In Our Time of Need

by laurie_ky

Summary

Blair goes to Denver to help train a new sentinel and guide pair who bonded under traumatic circumstances; Jim comes along, not willing to be apart from Blair. For four men, choices will be made that will affect them the rest of their lives.

Artwork by Mella at AO3
Artwork by Patt at her LJ

Written by Laurie

Notes

Written for Nell for Moonridge and for the Sentinel Big Bang 2011. Beta'ed by Sallymn, with additional assistance from Mab and Marns. Thank you all, ladies. I very much appreciated your insights. I was blessed with an abundance of art, from Mella and Patt which is included in the story

This is a "Sentinels are known" story, and touches on political and legal issues, bonding, and the spirit world.
Private camp ground, Estes Park, Colorado  
Friday, late evening, June 22, 2001

“Hey, Buck – want to hear a really funny joke?” JD leaned forward from his camping stool and poked a stick into the small campfire, stirring the embers up, and grinned at Buck’s groan of dismay.

Buck rolled his eyes theatrically, then smirked at him. “Kid, if you can tell a joke that’s actually got a punch line, I will buy you breakfast at I-Hop when we get back to Denver.” He waved his hand, granting permission to try to make him laugh. “I reckon my money’s safe, though. But go on – give it your best shot.”

Buck placed his hands behind his head, slouching down a little in his camping chair, and waited for JD to commence mangling whatever passed for humor in his head. JD knew this because it was what Buck would remark to him after most of the jokes he’d ever told in Buck’s presence, but this time he’d get Buck to laugh. He’d read this joke on the Internet and had practiced it to himself a couple of times. He lifted his mug of hot chocolate and finished it in two gulps, then placed the mug on the ground by his feet.

“Okay. Well, there was this cop and he was trying to give this lady a speeding ticket. She lied to him
and told him there was a body in the trunk and that she'd stolen the car and didn’t have any registration. So he calls in backup, right? And a bunch of other cops show up and they look in the trunk and there’s no dead body in there at all. So she didn’t get a speeding ticket because she made him out a liar about the body in the trunk and no registration. Pretty funny, huh?” JD waited expectantly for the praise that Buck owed him, but instead Buck moaned like a zombie and, reaching down to the campground dirt, lobbed a pine cone at him.

“Honest to God, JD, that was terrible. You must be the worst joke teller on this green earth and for making me suffer through that I should make you do the dishes and mop the kitchen floor for a month of Sundays when we get home.” Buck grinned mischievously, just waiting for JD to say something smart back to him, but just then three men walked up to their campfire.

Buck pushed himself out of his chair a little warily, facing them. “How do, gents. There something I can do for you?”

“Yeah, we managed to leave our fire starters at home. Wondered if you could spare a lighter? Or matches?” The tall, dark-haired man spoke in a friendly way, but JD’s spidey sense was tingling. Something was off here. Why did they need three guys just to borrow a lighter? JD stood up, uneasy, and reached into his pocket. He pulled out a lighter and started to toss it to the man who’d spoken, but the guy held out his hand in a stop gesture.

“Kid, you toss that in the dark and I’ll drop it for sure. Just hold on, and I’ll come get it.” The dark-haired man walked around the campfire to JD, who cautiously dropped his lighter into the man’s outstretched hand. The man nodded his thanks and slipped the lighter into his jacket pocket. When his hand re-emerged there was a gun in it, and he pointed it straight at JD’s gut.

The other two men swarmed in on Buck, who fought them off, fists blazing, the three of them coming dangerously close to falling into the fire. Buck got in a few hits on the man closest to him before one of their attackers cracked him over the head with the butt end of a gun. It dazed him enough for the two men to throw him down and as one man held a gun to the back of his shoulder, the other one cuffed Buck’s hands behind his back.

JD’s captor poked him with the gun. “You give a yell and I’ll shoot you in the belly. Not a pretty way to die, kid. We don’t need you, so the first sign of trouble and you’re history. Now lie down on the ground, hands behind your back,” the dark-haired man ordered JD.

JD complied. Cuffed, he glanced at Buck on the other side of the campfire and saw his friend being restrained. He judged Buck wasn’t fully conscious from the way his partner's head lolled while one of the men, blond, in his late thirties and taller than the other blond man, tied a gag around Buck’s mouth.

So he wasn’t essential, but evidently these guys needed Buck for whatever this was about. He grimly wondered if any of them knew he and Buck were ATF agents.

JD’s baseball cap had shifted a little as he’d fallen to the ground; if he could get it to drop off his head, maybe it’d be left here. The other members of his team would take that as a sign something had gone frickin’ wrong since they knew JD wouldn’t carelessly leave his hat behind for anything.

The dark-haired guy was talking into a walkie-talkie now, telling an accomplice to bring the van around. Then he grabbed JD by the arm and pulled him up on his knees. As JD struggled to get up to his feet, he saw his lighter on the ground. Realizing it must have come out of the man’s pocket when he pulled his gun, JD lightly covered it with his foot, hoping that when they left the lighter would remain behind. Maybe there would be some prints on it that forensics could identify. He was due in court on Monday, to testify about the technical support used to break the Bowery case. When he
didn’t show up, Chris Larabee would know something was wrong. But Monday was three long days away.

Dark-haired man, who was the leader judging by the orders he gave to the others, motioned the shorter man of the two blond guys to move to JD’s side. He ordered him to gag JD, and the cloth tasted dry and dirty in his mouth.

When a dark blue van pulled up and the shorter guy manhandled him towards the side of the road, he managed to stumble and fall against a tree, artfully dislodging his cap from his head. Short and blond cursed at JD and, grabbing his arm, hustled him into the van. Buck was dumped in beside him a minute later; the other two men had practically dragged him over since he seemed only half conscious. The men made them lie down in the back of the van, and one threw a blanket over them. Before the van door closed, JD saw Shorty return to the campfire and grab JD’s backpack. He returned and climbed in, opened it up and complained when he didn't find any wallets, but he made interested noises when he found JD's camera.

JD nudged Buck with his foot and Buck responded by rolling a bit on his side and scooting closer, shifting his leg over both of JD’s. It was comforting, and JD hoped that Buck knew what was going on and wasn’t just reacting to having a warm body next to him. He might think JD was one of Buck’s on and off again girlfriends, if his roommate was still dazed from the blow to his head. He felt worry tighten around his heart and hoped intently that Buck was all right. Probably his friend needed to see a doctor, but that wasn’t going to happen, or maybe he was playing possum to fool these assholes into underestimating him. He nudged Buck again and took it as a good sign when Buck tightened his leg around JD for a long moment, before relaxing against JD’s body.

JD concentrated on counting, to try to estimate the distance between the campsite to wherever their abductors were taking them. He firmly told himself to not get the shakes; it wouldn’t help and he didn’t want their kidnappers to see him as weak. They had brought him along for leverage against Buck, but what the hell did they want Buck to do for them?

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The dark-haired man eventually answered JD’s unspoken question after ordering the other men to bring them, still blindfolded, inside. JD estimated they had driven thirty to thirty-five minutes from the campsite but part of that could have been from driving in circles to confuse them. The last ten minutes or so had been a very bumpy ride over what was probably a gravel road.

When someone removed JD’s blindfold, he saw Buck slumped on an old, worn out, stained couch with its stuffing escaping through numerous tears. The shorter guy roughly shoved JD so that he ended up sprawled next to his teammate on the ratty couch. He hoped Buck was fudging being unconscious, but he hadn't whispered anything to JD during that long drive to this place. Without some clue from his partner, JD truly didn't know how badly hurt Buck was.

JD glanced cautiously around at his jail. It was an old cabin, lights were few, and he could hear a generator running. It looked to have maybe two bedrooms, besides the kitchen and living room. A wood stove was against one wall, a fireplace lined the wall across from the couch. There was a door off of the kitchen that was maybe a bathroom or a pantry. Probably wasn’t much here in the way of appliances. He’d bet there wasn’t any indoor toilet.

The four men who’d brought him and Buck moved to stand in front of the couch. Looking down at him, the dark-haired man spoke in a contemptuous voice to JD. “You’d better hope your man there values your life, sweetheart. He’s going to help me and if he won’t go along with the plan – then
there’s no reason to keep a liability around is there?”

“What do you want from us?” JD tried to keep his voice steady and thought he’d sounded firm enough. Lord knows he didn’t feel very steady.

“Mr. Wilson here is going to take us to the guns he was going to sell to Greer. He doesn’t know it, but I watched him on the security camera when he was negotiating a deal with my boss. Greer’s loss will be m-- our gain. Your part, little boy, is to encourage Wilson to coöperate.”

The dark-haired man looked at the other three men and waved his hand towards the guy with the orange-reddish, curly hair. “He’s in charge while I’m gone. You boys just lay low and keep these two quiet and under control. If Wilson won’t help, then convince him by making it rough on his bitch here. We’ve all got a stake in this operation. Don’t screw it up.”

The dark-haired man went to JD and pulled his hair so that JD was looking up at the man. He shook JD’s head a little and admonished him, “If you want out of this with all your body parts intact, little sweetheart, you’d better be persuasive when your boyfriend wakes up.” He shoved JD, making him bounce against the couch, and walked towards the door.

“He’s not my boyfriend; we’re just friends. Good friends,” JD called to the dark-haired man’s back as he left. He didn’t have a clue why he said that. He didn't care if these jerks thought Buck was his lover, but the words had just kind of happened when he opened his mouth.

