood and sweat and shit, they didn’t fall back into that easy, lazy orbit. Lee didn’t—he didn’t like it. He didn’t want it. But he also couldn’t bring himself to take that extra step to put himself at Barney’s shoulder, to find him across a crowded bar, to plant himself a half-step too close at Barney’s right side.
If Barney reached out, he reached back. If Barney started the joke, Lee finished it. That was instinct and muscle-memory, and he couldn’t have shaken that if he tried. But he could hold himself back from starting it, from reaching out first, from putting himself in reach. He could sit next to Gunnar or Toll or even fucking Doc by the sticky-topped table when there was an open stool at the bar at Barney’s side. He could take the long way around to bother Smilee and Thorn on the way to the plane when the straight path would have taken him by Barney’s locker, instead. He could go straight to whatever scumbag motel he was staying in that week instead of going to the usual post-mission drink and decompress; he could visit Tool’s shop only when he knew Barney was elsewhere; and he could wait to go back to the hangar until the call came in for the next op, the next job.

He could ignore it when he instinctively looked to his left to share a joke, a wry look, a snarky comment, and came face to face with open air instead—even if he kept catching himself at it, again and again. Old dogs could learn new tricks, eventually. Probably. Maybe.

And he could keep himself from checking to see if Barney was the same—to find out if Barney was looking, too. If he’d even noticed the lack.

* * *

“You trying to punish him?” Gunnar said, lifting too-bright eyes up from the gun he was stripping down and scrubbing clean so he could stare at Lee.

Lee didn’t bother to pretend he didn’t know what Gunnar meant. Barney had been doing a lot of staring lately, brooding and moping around and avoiding everybody, but especially Lee, and usually it was Lee’s job to deal with that, to poke and prod at him until the moron coughed up whatever it was that was eating at him. At least then they could fix the issue and move on. Of course, this time Lee was pretty sure he already knew what the problem was, and he was one-hundred-fucking-percent certain he didn’t know how to fix it. “No,” he told Gunnar truthfully. It wasn’t meant to be a punishment.

It was a side effect.

But Gunnar ignored him, like always. “You’re doing a good job at it, if you are,” he said, no real judgment in his tone, and then dropped his eyes back to his guns.

* * *

“Ever wonder how the infants knew to leave shotgun seat to you?” Caesar said, quiet enough that Barney might not be able to hear from where he was leaned up against the far wall of their safehouse, somewhere in Honduras. Gunnar and Smilee had distracted Galgo and the kids by arm wrestling around the fire pit they’d built in the abandoned wreck of the old building, and the whole mess of it—shouting, making and taking bets, yelling out threats and encouragements alike—was making enough noise to wake the dead, let alone cover one trying-too-hard-to-be-subtle conversation. Caesar and Toll were better at fire and brimstone than at stealth, and better at firefight than at interventions or psychology, but that didn’t stop them from trying.

Still, since they’d gone to so much effort, Lee paused and thought it over. “No,” he said finally. Nobody’d ever discussed it in his hearing, but at the same time, he’d never had to bring it up himself—the newbies had sorted themselves out elsewhere, and left Lee’s place alone.

“Galgo told them,” Caesar said, with meaning.

Lee squinted over at him. “So?”
Caesar sighed, rolling his eyes and turning to Toll, his hands gesturing over like he was handing over the conversation like a baton in a marathon.

“So,” Toll said, “how’d Galgo know?”

“Who cares?” Lee pointed out, reasonably. Galgo’s oddities were best ignored, in his experience.

Toll sighed, disappointed in him. “You should, moron. Think about it. By the time we all got onboard that day to snuff Stonebanks, your seat was free, wasn’t it? Can’t imagine Galgo was happy to sit alone in the hold and talk to the empty air when there was a perfectly good chair right next to Barney.”

“Easier to talk his ear off up there, probably,” Caesar agreed.

“But you got on the plane,” Toll said, “and you got your special seat, you special snowflake. Had to be Barney that told him to shove it, and why.”

“And nobody’s brought it up since,” Caesar added cheerfully. “So, I’d bet he did it firmly. Convincingly. You know?”

“Alright,” Lee said slowly, not sure what that was supposed to mean. By that point in the whole Stonebanks shitstorm, they’d already bullied their way past Barney’s stubborn arse onto the plane and onto the mission, too; Lee would have happily bullied himself back into his damn chair if Barney hadn’t made it easier on everyone and cleared it for him. “Sure.”

“Well?” Toll said, impatient, when Lee didn’t immediately jump up and do—something. Whatever he’d been expecting.

“Well, what?” Lee shot back with a scowl.

“Go on, then,” Caesar tried, waving his hands like Lee was a wild animal he was trying to shoo. “Doesn’t that change things?”

“Not really,” Lee said, and ignored them after that no matter how much they tried to irritate him into saying more.

* * *

“You want out, Christmas?”

The hanger was empty except for the two of them, not so much a coincidence as something Barney had to have planned out in advance.

It wasn’t a bad move on Barney’s part, because if the rest of this conversation went the same way it was starting, Lee was going to make a serious attempt at killing him, and that might scare the children. “Do I what?”

Barney was sitting with his elbows on his knees, his hands folded together and dropped low. He looked back at Lee steadily, his face wiped totally clean of emotion, no sign at all what he was thinking—if he was thinking at all, because what had just come out of his mouth was crazy. “You heard me. If we’re not good here, then I’d rather hear it straight out. You want out?”

“Do I want—do I want out?” Lee spluttered. His voice got louder with every word. “Do I—what the actual fuck? Do you think I got this tattoo for a laugh?” He felt his hand fly up to cover where the skull and raven Expendables tattoo was hidden under his shirt, and had to drag it back down. “I
“sold my life and my soul to—to this team years ago,” he spat out, and only barely stopped himself from saying to you instead. “And you damn well know that. There’s no getting out, unless you’re thinking about getting rid of me.” He narrowed his eyes at Barney, let his voice go just as suspicious as he felt and didn’t let up when Barney started to squirm. “That what this is, Barney? You trying to tell me something?”

“No! No,” Barney said, blank expression cracking as he threw up his hands, palms out. “Just—making sure that we’re—that you’re where you want to be.”