The short blond man laughed at that. “We listened to you two for a while, ya’ know. We know you live together, and we can recognize ‘married people talk’ when we hear it. Not that you can get married to each other. We’re against that. It ain’t natural, what you gay boys do with each other. So quit your foolin’, kid; anybody can see you’re a cocksucker. You probably was born that way, but it don’t mean you have to act out your impure thoughts. You should try practicing some self-control over your dick, JD.”

The curly-haired man snorted at the shorter guy’s advice. “I don’t care where they stick their dicks.” He stepped back from the couch, and turned to face the other two blond men. “Wilson had better not screw up or the kid’s history. You two got a problem with him being our insurance policy?”

“Sounds real good to me,” replied the short guy. “I’m sure glad you and the captain gave us a call. We both could use the cash.” The other blond-headed guy just nodded his head in agreement.

Things had fallen into place for JD while listening to their talk. Wilson was the alias that Buck had used to set up a gunrunning operation. Buck “Wilson” had met earlier this week with Robert Greer, a potential middle man gun broker, who was apparently now being double-crossed by one of his own men. The dark-haired man had seen Buck, but Buck hadn’t seen him. The man must have tailed him or run into him when they stopped for supplies for their camping trip. This was the captain’s – the dark-haired man -- and Curly’s plan. Shorty and Blondie were just hired muscle.

So these chowderheads thought he was gay and judging by all the “sweetheart,” “kid,” and “little” remarks, they didn’t see him as being a threat. Probably because he was small-framed, and though he was going on twenty-seven, he knew he looked years younger. The rest of Team Seven teased him enough about it. He could use that, get them to underestimate him, so when it was time to make a move they wouldn’t be expecting any resistance from him.

JD cleared his throat and said meekly, “My hands are hurting; please, can’t you take the cuffs off now? And I’m worried about Buck; lemme take a look at him, okay?”

Curly eyed him speculatively. “A few rules here, kid. One – you don’t make any sudden moves.
You need to piss, you tell us first before you get up. Two – no crying or whining. You’ll get your butt beat if you start any of that nonsense. Three – you don’t talk to us unless we ask you something. You try starting anything and you’ll be sorry.” Curly walked over to the table in the kitchen and came back with a taser.

“Ever been jolted by one of these babies, kid? They hurt real bad; you’ll be spazzing all down on the ground and you might piss your pants. So behave yourself and get your boyfriend to agree to help us and you’ll go home when this is over in one piece. You give me problems – I’ll zap you, and then I’ll introduce you to my knife. Maybe do a little decorating on your skin. We understand each other, kid?”

“Yessir,” JD mumbled fearfully at the man who’d just threatened him. He was practically biting his tongue so he wouldn’t mouth off at the jerk. It would be counter-productive to say the least. He could almost hear Josiah quoting St. Augustine to him again. “‘Patience is the companion of wisdom,’ John Dunne.” He experienced an intense longing just then for the rest of his team. But he guessed he and Buck were on their own for this one.

Curly tossed the cuff keys to Shorty, who proceeded to undo JD’s handcuffs. JD slowly brought his hands around in front of him, grimacing at the pins and needles sensation in his stressed muscles. He pulled himself up on the couch so he could get a good look at Buck. He ran his fingers through Buck’s thick hair, looking for a bump. Buck didn’t stir until JD located the injury, then he flinched and gave a little moan as JD probed it. It was a good-sized goose egg, and he couldn’t tell if Buck was playing possum or was really unconscious.

JD pasted on his most innocent look and raised his hand, like he was a kid at school still. Curly said, “What?”

“Can I put some ice on his head and get some circulation back in his arms? He’s probably got a concussion. You want him to be fit, don’t you?”

Curly said, “There’s no ice here, no refrigerator, but there’s a hand pump at the kitchen sink. The water will be cold. Use a dishtowel. And kid, remember…” He pointed the taser at JD, and then indicated he should get up. JD did so cautiously, wanting to lull these clowns into a false sense of security about how cowed he was. He returned with the wet towel and placed it on the goose bump on Buck’s head.

Shorty unlocked Buck's cuffs and JD massaged his partner's arms to get the blood flowing again. He positioned himself in front of Buck, blocking scrutiny from the other three men. Buck slowly opened one eyelid and focused on JD, then he gave him a slow and deliberate wink before closing his eye again.

JD felt a rush of relief slam into him. Buck was shamming after all, although he’d bet good money that Buck’s head was sore. Now to pick the best time to rush these jerks…

Another hour passed with JD giving Buck little pats on the face and re-soaking the dishtowel and replacing it on Buck’s head. He raised his hand again, feeling like a third grader, and when Curly made a talk motion with his hand he asked in an embarrassed tone if he could go to the bathroom now. He figured there was an outhouse they used, so he thought he could get an idea where to run to when they made their break. Shorty cuffed him for the trip outdoors, but at least his hands were in front of him this time. Unfortunately, he was also blindfolded at the door, so the idea was a bust. He couldn’t tell where they were or what direction to take when they escaped. Shorty and Blondie each grabbed one of his arms and pulled him along for a few minutes, then told him to piss. He did, hoping that some would splash on the frickin’ sons-of-bitches’ boots.
Back in the house, Shorty removed the cuffs and blindfold, then pushed him towards the couch. He pretended to stumble and crying out, “Oh, crap,” JD made his pitch forward shift to a turn towards Shorty. The diversion gave Buck the opening he’d been waiting for and he exploded off the couch and lunged for Curly. Buck tackled his target, knocking him to the ground, and started pounding on Curly’s face. JD and Shorty exchanged blows, and JD hit him furiously. They had to subdue the first two quickly before the third man—

Blinding pain burst across his back and he screamed as his muscles turned to jelly. Blondie blasted him a second time, and he fell down as limp as a marionette with cut strings. He was unable to scream anymore as his breath had been frozen in pain. He felt his body being moved so that he was on his belly, his hands cuffed behind his back. After a while, during which his thoughts kind of floated and he could hardly string two words together, enough of the mental fog cleared away for him to realize that his try for freedom had failed. With some difficulty he located Buck; one of their tormenters had restrained him, too, and his partner looked as dazed as JD felt.

He guessed that Blondie had tasered him and Buck. They were back to frickin’ square one, but their abductors wouldn’t be lulled again into underestimating them.

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Federal Building, Denver, Colorado
Monday morning, June 25, 2001

Chris Larabee placed the phone back in its cradle on his desk. His gut had tightened up as the District Attorney on the other end had tried to rip him a new asshole, and not because the DA had yelled at him. A man in his position of riding herd on his team had to expect to take the heat, and then in turn pass it on to whichever man had brought it on, or to shield that teammate, if one of the other six men needed it.

No, what was making him head out of his office to grill the other guys was a strong feeling of
uneasiness because -- JD wouldn’t miss a court date unless a problem had come up. JD was reliable. He prepared for his court testimony carefully, and he had a passionate sense of justice. He cared about the people whose lives had been harmed by the criminals the kid helped put in prison; there was no way he would forget or blow off showing up at court.

He stepped through his door and said to the room at large, “JD missed giving his testimony on the Bowery case this morning. Has anybody heard from him?” Chris glanced over at Buck’s desk, but there was no sign the man had stopped in this morning. Chris hadn’t been alarmed when Buck hadn’t come in – the man was planning on meeting with more arms dealers in the evening this week, and Chris had told him to try to keep his flex hours from accumulating by taking the mornings off.

Vin looked up from the report he was frowning over and said, “Nope, not since last Thursday when they were talkin’ ‘bout that camping trip.”

Josiah agreed, nodding his head. “JD was looking forward to it. The boy told me Buck knew a great spot up in the mountains, and they were going to do some hiking and fishing.”

A sound made Chris look over past their desks to see another team member quietly pushing open the office door. Ezra briefly looked chagrined when Chris caught his eye. He was keeping track of Ezra’s late entries and the man with the golden tongue had been warned that after too many late mornings without an acceptable excuse, Chris was going to give him some boring paperwork task to complete as punishment for his crimes. They did tend to differ on the definition of “acceptable excuse,” but Chris wasn’t interested in whatever yarn Mr. Standish chose to spin today.

“Ezra, you know anything about where JD is this morning?” Chris asked, a frown settling on his face.

“I believe he was due in court.” Ezra looked thoughtfully at the expressions on the other men’s faces. “I take it then, that he has not made an appearance at the Hall of Justice?”

Nathan looked up from his desk, phone in his hand, and said, “There’s no answer at JD’s and Buck’s apartment. Does anybody know which campground they were staying at?”

Chris swore softly to himself, then said, “Vin, you contact Casey, see if she’s talked to JD this weekend or seen him. Nathan, call their cell phones and the campground.” Chris looked at the other members of Team Seven, but all he got was expressions of ignorance.

“JD didn’t know which one, Chris.” Josiah sighed and ran his hand through his grizzled curls. “It was going to be a surprise, and I gathered Buck resisted the boy trying to worm it out of him.”

“I’ll find where they went, and send a ranger up to the campsite, see if they’re still there. I’ll have them call me with what they find,” Nathan said firmly and pulled out a Denver area phone book.

“Right. I’ll go to their apartment -- I’ve got a key -- and see what I can find. Ezra, you check with Inez down at the Saloon. See if Buck or JD stopped in there, or if Buck told her about where they were going,” Chris said, and then snapped his fingers. “Everybody check their messages on their cell phones and home phones.”

Chris began to head towards the door, then snapped his fingers again and turned around.

“Josiah … check the hospitals and the County Mounties and the PD, then start reviewing their current cases. See if it’s likely that somebody’s worked up a serious grudge against one of them.”

“Chris – what about the case JD was testifyin’ in court for this mornin’? I didn’t take it that he was a
key witness, but maybe I was wrong?” Vin offered, his expressive blue eyes focused on Chris.

“I’ll check it out, but there were plenty of other witnesses that did show up for the case, as the DA was in some pains to point out to me. We’ll check everything out.” Chris pointed to Josiah.

“You’re in charge of coordinating the information. Everybody report your findings to Josiah. I’ll forward my calls to my cell phone while I’m out. If it was just Buck who was late, I wouldn’t be so concerned. But for JD to miss court – something’s wrong.”

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**Dunne and Wilmington apartment, Denver, Colorado**

*Monday, late morning, June 25, 2001*

After making good driving time to his friends' neighborhood Chris parked his truck, noticing that JD’s motorcycle was sitting where it usually belonged, and walked upstairs to his friends' condo. He saw no sign of forced entry or a struggle. He prowled around the rooms, but there was nothing to see at their apartment, except a mostly empty fridge, chips and a jar of salsa on the counter, unmade beds, and mail carelessly dumped on the kitchen counter. For all they joked around and called the place the CDC, it wasn’t that bad.

Chris pushed the button on the phone and listened to the messages. There were three for Buck from women – Chris didn’t recognize any of the names – and one from Casey, Nettie's granddaughter, telling JD to give her a call sometime. That last one had been before this weekend. Buck guessed JD saved it for the phone number on it; JD and the girl would go out together sometimes. He called the three women, and none of them had seen Buck this weekend. Two assumed Buck had been out with another woman and told Chris to tell him to– well, he wouldn’t pass that along to his old friend. The other one had started to flirt with Chris, but he’d cut her off as soon as he realized she had nothing to tell him. ‘Buck, where do you find these women?’

His shrilling cell phone startled Chris; he answered it fearing he would be told that JD and Buck were dead, but the small sense of optimism he still carried insisted on hoping his friends were still alive. Nathan had information for him, and while they hadn't found their lost lambs, Team Seven had pinpointed JD's and Buck’s last location.

Nathan told him that he'd used a tip that Inez -- bless her tough, flirty little heart -- had given Ezra, and had located the private campground bordering the Rocky Mountain National Forest, up near the town of Estes Park. Luckily, Buck had bragged to Inez the last time he was at the Saloon about the fine spot he was going to show JD, where trails in the National Forest were only minutes away from where he’d reserved a tent camping site. Inez hadn’t paid attention to where he said he was going, she just remembered it was private and around the National Forest.

Buck hadn’t signed out of the campground. The woman who’d answered the phone at the camp store said she’d go and check the campsite as soon as she had a free moment, but she didn’t sound concerned about it to Nathan.

Chris walked over to the large windows and looked out while he thought out his plans, Nathan waiting quietly on the other end of the phone. He decided to check this camping place out himself and take Ezra, Vin, and Nathan, two to a vehicle, to the campground, which was located an hour from Denver. A private campground meant no rangers on duty, and by the time he would have
convincing the county sheriff to send a car up there, they’d be there themselves.

Rubbing his forehead, Chris told Nathan their new assignments and asked him to convey them to the rest of the team. They would meet at the Federal Building parking garage to drive up to Buck’s campsite. Although Nathan’s specialty was in explosives, he had the best general knowledge of forensics, and Chris told him to bring his kit. Josiah would continue to coordinate information and was already combing through JD’s and Buck’s cases, looking with a profiler’s eye for anyone with the type of character to kidnap or harm Buck and JD.

He also told Nathan to bring his emergency medical supplies. It was possible that his lost sheep had suffered a mishap and were in the National Forest in need of medical attention.

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Estes Park, Colorado
Monday, early afternoon, June 25, 2001

Chris and Vin had ridden to Estes Park in Chris’ Black Ram Dodge truck, with Nathan and Ezra in Nathan’s Ford Explorer right behind them -- both vehicles running with blue lights. They made the hour-long drive in forty-five minutes and pulled into the little campground nestled next to the National Forest. According to the notice, this was a family owned campground and the sign to the combination camp store and office directed visitors to stop there to register.

Chris went past it, having already gotten the campsite number and directions to the most private site in the campground from Nathan’s talk with the owner. He pulled down the isolated camp driveway, noting as he did that the layout of the camp meant there were no close campsites near the lot Buck had picked.

He parked his truck down the road from where Buck’s Lady was visible under some pine trees. Buck, with some help from the rest of the team, had restored the heap it had been when Chris had first laid eyes on the truck back to its 1957 red and chrome glory. Seeing her here, abandoned... As he turned off his ignition, Vin looked at him, his friend who knew the value of silence, and he knew that no matter what they would learn about Buck and JD, Vin would be there at his shoulder, quiet and doing whatever Chris needed him to be doing. Chris kept eye contact with Vin and gave a nod, then they both pushed open their doors and went to find out what had happened to their friends.

Nathan and Ezra had already climbed out of the Explorer, Nathan holding out big, heavy, rubber bands towards his team leader and Vin. They took them in silence and all four slipped them over their boots and shoes, so their footprints would be identified with band marks from any already on the ground. Standard crime scene precautions, and Chris hoped to hell that they would be totally uncalled for, but if wishes were horses, beggars would ride, as Sarah had used to say. Sarah – he knew he’d called up her memory because in his gut he was expecting to find his men, his friends, taken or – dead. ‘Ah, Sarah. You didn’t deserve to become my talisman of calamity.’

Ezra must have been reading his mind because he stepped up to Chris and said softly, “Mr. Larabee... Chris -- it’s entirely possible that they are merely detained in the forest here, and in need of our assistance to return to the site of this – primitive weekend ritual.” Chris acknowledged Ezra’s words with a nod and then turned to Nathan.

“Call the shots, Nathan.”
Nathan handed evidence bags to each of them and then each team approached the campsite, Nathan directing Chris and Vin to go around through the woods and come up to the tent from the opposite direction.

Nathan and Ezra scanned the area, and then carefully approached the ash filled fire pit, and a knocked over mug on the ground by a camping stool. At the same time, Chris and Vin reached the tent and looked inside. Vin, with a note of relief in his voice, called to Nathan that nobody was in the tent but their friends' rolled up sleeping bags were still there. It was likely then that they’d gone missing on Friday, before bedtime. Chris watched Ezra pick up the blue enamel camping mug and sniff it.

“This was JD’s, I believe. It has the remnants of hot chocolate in it.” He held his hand over the campfire and then poked it with a stick. “The fire’s been out for a long time, possibly days?” Ezra looked over to Nathan, who had pulled on evidence gloves and was picking something up off the ground. "What treasure have you unearthed?"

"Found a lighter, it's been scuffed into the ground. It's just a cheap, everyday lighter, there’s no distinguishing mark on it to tell who it belonged to. I'll have it checked for prints." Nathan spoke loud enough for his voice to carry to the other two members of the team, separated from him by the distance between the tent and the fire pit area.

Nathan sealed the bag and labeled it, and then something closer to the gravel road caught his attention.

“Chris, Vin…” Nathan said urgently. And he pointed.

Chris looked over and saw something under a smallish pine tree.

JD had not left his hat on the ground willingly. That hat was the kid’s favorite headgear and the subject of much teasing from the other six members of the team. JD had defended his hat, loved his hat, and was not careless with it. Finding it abandoned like this was going to change the investigation from JD and Buck maybe getting lost in the woods to definitely being kidnapped.

Chris reached for his cell phone, hoping that the reception would work since they were close to the mountains. “I’m calling in a CSI team and reporting in to Josiah. Nathan and Vin, you secure the site. Ezra, you and I will start interviewing campers and the staff here. Let’s move, people.”

Tobacco Wholesalers Warehouse, East 48th Avenue, Denver, Colorado
Tuesday, late evening, June 26, 2001

“Damn… Ezra, we’re wasting our time here. Didn’t your informants have any more details on when this shindig was gonna start?” Vin eyed his partner for this night’s surveillance on the aging warehouse. Ezra didn’t look like he felt any happier about being stuck in this run-down small fake tool trailer, parked so as to not be noticeable, then Vin did himself.

“I regret to inform you, Mr. Tanner, that the answer to your question is – no. No, my informants do not have any more particulars to pass along. And I tried to persuade the FBI to replace us, but they refused and our Mr. Larabee had to go along with their wishes.” Ezra looked at his Rolex and sighed.
Vin returned to watching the surveillance cameras -- nothing to see except the guard smokin’ a cigarette.

This warehouse was stuffed with cigarette cartons just ripe for the pluckin’. Ezra’d been the one to tumble onto this little fraud and black market scheme, and now Team Seven and the FBI boys were workin’ together to arrest the thieves – actually the owners of the company – when they came to steal their own property to resell on the black market, and turn in the loss to their insurance company.

Vin watched the guard throw his cigarette butt on the ground and grind it with his heel. He took a look at his watch; this felt like the longest damn shift ever, and he'd be glad when the FBI fellers showed up in two hours for their turn.