“Well, if I fucking wanted out, I’d be long gone.” Lee rolled his eyes, folded his arms, and bared his teeth. “What about you, Barney? Are you sure? Not giving me the boot?” He drew the pause out a spiteful second too long. “Again?”

Barney looked horrified, eyes wide, and Lee felt a sick sense of satisfaction in that, somewhere between viciously pleased that Barney could feel the horror in what he’d done to them and guilty for pushing Barney far enough to show that on his face. “The opposite of that, pretty much.” He still had his hands raised; maybe he was expecting Lee would try to hit him.

“Then I don’t want to hear it, you demented old bastard,” Lee snapped at him, taking a full step back instead, well out of range for any hits. “Say the word, and I’m gone. Otherwise, you’re damn well stuck with me, all the way ‘til the end. Get it?”

Lee would have figured that was obvious, but Barney stared at him for a full five seconds like Lee had just told him something unexpected, eyes jumping around Lee’s face like he could read Lee’s thoughts out from under his skin that way. “Oh,” he said finally, a quiet, confused noise. “Get it?” Lee repeated, loud and pissed off, because that wasn’t an answer.

“Yeah, alright,” Barney said slowly, still staring. He lowered his hands. “I get it.”

* * *

Barney didn’t try to bring it up again, so maybe he did.

* * *

The crazy death cultists they were fighting had set up goddamn bombs in the secure room of their concrete and steel bunker.

Lee found one of them by accident, after a screaming cultist managed to kick him in the gut and knock him backwards over a table—the thing was stuck to a low half-wall down near the floor, dull black numbers counting down from thirty seconds.

Thank fuck, Barney was already by the door. “Time to go!” Lee shouted at him, not bothering with the radio, and ran for it. “Get out, get out!”

He only made it halfway back before he was swarmed. Barney, keeping the steel-reinforced exit clear from just outside, tried to open a path, but there was too much shit in between them, and now Lee could see the security system on the computer. The countdown for detonation was hitting the final fifteen seconds. No way Lee was getting to the door in fifteen seconds, and no way he’d figure out a convenient off switch for the bombs in that time, either.

He could see the big green button that sealed the bunker door.

That’d have to be good enough. He ducked under the wild swing of a club, dodged a kick, and
leapt for the security panel, slamming a hand down on the button as soon as he could reach. The
doors swung shut immediately, faster than he could have hoped, fast enough that Barney didn’t have
time to react or try to run inside before it closed in his goddamn stupid self-sacrificial face. Lee
wasn’t getting out of this room, but he wasn’t taking Barney down with him.

His radio squawked in his ear. “Lee, what the hell—”

With five seconds left on the countdown, the lights overhead switched to red. The security desk
was reinforced metal, and the cultists had all paused in their attack to stare up at the red lights
overhead and chant something Latin-sounding with creepy intensity. Lee threw himself up and
over the desktop, and then dropped and rolled into the cut-out underneath where a chair should
have gone, hoping at for at least a little cover from whatever was about to happen.

Wishful thinking, really. The explosions rattled cracks into concrete walls, and threw both Lee and
the desk halfway across the room.

Flash-blind and unable to hear past the ringing in his ears, Lee barely had his shit together enough
to know he was lying on his back, limbs splayed and jerking like a landed fish, gasping for air.
There was concrete dust heavy in the air, in his mouth. He’d have stayed like that forever, or at
least until he figured out which way was up, except after what could have been seconds or maybe
hours there were hands grabbing at him, sudden and shocking, when at last look there’d been
nobody nearby but nutcase cultists with a tendency toward ritual maiming. He went for a knife—
even deaf and blind and with his brains rattled halfway out his ears he could always get his hands
on his knives—but the hands stopped him, firm and unshakeable where they’d locked around his
wrists, and when he tried to buck up, tried to eel out of that grasp, he couldn’t manage it.

Seemed like a good time as any to start panicking, except—without letting go, one of those steady,
solid hands was tracing something onto his arm with broad strokes of a thumb, something that felt
like—like letters—

L-E-E. L-E-E.

Lee blinked hard a couple times, and his vision finally went from sunspot-blind to murky, blurry,
but still fucking sight. And maybe he still couldn’t exactly make out any of the features, but now
he recognized the shape, the weight that’d dropped itself over his thrashing legs, the callouses on
the hands around his wrists. “Barney,” he gasped, relieved, and let himself go limp.

If the dim, backlit blob overhead said anything in response, Lee couldn’t hear it. Even his own
voice was swallowed up in the roaring white-noise nothing in his ears.

“Can’t hear anything,” he said, just in case Barney couldn’t tell. He had no idea how loud or how
quiet it was, whether he was whispering or screaming. “Shit. Barney. Barney, I can’t fucking
hear anything—”

O-K, the thumb traced on his wrist. O-K. G-O-T-Y-O-U.

Lee breathed, in and out, got his shit together, and nodded. The hands shifted from a grapple to a
clasp, and Lee got with the picture, pulled his legs under him, and let Barney drag him upright.
Something pulled sharply in his side, like a stitch from running too long, and that was just about
par for the course. He felt like he’d been walloped in the chest or maybe stepped on by an
elephant. He breathed through it and forced himself to stay standing once Barney got him there.

H-O-L-D-O-N, that thumb spelled out, and then Barney dragged Lee’s left hand to Barney’s right
shoulder and dropped it there.
Lee got the picture quick enough and latched on.

And they moved like that—with Lee clinging to Barney’s shoulder and stumbling alongside him easily enough despite the ever-present stitch in his side—all the way back to the plane. If Lee kept himself a half-step back and to the side, then Barney was still clear to shoot at anything in their way, and Lee was familiar enough with Barney and the way he moved to keep right with him, every step and turn and jump of it. The shift and tension in the shoulder under his hand was enough to steer him along, to the point where he could keep his own head on a swivel, strain his damaged eyes to look for anything coming up in their blind spots. He even managed to knife one or two that popped up closer to his reach than to the barrels of Barney’s guns.

His hearing eventually started to creep back—just on one side, patchy and distant and cut through with an annoying deep-pitched buzzing that was going to drive him crazy sooner or later, but it was something. Chances were good that he hadn’t just permanently deafened himself.

“Got hearing on my left,” Lee told Barney as they climbed up into the plane, figuring that was something he’d want to know.

“Shit, Christmas, you goddamn idiot. You lucky fucking bastard,” Barney said, swearing with fervent intensity, and since Lee could actually hear it, he had to admit he agreed. Thank fucking Christ.

“Fuck. Yeah.” Lee stumbled his way up toward the front of the plane, still just behind Barney’s right shoulder, and agreed with a nod when Barney came to a stop outside the cockpit itself with a questioning look—he was a hot fucking mess, no need to drag that into the cockpit unless they needed to.

“You good?” Barney said, giving him a quick glance over, though in the dim lighting, with Lee all in black-gone-grey with concrete dust, there was no way Barney could see much.

“Seeing spots and my hearing is shit,” Lee told him, breathing heavily. “The rest is nothing. Scrapes and bruises.” He still took Barney’s help when it was offered, lowering him down to the floor so he could sit propped against the wall.

“Catch your breath, then,” Barney told him over his shoulder as he straightened up and turned away, tossing the drives they’d managed to pick up into a bag and heading back into the cargo hold to get them locked up and stored. “We’ll get Doc to look you over when he makes it back.”

“Joy,” Lee managed, breathless and wry, and even mustered up a grin when Barney chuckled before he disappeared into the hold. “The bastard’ll feel useful, for once.”

Lee gave himself a second to sigh and drop his head once Barney was out of sight, tired and rattled as all hell, and then he shook himself into some kind of shape. No good napping while they were still technically on the job. He pushed up off the wall a bit so he could strip off his jacket, caked in concrete and dust and fuck-knew-what, yanking it off and away—

The stitch in his side flared up into sudden pain, white-hot and sharp. Lee gasped and his arms went out from under him, dropping him against the wall with a clang, and he couldn’t help the way he slid down, landing flat on his back on the crosshatch metal floor. His vision spotted out again, and he had to blink those spots away so he could look down at whatever the hell he’d done to himself.

All the noise got Barney’s attention, and he came clattering out of the hold, took one look at Lee leaking all over his plane, and just flat-out froze.
Barney stared. Lee stared. That was—a surprising amount of blood, actually, for something that—
compared to how it looked—didn’t hurt all that badly. Maybe even a frightening amount of blood.

A twisted chunk of metal, maybe two inches wide, was sticking out of him. It had clearly gone
straight through his clothes and body armor. His shirt and the waist of his pants were already
soaked just from the walk over—what he’d thought was sweat left his fingertips red when he
touched the wet patches on his clothes.

Yanking off his jacket had yanked the metal partway out along with it—a good inch or so had
come loose, with more left inside. And flopping on the floor had let the metal start slowly sinking
back down, hopefully into the hole it had already made, and not tearing out a new one as it went.

“Huh,” Lee said. Slowly, stupidly, he balled up his now-loose jacket and considered the best way
to apply pressure without jamming the damn metal shard farther inside himself. “That’s not
good.”

Lucky for Lee, Barney had his shit together. Or, at least, he wasn’t rattled half to pieces and
bleeding out the way Lee was. Lee’s voice startled him out of his freeze, and he came striding
over, pulled the jacket from Lee’s loose grasp, wrapped it around the wound, and managed to keep
the shrapnel steady while putting pressure on the leaky bloody faucet that had sprung up around it.
He fumbled a hand up to his radio. “Shit, Christmas. Why the fuck did you say you were fine
—Doc! Get your ass back to the plane, now! Goddamn it, you stupid stubborn asshole, you
walked all the way here like this? Why the hell wouldn’t you say something?” Barney sounded
more frantic than pissed off, but he was definitely that, too.

“Didn’t notice,” Lee told him, staring in morbid fascination down at where his jacket was hiding
the glint of dull silver washed out under slick wet red. He had definitely made it worse—there was
more blood now, soaking his jacket and streaking up Barney’s hands. “Ow,” he added, even
though he still wasn’t feeling it fully. He just felt—distant, mostly. Numb. A little cold.

That probably wasn’t a good thing. He closed his eyes so he didn’t have to look at it. Out of sight,
out of mind.

“No, don’t do that. Christmas, look at me. Look at me. Lee,” Barney said, voice leaning toward
full-on scared. That wasn’t right. Barney shouldn’t sound like that, not ever. He dragged his eyes
open again so he could do what Barney wanted, but they didn’t want to stay that way. “Goddamn
it, focus. I need you to stay awake, okay?”

Lee forced himself to nod. Actually, his chin just sort of—dipped down, and he didn’t have the
energy to pull it back up again.

“Lee, come on. Stay awake. If you fucking die on me, I swear I’ll fucking drag you back to life
and kill you myself. Do you hear me? If you die, I’m going after you, and I’ll kick your ass up
and down Hell itself if I have to. Stay with me.”

Stay? That was all Lee had ever tried to do, no matter how much Barney pushed him away.

“Not going anywhere,” Lee mumbled, and then he passed out.

* * *

Lee swam slowly back to consciousness with hard metal at his back, something soft under his
head, and his legs propped up on the gear box usually strapped down in the cockpit. His side
ached and throbbed, more painful than it had been before he’d blacked out, but still less than he
expected, this time with the blurry distance that came from the good drugs they kept stocked in the emergency field kits.

“Good morning, sunshine,” Doc said, annoyedly chipper, before Lee had even fully dragged his eyes open to blink up at him. “Welcome back to the world of the living. You dumbass.”

“Your tender concern is real touching,” Lee told him, tongue twisting in his mouth but still mostly understandable. Success. “Arsehole.”

“I don’t want to hear it,” Doc said. He leaned down and started flashing a too-fucking-bright penlight directly into Lee’s eyes, possibly to check Lee’s pupils, or maybe just because he was a shithead with a terrible sense of humor. “Idiots who make me deal with stab wounds in the back of a plane in the middle of fucking nowhere don’t get the VIP treatment. You’re lucky you and Barney share a blood type, or we wouldn’t even be having this conversation.”