The word from their inside man – the night guard chain-smokin’ out there – was that he was told the theft would take place sometime this week. The warehouse had been staked out since last Thursday; JD had set up the surveillance cameras and mikes. JD – it’d been the last time Vin had seen him. He and Buck had gone up to Estes Park Friday for that camping trip. JD, despite bein’ a Boston city boy, really appreciated the outdoors here in Colorado, and it tickled Buck to introduce him to the areas Buck had grown up enjoyin’.

Ezra had gotten out a deck of cards and was doing his fancy shufflin’ tricks with them. On another night, his friend -- who Josiah often remarked was no doubt the reincarnation of a “Mississippi River Boat Gambler” – would have been cajolin’ him to play a little poker by now, as they waited out their surveillance shift. But not tonight. Neither one of them had the heart to play card games. Their friends had been taken five nights ago, and Vin was tryin’ hard to not be jumpin’ the gun and thinkin’ they were dead.

Vin reached over to the thermos he’d brought and poured himself a cup of coffee. He politely offered the thermos to Ezra, who just shuddered and shook his head. Nobody on Team Seven would drink his extra-strong brew, except Josiah. Of course, Josiah would spin some tale then about other strange things he’d learned to drink in other parts of the world. The chicory blend made the coffee bitter-tasting, but Vin preferred it that way. Buck always had some smart-ass name for Vin’s coffee -- “Texas Tea,” for one and damned if Buck wouldn’t start humming the theme to the Beverly Hillbillies when a cup was poured.

Buck was always cuttin’ up and laughin’ about something. He was about the friendliest soul Vin knew. And Buck and JD had taken to each other like ducks to water. At least they were together. That had to be somethin’ positive in this whole sorry mess.

Vin drank his coffee and thought about what leads they’d managed to scrape up out of the dirt. Kind of literally, turns out.

Team Seven had made some progress on the case. They now knew the name and address of one of the men who’d taken Buck and JD. Besides JD’s prints on the lighter found at the campfire, a career criminal’s had been identified. James Carson, orJimmy C as he was known on his rap sheet, hadn’t been at home when they’d executed a search warrant. A thorough toss of his small, isolated house outside of Denver hadn’t given them any clues to where he might be holed up. They’d gone in silently – no lights, no sirens – so hopefully the grapevine hadn’t gotten the news that Jimmy C’s place had been checked out by the ATF.

Vin played with his coffee cup, pushing it with his finger, first one way and then the other, on the table the computer monitor and controls were set up on.

They’d put taps on Jimmy C’s phone line, and were hoping to squeeze any callers into coughin’ up more information on JD’s and Buck’s kidnapper, who’d appeared to drop off the face of the earth.
They'd checked about credit cards and vehicles. Jimmy C hadn't owned any cards in his own name, and his Jeep Cherokee now had an APB on it.

He stopped movin' his cup and raised it back to his lips. Chris was runnin' the phone records now, back at the office, coming up with a list of names to be checked out.

Vin finished with his coffee and screwed the cup back on top of the thermos. Nathan and Josiah had stayed to stake out the kidnapper's cabin tonight, in case he made an appearance. Tomorrow, they were gonna show Jimmy C's photo around the campground area and near his cabin and see if anybody knew the man or connected him with a dark-colored van. A van they wouldn't have known anything about except for Ezra, who'd done his part in finding out who took JD an' Buck.

Vin looked over at his friend, who was now playing a listless game of solitaire. If it hadn't been for him noticing the two little boys with the guilty lookin' faces, when their father and uncle had been assuring Chris that they'd not seen anything suspicious or out-of-place or even any vehicles by Buck's campsite Friday night, then they wouldn't have gotten as much of a description of the van as they did.

But Ezra had asked the nine and eleven year old boys if they'd like to play a game. He'd showed them the old cup shuffle and while the little fellers were busy tryin' to figure out which cup had the pebble under it, Ezra'd wormed it out of the two young-uns about sneaking out of their little tent after their father and uncle had gone to sleep, and braving the night -- like Daniel Boone or Davy Crockett. They'd seen a black, brown, or dark blue large van with no windows on the sides. It was more like a delivery van, they'd said. The two boys had hidden behind the trees when the van had crept in real slow and gone down the campsite road past them, around a curve and out of sight. It returned in a little while and left as slowly as it had maneuvered in. What made the boys pay attention in the first place was that the van had turned off its lights.

The boys were praised for paying such good attention and Ezra'd smoothed over their escapade with the father.

"Ez..."

Ezra looked up from his card game, his green eyes worried lookin'.

"Mr. Tanner... is there something I can assist you with?"

"Just wanted to tell you... you did good with them kids back at the campground." Ezra gave a sad smile and nodded his thanks, then bent his head back to the game he was using to while away the time. Vin stretched his arms out and rolled his shoulders, as he watched the guard resume his place in the entryway shack.

So at least they had an approximate time and a vague description of the vehicle used to kidnap his friends. Owners of dark vans in the Denver area and surrounding counties were being looked at for police records and any possible connection to Jimmy C.

They'd dusted Lady for prints, but apparently the kidnappers hadn't gotten into Buck's truck. JD's and Buck's wallets and guns were locked in the truck, which meant that the kidnappers might not know they were ATF agents or what their real names were, if this was related to any of the undercover work both men did. Vin slumped down in his seat and pondered the dangers of undercover work.

Every ATF man or woman knew, once he or she were through bein' a rookie, that undercover work could mean a contract on your head if you was found out. Team Seven didn't do deep cover work --
but some of the agents who did, infiltrating outlaw motorcycle gangs or cult crazies for years -- had to basically run for it when their covers were blown after the arrests had gone down. Their families weren't safe, neither. Maybe it was just as well that none of their team were married or had kids -- although Nathan was pretty serious about wantin' to marry Rain. After losin' Sarah and Adam, Vin thought it weren't likely that Chris would want to put a second family in harm's way.

Vin shifted in the chair and wondered if the undercover work Buck and JD had done had backfired on them. Josiah was looking into that possibility. Buck's latest cover was posing as a gun dealer, and he'd been at legitimate gun shows with some stock. He'd put out the word that he had some special items that he was willing to negotiate about. In private. With cold, hard, cash, thank you very much.

JD was a tech wizard and spent most of his time foolin' with equipment, but he also had done undercover work. Not long after landin' here, he'd posed as a tough kid who'd transferred to a Denver high school from Boston -- his accent was wearin' off the longer he lived in Colorado, but it'd been strong when he first come to Denver -- and had helped close down a pipeline that was supplyin' teens with no-serial-number hand guns.

Vin grinned, despite being worried about his missing teammates, at remembering the trouble JD couldn't keep out of. He was supposed to have acted like a D student, but he couldn't keep his brains hidden under a bushel like he'd been told to do. He'd had half the teachers in the school wantin' to talk to him to try and motivate their underachiever so that he could make better grades and go on to college. The guidance counselor had practically been in tears when, as part of the cover about the bust, JD had been "arrested" too, along with the other handful of teens that were caught with weapons at school. Buck had gotten ahold of the report card the school had on JD and had it framed and hung on the wall of their office. Even tryin' to make bad grades, JD had done much better in high school than Vin had managed. Of course, back then, Vin was on the streets a good part of the time…

Vin saw movement on the monitor and straightened up in his chair. Ezra was halfheartedly moving a stack of cards from one line to another, and Vin motioned to get his attention. "Ezra, we got some action comin' down."

Ezra moved next to him to watch. JD had set up the monitor to go from one camera angle to the next, and Ezra changed it so that the monitor would stay focused on the entrance. A large U-HUAL truck had pulled up to the side of the gate. They watched together as a second, then a third truck lined up behind the first one. Ezra stepped away to the other side of the trailer and pulled out his phone, his fingers dancing over the number pad, and Vin heard him telling their FBI contact to bring in the troops.

Vin cupped his chin, wondering why the owners had bothered with U-Hauls, when their original scheme, as reported by the night guard plant, had been to come in with semi-trailers. There were a lot of cigarettes in that warehouse; these trucks weren't going to hardly make a dent in the pile.

A dark blue van pulled up to the guard shack, and a tall, dark-haired man carefully got out of the driver's side. In contrast, the passenger door crashed opened and out bounded another tall man. Vin's attention was drawn to the passenger, who was now stretching his arms… and then he had to look twice at the man who seemed to be takin' up more than his share of space. He hit the control button to zoom in on the feller who'd hopped out of the passenger side.

And he recognized him; he'd sweated with him, bled with him, laughed with him, and maybe even cried with him over the years. He by-God knew who was walking with that familiar long-legged stride right up to the entry point to talk to the guard.

"Ezra! Sweet Jesus, that's Buck!"
Vin found his own phone and, fingers feeling awkward, punched in Chris' number. Ezra had practically skidded over and was leaning over Vin, his left hand gripping Vin's shoulder as he watched the monitor, his right hand reaching down to increase the sound from the hidden mike by the guard shack.

Looked like Nick, the guard and their inside agent, recognized Buck, because he pressed the panic button JD had installed, which would not only sound the alarm in the trailer they were using for surveillance, but would also trigger alarms at the FBI and ATF headquarters. Word of the missing men had raced through the ATF and FBI ranks, so Nick was aware that Buck had been kidnapped.

Chris answered the phone and Vin pushed away from the monitors and quickly moved to the side, so Ezra could continue to listen for any speech. Buck and the other man had reached the guard shack and Vin prayed that Nick could improvise whatever Buck needed him to do.