Lee raised his head a bare inch so he could eye the mess of tubing Doc had apparently jury-rigged, used, and discarded while Lee was out cold—and, yeah, it looked like a real biohazard. Nasty. He let his head drop back down with a grimace. “Shit.” Something felt off, and it only took a second to look around and figure out what the problem was. “Wait. Where’d Barney go?”

Lee expected him to say that Barney was in the cargo hold or right outside, just out of sight. “Went to join Caesar and the backup team, since I had to ditch to save your sorry ass,” Doc told him instead. “Not that they need it, the way things were going when I left. But what do I know?”

It took Lee a second to process that, and he felt it like a kick to his already-tender stomach. “But—” he started to say, confused, and then physically bit his own tongue to shut himself up. He was the one who’d been pushing for distance, wasn’t he? He didn’t get to have it both ways. Barney didn’t have to hang around for no reason, even if he would have before, even if Lee—irritably, reluctantly—wished he had.

“Yeah,” Doc said. “I know. It was weird as hell, the way he went running off the minute we were sure you’d pull through. Seemed to think it would be better if he disappeared before you came to. Can’t imagine why. The old guard sounded pretty damn surprised to hear he could drag himself away—and I always figured you two for the codependent type, even with this little lover’s spat you’ve got going on.”

Lee stared blankly at him. That was a lot to process on the good drugs. “What the actual fuck.”

“Yeah,” Doc said again, this time with pointed emphasis, and nodded like Lee had confirmed whatever the hell he was thinking. “The two of you are quite the pair, huh? Both the same kind of idiots.”

* * *

Lee figured he was justified in ignoring most of that conversation once the drugs wore off.

* * *

The bar was dim-lit and just on the wrong side of too warm, but it was lowkey, the alcohol was cheap, and the tables and floor were decently clean, so it was exactly the sort of place where the whole baker’s dozen of the Expendables could relax on a night off.

Lee hadn’t planned on coming. He wouldn’t have, if Toll and Caesar hadn’t conspired with Tool to hunt him down and drag him along by his ankles. As much as he hadn’t wanted to come, now that he was there, he was actually enjoying himself. Avoiding Barney came with its costs, mostly
in how he had to avoid all the others just to get away with it. Reluctantly, he’d admit he’d missed their stupid antics, even their obnoxious drunken ones.

Tucked in the back of a rounded corner booth, with Thorn and Mars on one side and a stretch of open space on the other, he could see the whole room, everyone in it, and all the entrances and exits. He was on his fourth beer of the night and feeling good, enough to smirk along as Thorn showed Mars just how easy it was to use AirDrop on an iPhone to fuck with strangers. Every once in a while, from across the bar, some hapless moron would shout or swear as something popped up on their phone screen, and Thorn and Mars would start giggling.

Lee let his eyes drift, counting off his people.

Thorn and Mars were at his table, obviously. Not far off, Luna was arm-wrestling with Caesar, maybe even winning, while Galgo leaned over Caesar’s shoulder and chattered at them both. Gunnar and Doc were bickering with Yang and Trench up by the bar—Lee wasn’t sure when Trench and Yang had gotten there, but they counted as Expendables, more or less. At a hightop table in the corner, Smilee had his jaw propped on his fist, leaning in to nod along with whatever Tool was telling him.

And that just left Toll and Barney, who were—coming right up alongside Lee’s table, actually, Barney’s arm draped over Toll’s shoulder. “Incoming,” Toll announced cheerfully, and slung Barney into the empty side of the booth.

Barney had to be drunker than usual; he let Toll do it, and the motion almost tipped him right over. Lee had to quickly shove himself partway around the rounded booth and throw out a hand just to keep him from falling. “Whoops,” Barney said, half-laughing, and then tipped his head around to smile at Lee, small but still warm. “Hey, there, Christmas.”

Lee settled back into his seat, but he kept his arm resting up on the seatback, his hand pressed against Barney’s shoulder. He wasn’t sure Barney wouldn’t tip over without the support. “Having fun?” he said, and couldn’t help smiling back.

Barney’s whole face went soft. “Could be better.”

“Okay, time to go—somewhere else!” Toll said loudly, choosing that moment to plunk his untouched beer down on the table in front of Lee, grab Mars and Thorn, and drag them away to play pool on the other side of the bar, ignoring Thorn’s protests and the way Mars kept throwing around knowing looks.

Yeah. Not subtle, that lot.

“Lee,” Barney said softly, and Lee looked back over at him instead of watching Toll pull the others around by the collars of their shirts. “Are we ever going to talk about this?”

Lee blinked, startled. Barney looked pointedly down at Lee’s hand on his shoulder, which suddenly looked and felt less like a support and more like Lee was holding Barney a literal arm’s distance away. He twitched his hand off Barney’s shoulder, settled it on the seat back instead. Pulling it all the way back in would have felt too defensive. Instead, Lee used his other hand to pick up the beer Toll had left behind and slam half of it back in one go. “You want to talk about it?” he finally said, setting the glass down on the table with a solid thunk. If he sounded skeptical, he figured that was only fair.

There was a silence, stretching out, and Lee shrugged, taking that as a no. They’d never really been the talkative sort, him and Barney, even when they’d been talking more than this.
Except maybe Barney was just gathering his thoughts, because he sucked in a breath and shifted closer, and then closer still, close enough that Lee’s arm on the seat back was basically draped around his shoulders. Lee stiffened—Barney froze—and then Lee, buzzed and masochistic, consciously thought *aw, fuck it* and relaxed. Let him do it.

Even drunk, Barney wasn’t stupid. He knew permission when he got it. “I hurt you,” he said quietly, close enough that only Lee could hear. He slowly leaned into Lee’s space, tipping himself nearer, tucking himself under Lee’s arm—waiting to be rejected, to cross whatever lines Lee had drawn and get shoved off. There was a line, Lee thought, a little desperately. There had to be, even if he couldn’t say where it was or should be. Another few inches, and their cheeks would be brushing against each other. Surely it was somewhere. “I didn’t want that.”

“I know,” Lee said, equally quiet. “You just wanted me gone.”

“Wanted you alive,” Barney shot back, a moment of intensity making it through the comfortable fog of alcohol. For a second his eyes were razor sharp—and then he settled, gentled again. “That’s what mattered. Even if you hated me. And now, you’re alive, you’re—you stayed, you’re still here. I can live with that. Even if you—”

*Even if you hate me.*

Lee sucked in a breath, held it, let it out slowly. It was hard not to let on how much that hurt, and if he’d had any less to drink maybe he’d have gone tense, but the buzz was keeping him calm. “You’re too drunk for this, old man,” he said. And then, stupidly gentle, he added, “I don’t hate you. I could never hate you.”

There was a minute of silence, almost comfortable.

Barney broke it first. “You ever going to forgive me?”

Lee side-eyed him. “You actually sorry you did it?”

“…no.”

“Guess we’ll never find out, then.”

“Fuck.” Despite that, though, Barney didn’t pull away, still tucked under Lee’s arm, and Lee didn’t make him move or move himself. Instead, his hand slipped, not quite an accident, enough that his fingers could curl in the fabric of Barney’s thin black t-shirt, almost close enough to Barney’s heart to feel it beat. Barney shifted, millimeter by slow millimeter, until the whole long line of his leg was pressed against Lee’s own. Neither of them said another word.

They stayed like that the rest of the night, silently leaning into each other, until the bar closed. Nobody bothered them. And then, without another word, Lee peeled himself away, poured himself into a cab, and went back to his latest motel, alone.

Skinning himself with one of his own knives might have hurt more. Then again, it might not.

* * *

Lee always knew they’d have it out someday, one way or the other. This careful distance he’d made couldn’t last forever. Fuck, he wished it could. As much as he hated it, he was pretty sure what he’d be left with on the other side of that argument would be worse.

But it was looking like that day was today, with another job gone wrong. Another chance for
Barney—stupid, stubborn bastard—to try to leave the team behind while he ran off on another
goddamn suicide mission.

Lee wasn’t fucking having it.

Since it wasn’t Stonebanks, this time, he might have a chance at getting through. Lee could almost
convince himself there was nothing else to lose by trying. “No way in hell,” he said, calmly at
first, and when that didn’t do it, he said it again, louder. And again, louder still.

He argued. He bargained. And when that failed—when Barney motherfucking Ross coolly and
calmly insisted that he was getting on his damn plane alone and going off to die by himself—Lee
jumped right past blind killing rage and went straight for the throat.

He clawed open his chest and told the truth.

“Okay,” he said, stepping right up into the man’s personal space and jabbing a finger into his
shoulder. “Let me lay this out for you, nice and simple, since you seem to be having trouble with
higher-level thinking shit just now—”

Barney rolled his eyes. “Christmas,” he said, exasperated.

“Shut your fucking mouth, Ross,” Lee said pleasantly. “When I’m done, you can do whatever the
hell you want to do—I won’t stop you. But you’re going to listen first.”

“Yeah?” Barney said, suspicious. “That doesn’t sound like you.”

“Well, clearly you don’t know me all that well,” Lee snapped back, and if he was anybody else,
maybe he would have missed the way Barney’s eyes went tight at the corners, almost a flinch.
“I’ve never tried to take those choices away from you. Always seems to be the other way around,
huh? That sound about right?”

Barney drew back, but not so far that he actually stepped away. “Whoa. That’s not—”

“No, nope, nu-uh. Shut up. It’s my turn to talk now,” Lee said sharply. “Here’s what’s going to
happen. If you go and, by some kind of miracle, you come back alive, then—shit. We both know
I’ll come crawling back. Just don’t expect me to forgive you for it. But if you go and you die on
me...first, me and the boys will go out and destroy whoever actually managed to take you down.
Tear them into bloody fucking pieces, whatever it takes, see if we can’t manage together what you
couldn’t do on your own as one last fuck you, I told you so. And then—and then—”

He sucked in a couple of quick breaths, resisting the urge to grab Barney by the shoulders and just
shake him. He’d thought he’d cut out the tiny part of himself that had expected better, that maybe
Barney would learn something from last time, but that was a stupid fucking thought on both ends.
Barney hadn’t learned shit, and it seemed Lee hadn’t either.

Nothing to do but keep pushing, and see if he could get anything through Barney’s thick, dumb
skull. “And then,” he managed, dragging the words up from where they’d been digging away at
his gut, “if I survive that, I’m crawling straight back into the bar and the bottle you dragged me out
of all those years ago and I’m never coming back out.” He leaned in even closer, jabbed his finger
into Barney’s chest again as he glared into those stupid stunned eyes. “Maybe, if I’m lucky, one
day I’ll start a fight while I’m too sloshed to see straight and some redneck piece of shit will beat
me to death. Finally put me out of my misery.”

Barney’s whole attitude screamed denial. He finally pushed back against Lee’s hand and opened
his mouth. “Christ, Lee—”
“No!” Lee snapped, cutting him off. “Shut up. This is not a debate.” He reached out and yanked one of Barney’s guns out of its holster, and even though Lee was right in his face and clearly pissed off, Barney let him do it. He forced it into Barney’s hand, waited for muscle memory to curl those fingers into a solid grip. And then he yanked at Barney’s wrist, raised Barney’s aim to head-height, and forced that suddenly tense arm to stay in place while he jerked forward to lean his own head against the front of the barrel. It took every bit of his strength to hold Barney there, but he managed. “You take me with you, idiot, and maybe you and I have a chance at dragging each other out of the shit. Maybe we both die,” and here he had to raise his voice, tighten his grip, because Barney was really struggling now. “Or maybe, with someone there to watch your back, we both survive. You demented self-sacrificing bastard.”

“What the hell are you playing at, Christmas?” Barney spat out, ignoring all that. “Let go!”

Lee ignored Barney in turn, just yanked harder at the arm he was holding, so the cold metal ring of the gun barrel dug into his forehead. “But if you—stop fucking fighting me and listen, Barney—if you really want to leave me here and run off to die by yourself in some blaze of glorious stupidity, then do me a fucking favor and shoot me yourself before you go. Think of it as a mercy killing.”