Vin focused on giving Chris the concise information his team leader needed, then returned and sat down beside Ezra at the monitor, shoulders touching, and indicated with his eyes for Ezra to tell him what was goin' on with Buck.

"Buck's told Nick that 'he had some business to conduct with these gents, and to give him the keys.' Nick agreed and relinquished the keys with several 'yes sirs' added to impress the van driver." Ezra held up his hand then and both listened as Buck started talking to the other man. Come on, Buck -- give us a clue how to play this hand.

As Buck walked back to the van, they heard him tell the other man that the guns were in a closed off section of the warehouse.

Ezra and Vin locked eyes and then both of them got up. There were no guns in that warehouse and once Buck's new business partner figured that out, Buck was gonna be in a world of trouble.

"We can't wait for back-up," Vin said matter-of-factly.

Ezra nodded. "I agree. I'll update the FBI, and you call Chris. Tell him we have to move in now, and to please, try not to shoot us."

As he and Ezra got their cell phones out again, Vin said, "Let's see if we can start by takin' out the truck drivers. I'll call Nick and fill him in. We'll wait till Buck has got his man in the warehouse and rush the other three, and then go for Buck's man." He handed Ezra a bulletproof vest, and then thrust his arms through his own vest, fastened it up tight and got out his gun. "Let's ride, partner."

** ** ** ** ** ** ** ** **
Federal Building, Denver, Colorado
Wednesday, early morning, June 27, 2001

One man dead. One man in the hospital lying in a coma, with no certainty he was going to be conscious ever again.

The two imbeciles in custody -- he was going to squeeze them until they sang a fucking opera about where the hell they had hidden JD.

Chris yanked open the door to headquarters and was glad there was hardly anybody there at two in the morning.

He felt that familiar cold rage icing through his veins again. He had become frozen in Hell when his sweet Sarah and Adam had died. The only thing that had thawed that ice had been the hot burn of bourbon or scotch or tequila sliding down his throat. Back then a kind of detente had been arranged, a truce where his pain was numbed and his mind could dwell on something other than the agony of losing them. He'd stopped while he still controlled the alcohol, before the booze damaged him beyond recall.

He could taste the wanting in the back of his throat. The desire to feel that fiery release before the pain of losing one of his own again icicled through his heart to take him down to freezing point depression.

Wasn't there some fairy tale about a boy who got ice stuck in his heart or his eye -- some damn body part -- and he became mean and cantankerous to the one who loved him?

He didn't want to be that person, didn't want to lash out at the people he knew cared about him --
people like Mary and his team. His team… minus one. So he controlled that rage, wrestled down that urge to pour whiskey down his gullet. His team and JD needed him. And right now, *Buck* needed him.

*One man dead. Another man who might well be dead by the afternoon. They could tell him nothing.*

Chris turned down a hallway, his boots echoing on the tile floor as he moved quickly in the quiet – the middle of the night quiet where sounds traveled and lights were dimmed – to where the morons were being held that needed the fear of Team Seven put into them.

Chris was proud of his team and never more so than tonight, when Vin and Ezra’d laid their lives on the line for a teammate. They’d made the right call – to go in before backup had arrived. Buck was alive – there was no telling what his kidnappers would have done once they’d realized there were no guns at that warehouse. The thought that his old friend had been tortured for information or out of spite made his hands ball up into fists as he strode towards the interview rooms.

Back at the warehouse, he’d debriefed Vin, then Ezra, and finally Nick Evans, the FBI agent posing as the night guard, about the sequence of events. Vin had been quiet, even more than usual, as he went through the circumstances that led to him using deadly force, and Chris planned to keep a close eye on him.

Vin, Ezra, and Nick had made a quick plan on the phone to disable the drivers waiting in their U-HUAL trucks first, but before Vin and Ezra arrived at the warehouse from across the road where the surveillance trailer was located, one of the drivers had gone into the warehouse with Buck and James Carson – the tall man who’d driven up with Buck in the dark blue van.

Chris turned left when the hallway dead ended, listening to his boots beating out a rhythm to accompany the tune of *find him; find him* that was playing in his brain.

While he walked briskly down the hall, Chris reviewed the de-briefing told to him earlier, looking for any loose ends that the shooting incident review board might try to pick apart. The three agents had separated after the two drivers were pulled out of their truck cabs and made to lie on the ground, their trucks blocking any view of them from the warehouse. Nick’s back entrance key to the warehouse had been given to Vin. He’d run to that doorway and quietly let himself in, leaving Ezra and Nick to deal with securing driver one and driver two.

Ezra’s part of the tale had told how the two drivers had started bleating that this wasn’t their idea as soon as they’d been jerked out of their trucks. He and Nick had made the two of them shut up, and after they’d been handcuffed, Ezra had left Nick on guard, and the FBI agent started questioning the two assholes. When backup arrived Nick would direct them inside.

Ezra had followed Buck and his kidnappers into the warehouse, sliding the door open quietly and taking cover inside as he tried to locate where Buck was taking the two men. Ezra’d targeted them and came closer, moving from one section of the warehouse to another, hidden by pallets upon pallets of crates of cigarettes. When he’d gotten as close as he dared, he had trained his gun on the one nearest Buck and identified himself as ATF, and ordered them to lie down on the floor. Buck had used the diversion to jump on the curly-haired man and try to subdue him. As they grappled, exchanging kicks and blows, the tall, dark-haired man pulled his gun and began shooting towards Ezra’s position, using the crates as cover just as Ezra was doing.

Vin had shot both kidnappers. The board wouldn’t fault him Chris had re-assured him, when Vin explained his actions. The curly-haired man, Greg Morgan, according to the information in his wallet, had overpowered Buck, who’d crashed to the ground unconscious after his opponent had pulled his own gun out, and used the butt end on Buck’s head before joining the gun battle. Buck
was in danger of being shot or used again as a hostage when the two kidnappers tried to make their escape.

Vin had climbed up into a loft area when he’d entered the warehouse by the back door; he’d explained to Chris he did that so he would have the advantage of height. The ex-ranger sniper had used those hard-earned skills and ended the shooting. Morgan had been seriously wounded. The dark-haired man, James Carson, had died before first aid could be rendered.

Ezra had said that Buck had come to, dazed-like and looked at his kidnapper’s bodies without comprehension at first. As Ezra had checked him for other injuries, Buck had realized what happened and told them that JD had been moved from where they both had been taken, and hidden to insure that Buck would give up the illegal guns willingly that these men had thought he’d had. He didn’t know where he and JD had been held. He was frantic to talk to the two other men in custody.

Chris had arrived at that point and taken control. Ezra’d been trying to calm Buck down. Vin kept giving first aid to Morgan until the ambulances arrived. Josiah and Nathan were a welcome sight, Chris having called and ordered them to end the surveillance of James Carson’s residence. Like Chris, they’d arrived after the events of the night had gone down. Chris had interviewed all four men involved with the shooting separately, and the recounting of the events of what happened outside and inside the warehouse matched. They’d follow procedure and notify the Office of Investigation at ATF headquarters, but it had been a righteous shoot.

Nick went with the unconscious man to the hospital, but not before Chris had shaken the FBI agent’s hand, a grip that conveyed his thanks for helping his team. The FBI backup had arrived also, and Chris had turned over the nuts and bolts of the now ruined investigation to them, so he could concentrate on his men.

Chris passed a row of interior office windows and caught sight of his reflection as he hurried by – he looked like shit, but then none of them had slept much since Monday.

One man killed at the warehouse. Another so seriously injured he might well be dead by noon. They couldn’t reveal JD’s whereabouts.

Two men in custody.

Two men who Buck had tried to attack after Chris had gotten from him the quick and dirty version of the kidnapping. Buck had been wild to get at them – hatred in his eyes and punishment promised in the way he balled his fists – but Vin and Ezra had kept him from assaulting their perps. Chris didn’t fool himself that they’d protected those criminals – they’d been protecting Buck from being brought up on assault charges for battering prisoners in custody.

Josiah, Ezra, Vin, and a FBI volunteer had taken the two prisoners down to ATF headquarters for questioning. He’d had to stay behind, talking to the coroner’s office and waiting for the arrival of a CSI team to process the blue van and James Carson’s body.

Nathan insisted it was necessary to take Buck to the hospital, since Buck had been knocked out in the fight, plus Chris and Nathan weren’t taking Buck’s word for it that he was okay. Buck had told them that he’d had been given a head injury when taken, and JD and he both had been tazed a number of times. Nathan wanted him checked out for any irregularities with his heart. Buck didn’t want to go in an ambulance, and Nathan agreed to drive him to the hospital.

Buck had gripped Chris’ arm before Nathan had herded him toward his vehicle. In a low voice, he demanded that Chris remove JD’s movie camera from the dark blue van and take it with him.
“Don’t watch it,” Buck had told him, and there was misery in his voice and pleading in his eyes. Chris agreed, but he did place the camera in an evidence bag and logged it in with the CSI crew before he left the warehouse. He locked it in his truck, hidden under a jacket. He’d find out from Buck what the hell was on that tape before he turned it into the evidence locker.

Chris stopped and took a deep breath before entering the observation room where Josiah was watching the prisoners through the one-way windows, each perp in a room that adjoined this room. It was almost show time. The perps had been separated upon being arrested; he’d talk to one and Josiah would interview the other. It was his decision to make about allowing Vin and Ezra to remain on the case after the weapons fire, but he’d walked that line before and thought he could keep them active. And he needed them. JD was still missing.