Barney stopped struggling so suddenly they both almost fell over, face gone bone-white and furious and coiled-up-threatening as a cornered rattlesnake. “No way in hell!” he snarled. He couldn’t get his hand off the gun or the gun off Lee’s face, but he could bend his fingers as far from the trigger as they could get and glare at Lee around the pistol between them. “You can’t—don’t say shit like that—”

Lee snarled back at him, all teeth and blinding, unshakeable certainty. “I told you, Barney, this isn’t a debate. It’s an ultimatum.” He twisted his head a little, so the gun barrel ground down and Barney had to feel it. “You tell me to leave and I’ll leave. I said it before, and I meant it. But don’t think for a single goddamn second that you’re saving my worthless arse if you do. I’m telling you now, it’s just a slower way to go. Might as well pull the trigger and be done with it.”

“Never.” The word was ice-cold and shattered around the edges.

Lee threw both hands up, letting Barney go in the process. “Then I guess you’d better take me along, you colossal tit—”

Barney snatched the gun away the instant he was released and fumbled it back into the holster. His eyes showed white all the way around. Without a word, he grabbed Lee by the shoulders and yanked him in, and anything else Lee was planning to say got swallowed down when his jaw crashed into Barney’s collarbone.

Barney’s voice was all gravel when he finally spoke, words tripping over themselves. “Shit. Fuck. Fucking hell, Lee. Fine—whatever you want, okay? Whatever. Just—not that. Don’t do that.”

If this was a hug, it was the weirdest and most desperate one Lee had ever seen. Barney was obviously shaking, clinging with both arms; Lee could feel Barney’s pulse, rabbit-fast, where his face was mashed into Barney’s chest.

Lee sighed and deflated, anger running out of him like he’d pulled the plug from a drain.

He wouldn’t have been himself if he hadn’t brought his arms up and hugged his mad idiot back, wrapping one arm around Barney’s waist and curling his other hand around the base of Barney’s neck. “Alright,” he said. He ran his thumb back and forth once on the thin skin of Barney’s throat, slow and soothing, and felt it full-body when Barney shuddered, clung tighter. “Alright, that’s
fine, then. We’re fine.”

Barney took a deep, gasping breath, maybe to say something—

Not far off, the hangar door opened with a bang. The others were showing up, despite Barney’s orders, just like Lee had known they would, like Barney had known they would, as much as he’d wished otherwise.

Barney pulled back with a physical step and with a mental one, face going blank and something closing off behind his eyes. He still left one hand on Lee’s shoulder, holding too tight to be casual. “You win,” he ground out, jaw working. “If you idiots want in, I won’t stop you. And then—if we don’t all die a horrible, bloody death—we’ll finish this.”

Lee nodded at him sharply, even as relief rushed through him, left him dizzy. He reeled himself in, too, forced himself back to a mindset more appropriate for a job. Somehow, it left him in a place to smile and to have it feel almost normal, the old normal, back when they were in perfect sync, the Barney-and-Lee show, partners in just about every sense of the word.

In every sense except the romantic, really, and Lee had done an excellent job of not thinking about that at all until just that moment—because it led to some very uncomfortable thoughts about what he needed from Barney versus what he wanted, and the distinction between those two explained a lot about why Barney kicking him to the curb felt more like he’d gotten his heart ripped out of his chest and then stomped on.

Well, there was a realization that could have come at a better time.

“Think about it this way,” he said, morbidly cheerful now. “If we do die a gruesome death, at least we won’t have to have any more chats about our feelings.”

It looked like it hurt, but Barney still smiled back—a real smile. His hand squeezed once, hard, on Lee’s shoulder, and then slipped away. “Silver linings,” he said, dry as dust, and turned to greet the arriving crowd.

* * *

The whole crazy lot of them, all the Expendables, went on the job despite Barney scowling and grousing the whole way. Of course they did. And, somehow, after all that—they all lived.

That was the thing Barney always forgot. All of them together could pull off crazy bloody stunts, things that would’ve been impossible on their own.

Maybe someday, their luck would change. But for now, they could do miracles.

* * *

“Caesar,” Lee said, pulling the man aside just before they all got back on the plane to fly home—all of them bruised and bloody, some with a broken bone or two, but somehow mostly whole. “I need a favor.”

Caesar eyed him over, and then looked up the plane steps toward where Barney had already disappeared into the cockpit. “Want some privacy, brother?”

“That obvious?” Lee said, not really surprised. The man was insightful when he wanted to be. “Yeah. Keep the rabble out, would you? Unless the plane’s falling out of the sky, I don’t want to hear it.”
“And you’d know that before we would, shoved in the back. You’ve got the only window.” Caesar grinned at him and then reached over to slap him on the back, hard enough that he stumbled. “Go get ‘im, tiger.”

Lee shuddered. “Never fucking say that again,” he said, but he still went.

* * *

Lee waited until the plane was in the air and firmly on course before he got up out of his seat.

“Going somewhere, Christmas?” Barney said, too strained to sound casual, as hard as he was trying.

“Hell, no.” Lee leaned out the cockpit doorway to give Caesar a pointed look, and then pulled back inside and shut the door. The door had a lock, even if Lee couldn’t remember anyone ever bothering to use it; he felt his lips twist as he considered it, and then he reached out and flipped it over, locking them in. He nodded once, firm, and then turned and went back to his chair. “We’ve got plenty of time ‘til we need to land,” he said as he sat down. “And the autopilot can handle things for a bit.”

Barney looked over at him, confused.

“You wanted to talk,” Lee reminded him, raising an eyebrow. “Now’s the time.”

Barney blew a breath out through his teeth. “Yeah,” he said. “Yeah, let’s do this.”

He still took a full minute too long to get the autopilot up and running, not that Lee minded all that much. They both needed the time to get things sorted in their heads. Better to start this conversation right.

Finally, Barney’s hands went still. He turned his head to the side to look at Lee, but kept his body pointed straight ahead at the window, leaving that little bit of defensive distance; Lee found himself doing the same. He nodded at Barney to let him know he could start them off.

“This isn’t working,” Barney said instantly. “This, what we’ve been doing the last few months? It’s not working, and it’s not going to work. We both know that.”

Every muscle in Lee’s body went tight with instinctive denial, but he bit down on his tongue hard before he could protest. It wasn’t actually untrue. “Yeah.”