Josiah and Chris held a quick strategy session before separating to interview the two men, whose wallets had held Colorado drivers’ licenses identifying them as Michael Parks and Jonathan Parks, ages thirty-five and thirty-seven years old. They agreed there was no reason to keep Buck’s cover now. When these two went to court, Buck would have to testify and his identity as an ATF agent would be on record. If these two clowns knew that they’d kidnapped two federal agents, then maybe they’d crack a little faster. Time – they didn’t have time to dick around with these assholes.

Josiah laid a comforting hand on Chris shoulder, then turned and went to interview Michael Parks. Chris took a deep breath and pasted on his meanest look, the one that said “cross me and you die.” Or so Buck had told him many a time when they’d worked Homicide together, back in the day.

Chris shoved open the door and let it crash against the wall. He stalked over to the table where Jonathan Parks was waiting for him, sitting in a chair and handcuffed to the table.

He leaned over the table and violated every rule of personal space by breathing hard on the shit-head waiting for him. The guy was going to play it tough because he didn’t shift backwards, although Chris saw him blink reflexively at the intrusion. Chris stood straight and turned on the tape recorder, stating the relevant information, including reading Parks his rights again and affirming that he waivered having a lawyer. Then he began bargaining for JD’s life.

“Parks, this is how it’s going to go down. You are going to tell us where JD was taken -- and pronto, amigo -- and we don’t book you for attempted murder.”

The short blond man started talking fast while holding stubbornly to his space in the chair.

“Look here, lawman, it wasn’t my idea to do anything with that kid. I was just hired to be a driver and I didn’t ask any questions as to what was gonna be in my truck. You can’t charge me with anything – it wasn’t me that touched him and it wasn’t my cousin either. I don’t know where Jimmy C took him. I was just there to drive a truck. I don’t know anything about what Jimmy C wanted at that warehouse. I was just there to drive a truck. I didn’t do anything but drive a truck.”

Chris watched Parks lick his lips and swallow. He didn’t say anything, knowing the power of silence.

“But I can give you some information about Buck Wilson – this is what I overheard Jimmy C talking to Morgan about and I didn’t understand it at the time, but now I think I do. This Buck Wilson, tall man, mustache – he’s a gun dealer and he was partners with Jimmy C and Morgan. Yeah, they were all in it together. He’s kind of crazy, too; he tried to kill me back at that warehouse.

“That JD kid, Buck fucked him, not us. We didn’t touch the kid. You should be talking to Buck Wilson; he was partners with Jimmy C and Morgan. Jimmy’s dead and Morgan’s hurt real bad. You want some answers about the kid; you should talk to Buck Wilson. The word is that the man would
sell his own mother to turn a gun deal. If you sweat him, he’ll tell you ‘bout other gun deals he was working. Buck knows where that kid is; he was sweet on him, probably got him stashed somewheres real nice.”

Chris took in every word this low-life-son-of-a-bitch was saying, and he comprehended that something sexual had happened to JD while he was this man’s prisoner. But he kept his face impassive and promised himself that he’d fantasize about shooting him later – slowly -- first an arm, then a leg… And the S.O.B. just kept running his mouth.

“Buck pretended to be kidnapped is all, he were in on the deal from the beginning. He’s a gunrunner, a crook. And it was his idea to fuck the kid. We didn’t do anything; it were Buck’s idea and he sure enjoyed himself. That kid, JD, he didn’t mind one bit. Buck’s his man and fucks him all the time. I can always tell a homo when I see one, and JD, he’s a cocksucker. Probably natural like for him, so nobody made him do anything he didn’t want to do.”

Chris glared at Parks, who started right back up on his line of bullshit.

“I was just hired to drive a truck. Man didn’t say what he wanted when we drove to that warehouse, just told me and my cousin to stay in the truck till he was ready to load up his purchases. Buck is the one that could give you real information. He’s a gunrunner; I’m a truck driver. He fucked that kid; me and Michael didn’t touch him. You find him and there won’t be any of our spunk in him. It was Buck that done it, but the kid wanted him to do it. We didn’t rape him; Buck didn’t either, the kid wanted Buck to do him. JD loved sucking Buck’s dick--”

“Shut up! Buck Wilson is an ATF agent – think I’m gonna take your word over his about what happened? JD belongs to the ATF, too. We don’t find him in time, and cowboy, you are looking at murder one of a federal treasury agent!”

Parks slumped in the straight-back chair and let out a soft moan. “I’m fucked.”

Chris answered him in a pseudo-concerned tone of voice, wishing instead he could lay his hands on this pile of crap and just beat the answer out of him.

“Make it right, Parks. Just tell us where Jimmy C took JD.”

But Parks was shaking his head frantically and spilling words out of his mouth in his haste to confess. “I don’t know, we don’t know. Jimmy C told Morgan, but they didn’t tell me and Michael. Shit, shit, shit. I can tell you how to get to Morgan’s granny’s cabin, which was where Buck and JD and us all waited till Jimmy C got back from setting up the gun deal. Jimmy C, he was secretive like, and told us this mission was on a need-to-know basis, and that Michael and me didn’t need to know anything except how to drive a truck. Morgan, he was in charge when Jimmy C was gone. Anything happened to Wilson and JD, it was his doing, not mine or Michael’s.”

Chris looked at him, evaluating his body language and his words. He was afraid the asshole was telling the truth about not knowing where JD had been taken, but he was lying about not being involved with whatever sexual acts had been performed on JD. Chris knew now why Buck had been so adamant about Chris taking the movie camera, but not watching it. What ever had happened to JD and Buck, it had been filmed. Christ, they had filmed JD being assaulted with the kid’s own camera, the new, bells-and-whistles, digital camera that he was so thrilled about owning. If they got JD back, the kid probably wouldn’t even want to touch it.

No, he corrected himself. When they got him back.

Chris glared at Parks, but he wouldn’t push him to reveal more about what they’d coerced JD and
Buck into doing. Or what the four kidnappers had done to his men. Not now. They’d sweat the pair of them later for a confession to the charges of kidnapping, and assault.

They needed to focus on JD being found. Buck had said that JD had been taken from him around two to three o’clock in the afternoon. That was twelve hours ago. Jimmy C had told Buck that if he didn’t cooperate with him, he’d never see JD again and the kid would die a cold, hungry death. Jimmy C had drugged JD before he left with him. Buck said when JD was unconscious Jimmy C and Morgan had carried JD out of the cabin. The kid was going to wake up somewhere, and not know where he was or what was happening to him.

Buck’s account had Jimmy C returning around eight o’clock the same evening he took JD away. Seven hours later, and he had no clue where his youngest team member had been locked away.

**Jimmy C dead. Greg Morgan in critical condition and unconscious. They could tell him nothing, but he was going to tear their lives apart, trying to find some clue as to where they had decided to hide JD.**

Chris pointed a finger at Parks. “You start thinking of everything you ever heard those two bastards say, and everything you ever heard anyone else say about them. If your information leads us to JD, we’ll drop the attempted murder charges.” Then Chris walked out of the room. He opened the other interview room door and motioned for Josiah to join him. They went into the observing area where Vin and Ezra were seated at a table, monitoring the interrogation. By the sick look on their faces, they’d realized they had nothing, except the knowledge that JD had been raped, in some fashion or other. Josiah cleared his throat.

Chris nodded his head for Josiah to give his report.

“Michael Parks is unholy proud of being an amateur film-maker. He was more than willing to talk about how he directed his actors – Buck and JD – to have various forms of sex together.” Josiah took a deep breath. “Jimmy C left the three of them, Greg Morgan, and Michael and Jonathan Parks, up there for days with no TV, no radio, nothing to do except watch the prisoners. They were bored and found JD’s camera in his backpack. Michael, who has always wanted to break into the porn industry, decided to make a film. JD and Buck refused to take part and to ‘motivate’ Buck, who he pegged as the dominant partner – he is convinced that Buck and JD had been homosexual lovers already – they tazered JD, over and over, until Buck agreed to his terms.” Josiah looked frustrated and shook his head. “But Michael says he doesn’t know where Jimmy C took JD. Greg Morgan knew, but he and his cousin were left out of the loop. No ‘need to know,’ he was told.”

Josiah ran a hand through his hair, and looked bleakly at Chris. “It doesn’t seem to make any difference to him that JD and Buck are ATF agents, but in order to reduce the charges, he’s agreeable to telling us whatever he knows about Morgan and Jimmy C. Did you get the same information from Jonathan Parks, Chris?”

“Basically.” Chris kept his anger simmering behind his facade of normality, but his team knew him too well. Josiah gave him his ‘I’m here if you want to talk,” look; Vin's eyes sent his usual message of support.

Ezra’s eyes widened and he said, “Gentleman. We need to find that camera. We can’t allow them be exposed like that.” Chris held his hand up.

“I’ve got it. Buck didn’t want me to watch it, but I’m going to have to, just in case one of these assholes said something that might be a clue. I’ll let him know first, though.”

Chris loosened up the hold he held on his anger, and felt that adrenaline edge filling him, sustaining
his tired body.

His team looked at him, waiting for their orders.

“Vin, Ezra… You two head up to that cabin, see if you can find any clues. I’m going to send the CSI team from the warehouse up there with you.” He looked at his watch. “It’s going to be daybreak in a couple of hours. Rouse the neighbors, see what you can find out about Morgan, the land the cabin’s on and any likely isolated spots that a van could drive to with abandoned buildings, or hell, JD could be in a vehicle somewhere, locked in the trunk. JD’s small, but even so, packing him around couldn’t have been very easy. Jimmy must have picked a spot that he could drive right up to, one that wouldn’t draw any attention.”

Vin and Ezra stood up, standing shoulder to shoulder.

“Relay your information to Josiah. And by noon I’ll need your SIR report on the shooting at the warehouse for the OI to start the investigation. You both followed procedure, so I don’t expect the Office of Investigation to find any fault.”

Ezra replied, “We shall endeavor to do our best, Mr. Larabee, sir.” He nodded to Chris and Josiah, and walked out the door.

Vin didn’t say anything but relaxed slightly when Chris reached out and clasped his arm, drawing him close. Vin had shot those men because it needed doing, but he didn’t enjoy killing.

“You okay?” he asked in a low, private voice.

Vin nodded and Chris felt him droop a little against his side before pushing himself away from Chris’ embrace. “I’m thinkin’ Buck’s going to be hating himself about now. You tell him – we got his back. JD ain’t going to hold Buck at fault, but I think it’ll take some convincin’ for Buck to see that.”

Josiah said, “John Dunne is a good man; he’ll make Buck see reason. So let’s find him so the healing between them can begin.”

Vin gave a half-wave and walked out the door, his quick steps echoing in the silence. Josiah raised his eyebrows and remarked to Chris, “Do you want me to keep on with these two sinners? And go over what we have on Jimmy C and Morgan – to see if there’s any pattern to their behaviors, any places they’ve holed up before, where they might have taken our boy?”

Chris said, “Yep. I’ll call the CSI guys and have them forward their findings to you. I’m hoping that the treads of the van or Jimmy C’s shoes might show traces of where he’d last been. Also – figure a time line and distance boundaries for where Jimmy C took JD.”

Josiah nodded and Chris clapped him on the arm. Josiah’s help was going to be invaluable, since so much of an investigation relied on nitpicking details.

Chris said, “I’ve got to do my report about the shooting and send it off to the OI. Nathan knows to call me when the tests are done on Buck. I have to watch that film, and talk to him about it. There’s just no way to keep this totally quiet. These two assholes are going to keep blabbing about it.” Chris caught Josiah’s eye. “I’d like to destroy that film – and you didn’t hear me say that – but until I’m certain it doesn’t contain information we need, I can’t.”

“Are we going to charge the Parks cousins with forcing JD and Buck to have sex?”

Chris didn't answer.
The desire to hit something, the wall, or the two assholes sitting in the interrogation rooms, was so overwhelming right then. Josiah gripped Chris’ shoulder.

“Chris?”

“If we don’t find JD in time... Buck’s gonna be in bad shape.” He thought to himself that if he was Buck, he’d be tempted to eat his gun if JD died.

He answered Josiah’s question, wanting to get the image of Buck so desperate out of his head. “I don’t know about the charges – depends what the film shows.”

Josiah gave Chris a little shake. “I’d spout off a proverb from an Eastern religion, but I’m afraid you’d want to shoot me then.” Chris smiled despite himself. Josiah continued, “We’re going to find him, and JD and Buck will work their troubles out between them. What happened to them might test their friendship, but I have faith in them both.”

He squeezed Chris’ shoulder again. “Now, I’m going to go back in and convince these sinners that confession is good for the soul.” Josiah let go of Chris’ shoulder and turned to open the interview room door.

“Josiah…” Josiah turned back to meet his eyes. “Thanks.”

Josiah acknowledged his words by a bow of his head, then disappeared inside the interview room.

Chris went to his office, to complete the report on the shooting and to wait for Nathan’s call, the tension in his body coiled into his muscles, ready, waiting for the time to spring into action.

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Buck was in Hell.

He figured he deserved to be here. Lord, but he’d done so many things wrong in his life.

But JD shouldn’t be keeping him company. The kid belonged on the other side of the fence, up with the angels. He tried to tell JD that, that he should be a cherub and sit at the hand of God, but JD just made a face.

“I ain’t no naked baby angel, Buck.”

“Well, you’re too damn short to be one of the archangels or seraphim. You’d be real cute as one of the cherubim, why don’t you give it a try?”

“Buck, I’d rather be in Hell with you.”

No, that wasn’t right; JD was too good to stay down here in the fiery depths with an old reprobate like him. He’d have to trick him into going to Heaven. Trouble was, his head hurt and it was keeping him from coming up with a clever plan. Well, he’d send JD up to the pearly gates tomorrow. For tonight, JD could snuggle up with him. Buck kissed him on the forehead and told him to go to sleep and not mind the devils making all that racket down on one of the lower levels of Hell. He sighed and felt guilty that JD was in his arms. It felt nice, but it was wrong. Shit, no wonder he’d ended up in Hell. He always did do the wrong thing, if it felt good enough.

“Buck, we’re here. Wake up.”
Something was pulling at him, separating him from JD. He felt himself moving upward, swimming up through dense layers, and he didn’t want to leave JD behind. He tried to go back for him, but he was stuck, he couldn’t go back down through those layers.

“Buck, wake up now. We’re at the Federal Building, and Chris is waiting for us.”

Buck opened his eyes and blearily mumbled, “Shit, I left JD by himself. He’s still in Hell.”

Nathan said, “Hush now, you did no such thing. It wasn’t your fault you two were kidnapped.”

“I tried to get him to go to Heaven, but the dern fool didn’t want to be an angel.”

“Buck. Wake up. You’re still half asleep here, talking about angels and Hell.” Nathan jiggled his shoulder.

Buck roused himself, the dream about JD and Hell already fading from his mind. He looked at Nathan and scrubbed his hands over his face.

“I’m awake now. Let’s go.”

They walked into their office, Buck’s eyes sliding past his and JD’s desks, which, as always, were tucked up together. He and JD’d had a lot of fun in their little space of the office, tossing whiteout back and forth, him swiping JD’s pens and JD stealing them back.

Chris was waiting for them at the door to his office.

“Buck, have a seat.” As Buck pushed past him, Chris gave him a pat on his upper arm. He took a seat and waited for Chris to question him, but Chris was still talking to Nathan.

“Anything more to tell me?”

“Just what I told you on the phone. He needs to get some rest, he can have Tylenol for his head in--” Nathan paused, “two and a half hours.”

“Get some sleep. When people are up and stirring, I want you to go with Buck and back track from the campground. Jimmy C spotted Buck somewhere between his condo and Estes Park. Let’s see if anybody recognizes his mug shot.”

“All right. You going to look out for Buck?”

“Yeah. I’m going to take him home with me to get some sleep for a few hours. I’ll call you when he’s awake.”

Chris closed his door and pulled up a chair next to Buck. Buck appreciated that gesture -- Chris sitting across the desk from him would feel too much like an interrogation. This was going to be hard enough as it was, to have to tell his old friend the things that had been done to him and the things he’d done to JD. He knew he had to tell him. He’d come to that conclusion while waiting to be treated at the hospital. Probably Blondie and Shorty, as JD had named them, had said something stupid, instead of keeping their mouths shut. The two of them together had only shared half a brain. Too bad the one idea Blondie’d had, to keep themselves amused while the long hours had crawled by, had been to play with JD’s new camera and decide it would be fun to shoot a porn flick.

Chris hadn’t been made a Supervisory Special Agent because he was good-looking, in his own scrawny way. The man did have a brain, and Buck knew Chris would know that whatever was in that camera had to do with the kidnapping.
“Chris, turn on the tape recorder and let’s get this done. I did some bad things while they held us; I feel like you should be arresting me, not taking me home with you to bunk for the rest of the night.”

“Look, I know more than you realize, and nobody’s holding you responsible. When we find JD, he’s gonna tell you the same thing.”

“He already did. Before I… fucked him, during fucking him and afterwards. I still feel like… like a pervert. Like I committed incest. And I’ve never wanted to kill anybody so much as I wanted to kill those three… I can’t even think of somethin’ bad enough to call them. They thought it was so damn funny. And they got it in their God-dammed heads that JD and I were already a couple, so they seemed to think that gave them the right to force me to have sex with him. They made JD do stuff to me, too. Blow-jobs, and kissing. And touching. And my treacherous body liked that a lot, didn’t it. JD’s mouth on my dick got me good and hard real fast. Even with an audience, and if that doesn’t prove I’m a pervert, then I don’t know what does. I deserve to go to Hell.

Chris gripped Buck’s bicep. “Cut it out. Once JD’s back home, if you still ain’t right about all this, I’m gonna tote you to a shrink.”

Buck gave a watery laugh, and then said seriously, “Chris, let’s just do it, okay.”

Chris nodded and poised his finger over the record button on the tape recorder. “I have to watch the film, you know that, don’t you? But you don’t have to watch it with me. Your choice, Buck.”

Buck shook his head emphatically no. “I trust you, Chris. If there’s some part you need me to explain, I will, but I’d rather not watch me forcing JD. And if we can keep from having to use the film as evidence, then I want to burn it. Me and JD, we can burn it together.” If he’s not dead by the time we find him. Oh, Sweet Jesus, please let him live through this.