“Thing is,” Barney continued, slower, “I definitely know when I fucked up. And I see where we’re running into issues. The part I’ve been stuck on, though, is—what the actual fuck you’re thinking.”

Lee felt his eye twitch just a little. “Rude,” he said, but it was a mild protest and they both knew it.

“Still true,” Barney said, rolling his shoulders in something that wasn’t quite a shrug. “None of the others have as big a problem with this shit as you, even if they’re pissed, too. And none of them are holding a grudge about it. So, I can’t help but think there’s something else to it—”

“Holding a grudge,” Lee repeated, cutting in, and then repeated it again, with rising irritation. “Holding a grudge? That’s what you think this is?”

“I don’t know, Lee,” Barney said, insistent. “That’s the whole damn point. Can’t you just—tell me what you want me to do? No more silent treatment, no more scare tactics. Tell me what you
want, and we can try to fix this damn thing between us, because—fuck. Because you’re my partner, okay? You’re my damn right hand. And we can’t keep going like this, and I can’t read your damn mind, so just tell me what you want.”

Well, shit.

What did Lee want? The answer wasn’t as straightforward as Barney wanted it to be, even in Lee’s own head. Needing versus wanting, Lee reminded himself. There was a difference between the things he could live with, the things he could live without, and the things he couldn’t. And when he thought about it that way, it was easy as breathing. “Aw, fuck it,” he said, deciding abruptly to go for honesty. What the fuck did he have left to lose? “I want a lot of shit, Barney. But what I need is for you to stop trying to get rid of me.”

Barney stared at him like he’d suddenly started speaking in tongues. “I have never,” he said, “not once, wanted you gone.”

Good to know, but not the point. “Hasn’t seemed to stop you,” Lee shot back. “Stonebanks. This fucking shithow. You’ve done everything short of tying us all up—tying me up and leaving me handcuffed in the back of the hangar to keep me away while you go gallivanting off on one of your little suicide runs.”

“I’m trying to save your damn life, Christmas,” Barney snapped. “You’ve always been more practical than me when it comes to this shit, anyway—what, you saying you don’t hate it when we go off mission specs?”

“We’re there to do a job, not fall for every sob story with a pretty face,” Lee said, falling easily into the rut of the old argument. And then he caught himself, and shook it away. “And that’s not the damn point. The point is, if you’re going, I’m going. You want to call me your—your right hand? Fine. But I don’t see you fucking cutting that off and leaving it behind.”

Barney’s face could have been stone. “I’m never going to be sorry for keeping your idiot ass out of the fire. No matter what it takes.” Even if you hate me, he didn’t say, but Lee guessed they both were remembering that drunken conversation.

Lee clenched his teeth. “I don’t need you to be sorry,” he shot back. He could want it all he liked, but that genuinely wasn’t important. Barney wouldn’t be himself if he regretted doing what he had to do to keep his people safe; Lee’s hurt feelings didn’t trump that and never would. I don’t hate you, Lee had said, and it was nothing but truth. I could never hate you. “But if you want to fix this—if you mean that, Barney, then I need you to swear you won’t do it anymore. I need—I need you to understand that this, this team, you—it’s the most important thing I’ve got, and I’m not letting you cheapen that every time you try to throw me away for my own good.”

If Barney couldn’t do that—if he couldn’t give Lee that much respect—then Lee would give up the ghost, as much as he could. He wouldn’t leave. He didn’t think he could. But he’d call Barney by his last name, even in his own head, and he’d stop meeting up at all outside of jobs, and he’d—he’d sit in the back of the fucking plane, with the rest of the Expendables. Galgo could have his chair. Fuck, the rest of the team would probably even appreciate the change.

“Lee, the usual shit we do is one thing,” Barney said. He was watching Lee closely, tracking the look on Lee’s face with the intensity he usually saved for shootouts. “That’s just the job. But the real crazy crap? When we all know it’s safer, saner, to walk away, but I need to keep pushing? I can’t just…drag you along with me. I can’t justify that.” He gritted his teeth. “But I’m not throwing you away, either. Never. Maybe I went too far, with Stonebanks. I said a lot of shit I didn’t mean, and that was—not good. Even if it worked.”
Lee straightened up sharply, seeing a chance. That wasn’t an apology and it wasn’t agreement, not by a long shot, but more importantly, it wasn’t a flat-out refusal. Honestly, that was more than Lee had expected. “Then offer me an out, if you have to,” he said urgently. “If you can’t justify just dragging me along, then you need to ask me. Don’t order me, don’t try and drive me off when you don’t like my answer. Ask.” Barney looked like he wanted to protest, and Lee raised a hand to hold him off. “You respect my judgment enough in the field to let me argue with you there, don’t you? And I’ve always let you know when I hit the end of my rope. So. Ask me. Let me decide.”

“That’s—” Barney struggled for a second, face twisting. Lee held his breath. “That’s probably fair.” He scowled, shifted in his seat. “I guess—if you let me have my stupid-ass decisions, I can’t stop you from making yours.”

Lee’s heart leapt up into his throat, but he forced it back down. Not quite there yet. “Swear,” he insisted, tense enough he thought he might snap. “Swear it and mean it, Barney.”

Barney stared Lee down, a muscle jumping in his clenched jaw. And then he shifted in his seat, turning toward Lee, and extended his clenched fist. “Okay,” he said, low and solemn. “Not going to lie, I fucking hate it. I already wish I could just knock you over the head and stuff you in a locker, keep you out of all the crazier shit, but—I’ll ask. And I won’t push you out again. You’re my partner. You’re—too fucking important for me to fuck this up. So, if that’s what you need from me to fucking fix this, to make us good again—then yeah, Lee. I swear.”

Lee looked him over, careful and slow, assessing—but he didn’t really need to. He knew Barney better than anyone, and he knew when Barney was telling the truth.

“What,” Barney said, irritable. “Not good enough for you? You want a blood oath, too, Christmas?”

Lee stopped fighting the grin that wanted to stretch across his face. He laughed out loud, watched the irritation fall away from Barney’s expression and exchange itself for something like awe and disbelief.

“Nah,” he said, and reached over to tap his fist against Barney’s, still outstretched and just waiting for it. “That’ll do.” He left his hand there, touching, because it felt so goddamn good, felt right—felt like some combination of a weight dropping off his back and relief ballooning up in his chest until he could have floated right up out of his fucking seat. When Barney just looked at him, unsure, he let that grin go warm and soft and fond as it felt, and added, “We’re good, Barney. I swear.”

“That’s it?” Barney said, watching Lee’s face and lighting up, up. He left his hand in place, too, even as he went boneless in his seat. “Seriously, that’s all? Easy as that?”

“Demented, stubborn idiot,” Lee told him, trying for stern but mostly just failing to stifle that smile. “It was always simple. You were the one fighting it every step of the way.”

“Could have left off the demented,” Barney grumbled back, but Lee noticed he didn’t argue the rest. “Lee.”

“Yeah?”

Barney opened his fist and slid his hand around Lee’s, slipping his thumb into the loose curl of Lee’s fingers. Lee furrowed his eyebrows but let him do it. “Lee,” Barney said again, insistent. “You scared the shit out of me today, you know that?”
“Yeah,” Lee said, a bit rueful, but not all that much. He didn’t pull away, even though Barney was essentially just holding his hand, now. “I know.”

“You made me hold a gun to your head,” Barney said. His grip tightened. “What kind of overdramatic bastard does that?”

“I know,” Lee said again. Still no regret. “Had to get through your thick skull somehow.” He shrugged, and added, “It worked, didn’t it?”

“Gave me a heart attack, is what it did,” Barney grumbled. “It’d kill me if you died because of my shitty choices, you know? Let alone if I had to—*that*.”

“Yeah,” Lee said, gentler this time. “And now you know what it’d do to me if you ran off and got yourself killed without me to watch your back. Just so we’re clear.”

“Just so we’re clear,” Barney repeated, his face going shadowed for a second. He shook his head, and shook the shadows away with it. “Yeah. Lee, you know I love you, don’t you?”

Lee’s stupid, stubborn heart jumped and kicked him in the back of the sternum before he could shove it back down where it belonged. “I know,” he said again, instead, and laughed a little. It felt good to hear it, to be able to say it back, even if they didn’t mean exactly the same thing. “I love you, too, you mad old bastard. It’s not exactly news. You’re my best friend.”

“No,” Barney said, too fast, and shook his head. “Well—yes, but—no. It’s like this.” He inched forward in his chair, tugging lightly on Lee’s hand until Lee got the picture and did the same. Their seats weren’t really meant for it, didn’t turn all the way, but if they both twisted and shifted, they could get closer, get themselves angled right so that their knees brushed. And then, keeping his hold loose enough that Lee could pull away at any time, Barney lifted their clasped hands.

The kiss he brushed over Lee’s bruised knuckles was quick and painfully gentle—a soft, dry press of his lips that was over as soon as it had come.

“I love you,” Barney said again.

Lee wondered if this was how it felt to see a lightning strike close up—terror and relief and static electricity sparking over him, all the fine hairs on his arm standing on end. “Oh,” he managed to say.

He stared, blindsided. Barney looked back, a little nervous and almost—almost defiant, like he expected Lee to reject it, reject him, or maybe even take a swing at him for it. Like he thought Lee was anything less than stupidly, painfully in love with his stupid bastard of a best friend. After everything—fuck, after today, of all days—how could he not know?

But Barney apparently didn’t know, because his face was drawn and tight as he dropped his eyes and went to let go of Lee’s hand, and Lee realized with a jolt that he hadn’t answered out loud, hadn’t done anything at all except stare at Barney with his jaw dropped and with what had to be an incredibly stupid look on his face.

Lee tightened his grip, even brought his free hand up to latch on and keep Barney’s hand wrapped around his. Like hell he was letting go after that. Now it was his turn to pull and tug at Barney’s arm, until he got with the picture and leaned in again. Lee leaned in, too, ignoring the confusion on Barney’s face as he got closer, and closer still, until their foreheads were pressed together, breaths mingling. Lee had a raw scrape curling around his temple that stung with the contact; he ignored it. This was more important.
“You have such shitty timing,” Lee muttered, voice quiet but filled with all the sincere aggravation he could muster. “I swear, you pull this crap just to mess with me.”

Barney blinked at him, obviously failing to process what was happening—why Lee was so close if he was so irritated. “What?”

“If we didn’t have to land this damn plane at some point,” Lee said, scowling, “then I’d be kissing you senseless right now, understand? As it is, once we get started, I’m not going to be able to stop. If you’d held off, we could be doing this on solid ground, instead of in a tin can in the sky with a bunch of idiots and children in the back. And maybe we would be somewhere private, maybe even somewhere with a damn bed—”

Lee could see the moment it clicked, as Barney’s eyes blew wide. “Fuck, Lee—” he managed to say.

“Yeah,” Lee told him. He nodded a little without moving his head away, sweat and blood and dirt grinding together between them. It was sort of disgusting. It was the best thing that had ever happened to him. “Yeah, that’s it exactly.”

Barney’s free hand flew up, fast as it was on the draw, and latched onto the back of Lee’s neck, gentle for all that it was obviously desperate. “You’re saying that we—that you—”

“Shh,” Lee said, soothing, as Barney shuddered and tripped on the end of the thought. He pulled back, only just enough that he could brush a kiss of his own at the corner of Barney’s eye, over the fine lines of the crow’s feet there. He ignored the way Barney’s grip tightened before he realized Lee wasn’t moving away any farther than that. And he kept the teasing light and easy when he said, “Your hearing going, old man? I said it once already, and I meant it.” Leaning back in, he put them forehead to forehead again. From this distance, Barney’s eyes basically filled Lee’s field of vision, warm and dear and more familiar to Lee than his own face in the mirror. “I love you, too.”

End Notes

If there’s anyone out there: thanks for making it this far! This was supposed to be an exercise in writing a fic shorter than 5,000 words for once. I, uh, failed. And then it was supposed to be shorter than 10,000 words, and I, um. Also failed. But it *is* shorter than 15,000 words, so third time's the charm. Or something.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!