Chris pushed the tape player button. “This is Supervisory Special Agent Chris Larabee, interviewing Special Agent Buck Wilmington. The date is June 27, 2001. The time is…

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**Dunne and Wilmington apartment, Denver, Colorado**

*Friday, late evening, June 29, 2001*

Buck hit his pillow a couple more times, scrunched it up, and tried again to go to sleep. Chris had offered to put him up again at the ranch, where he’d stayed for a few hours after being released from the hospital and last night, but he wanted to come back home to try to sleep.

He was dead tired, but then they all were. Every line of investigation had been checked out, from Jimmy C’s and Greg Morgan’s pictures being shown around every place Buck and JD had stopped at on their way to the campground, to interviewing their family members and neighbors and friends, trying to find out if anybody knew a place the two men might have used to hide JD.

He rolled over to his side and wiggled around on the bed. He couldn’t get comfortable and his mind was like a hamster in a wheel. He just kept thinking about how they’d failed to find JD.

Forensics had helped a little; the tread on Morgan’s van had held traces of gravel and dirt common to the Rocky Mountain area. Jimmy C’s shoes and clothes had the same traces as the tread, with one
difference -- traces of straw had been found. So they were concentrating on rural areas in the mountains where straw might be located. Farms, kennels, and horse ranches in a three and a half hour radius from the cabin where he and JD had been kept were being targeted. The areas closest to the old cabin, Morgan’s home, and Jimmy C’s cabin had been the most heavily searched, but they’d found nothing.

Morgan – the son-of-a bitch – had died this morning without ever regaining consciousness. Buck had been praying the man would wake up and spill the beans about where JD was, but God wasn’t listening to him. Buck tightened his hands into fists as he thought about the men who’d hurt JD, then relaxed them again. He needed to sleep, so he could focus on finding JD. He’d been absolutely no help at all this evening and Chris had ordered him to go to bed.

Chris had brought in Robert Greer and sweated him, but while the man had co-operated, he’d only told them the things they’d already figured out – and nothing that would incriminate himself. He claimed that Jimmy C had worked for him for a while at a warehouse but had been let go. He admitted to meeting with Buck ‘Wilson’ because he was hoping the gun dealer could help him locate rare antique firearms, such as Smith and Wesson revolvers and Kentucky Long Rifles, for his collection.

Josiah had worked up a profile on both Jimmy C and Morgan, and he figured they’d picked an isolated place in the mountains. Both men had a lot in common with survivalists, and Josiah had talked to informants with knowledge of the local survivalists communities, but nobody recognized either man.

Morgan had brought in the Parks cousins; they’d been at the same high school. They’d kept up a loose association over the years, sometimes going hunting together or drinking together.

Where Morgan and Jimmy C had crossed paths had probably been in prison, as they’d both served a term at the Colorado Territorial Correctional Facility in 1999.

Buck took his pillow and pounded it again, then tried again to shut off his mind. He decided he’d try to count presidents. A degree in history ought to be good for some damn thing.

After he’d gotten up to the current president, Bush the second, he’d given it up. He rolled onto his back and his mind slipped back to the last time he’d seen JD.

JD had been handcuffed to Buck, and they were lying on a foam pad that had been dragged out of the bedroom. They’d had sex again late that morning, Blondie directing them in the poses he wanted to see. This time he’d wanted JD to blow Buck for a while, then Buck had to fuck JD, his legs over Buck’s shoulders. For lube they used an ancient can of Crisco, which their kidnappers had found in a cupboard days ago, after Buck had said he’d do it – he’d have sex with his friend. He couldn’t stand to see JD shocked any more; people could die from tazer misuse and while JD was young and strong, Buck was afraid the shocks were going to damage his heart.

So they were just lying in each other’s arms, face to face, after the exhibition they’d had to do for their kidnappers, a blanket for warmth covering their nakedness, when Jimmy C had returned, elated that a buyer had been found for the guns he thought Buck had hidden away.

The guy in charge, Jimmy C, hadn’t cared that Blondie had branched out into making porn flicks. He’d unlocked the cuffs, a stun gun pressed against JD’s skin to buy compliance. JD was given his pants back to put on, but no shoes or shirt. Then Jimmy C produced a syringe and shot the kid up with some kind of fast acting sedative. As JD had become sleepy and started to sway, Buck had demanded that they let him hold the kid. Shorty had laughed, and told him, “Sure, hold onto your baby.” JD had whispered to him to take care of himself. Then he’d passed out with his head on
Buck’s chest. Buck supported his friend’s limp, dead weight, hugging him, until Morgan and Jimmy C took the kid from him and carried him out the door.

The last time he’d seen JD the kid had been helpless, not even conscious. He prayed Morgan and Jimmy C were frying in Hell and he hoped they were saving a place for the Parks cousins.

He couldn’t stand lying in his bed any longer and he got up and went down the stairs. He went over to the big picture windows for a while, staring mindlessly out at the Denver skyline, then detoured into the bathroom. When he came out he intended to climb back up the stairs, but instead he found himself opening JD’s bedroom door. He stepped inside, and took a deep breath. The room smelled faintly like JD did, and he supposed that meant the room needed a good cleaning. Still, he found himself relaxing a little, here in JD’s space. He slowly headed for JD’s bed and without really thinking about it – because he didn’t want to think about what thinking about it would mean -- he climbed into JD’s bed and pulled up the covers. He laid his head down on JD’s pillow and closed his eyes. He felt close to JD here, like this, and he thought he could finally sleep. ‘Thanks, buddy,’ and he felt himself sliding into welcome slumber.

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Buck found himself wandering down a well-marked trail, trees in their full fall glory of colors everywhere. There were lots of paths here; he could see them off to the side and sometimes they would cross the trail he was on. Signs for mountain biking showed various directions a biker could take. But he was alone here. There were no bikers, or campers, or fisherman sitting in boats on the distant lake. The only sign of life was a hawk circling above him.

A part of him knew he was dreaming, but why was this tame landscape turning up in his subconscious? The trees were wrong for Colorado; it was early summer, not fall, but here the trees were a glorious mix of yellows, oranges, and reds. Well, he’d wake up before too long. He might as well keep exploring. He debated which path to take now, but when he felt a pull towards the one on the left, he shrugged and turned his steps that way, the hawk crying out overhead.

That pull was stronger now, and he hurried along with a sense of expectation. There was something here that he needed to see. Something he needed to find. Something that was lost.

He was hiking along at a great pace now, curiosity and anticipation lengthening his strides, the hawk flying ahead of him to land on branches until he had almost reached it, then flying ahead of him again. He thought he must be closer to whatever was drawing him because the feeling steadily got stronger the more he traveled on this path.

He heard the hawk scream as he came around a bend in the path and broke into a run. There -- on top of a… a bunker? What the hell was a bunker doing in the middle of this park? But what was the shape on top of it? He came closer to the odd building, which was mostly underground from the look of it. He gave an enormous sigh of relief, and then felt an onslaught of guilt and shame. The figure sitting cross-legged on the bunker was JD.

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** Devils Gulch Rd, Larimer County, Colorado**
Saturday, early morning, June 30th, 2001
“Nathan, I’m telling you I don’t understand one little bit of it, but I have a strong hunch that we should head east from here.” Buck felt weird even saying this out loud, but Nathan wanted to continue the search for JD in a more methodical fashion, thoroughly covering the area they’d been assigned – not shooting off in some direction without apparently any rhyme or reason.

“Look, you know we could miss him unless we do this search in a grid fashion.” Nathan tried for a conciliatory tone of voice, but Buck just knew the medic was wondering if those head injuries he’d gotten was responsible for some other effect on his danged mind.

Well, if he had to, he’d split off from Nathan, go back and get Lady and head east. But that would get Chris on his back about returning to the hospital to get checked out, and it would delay the search. He sighed, knowing he didn’t really have anything to lose by telling Nathan what had happened in his dream. Maybe Nathan could explain it – or at least humor him.

“Pull over, okay? What I’m going to tell you makes me sound crazy as a loon – I know it does – but it’s like I’m being compelled to find JD this way.” Buck swallowed hard as Nathan shot him a concerned look and pulled the Ford Explorer over to the side of the road.

“Just hear me out, pard, I promise I’m harmless. Last night I dreamed I found JD. He was in some park that had old bunkers in it and it was fall, judging from the trees. It wasn’t anyplace around here. JD, he said he’d pulled me to him, said that he was somewhere under ground – sort of like that bunker he was sitting on top of – but smaller. He’s getting weak, Nathan. He’s run out of water and food and he’s trapped in that underground place.”

Nathan eyes were full of sympathy. He said, “Buck, you’ve been under tremendous stress. It’s no wonder you dreamed you found JD, but it was just a dream. We can’t let your dream keep us from searching for him the right way. We’ll find him, Buck, but not if we just let you meander wherever you think he might be.” He reached over and patted Buck on the arm.

“JD said that’s what the rest of our team would say. He said to tell everyone that where he and I were talking – it wasn’t really a dream. It was more like a place where our souls went walking to meet each other. JD said that park with the bunker was someplace he’d go to when he was a kid. He was tired, Nathan. He said he didn’t remember the name of the park, but it was close to his old home.”

Buck snuck a peek at Nathan, to see if he was twirling his fingers at his temples in the crazy sign, and was encouraged to see that Nathan was listening intently.

“He told me that being in that dark place under the earth… well, it was changing him. He could hear sounds that were far away. Cars, Nathan. He couldn’t hear them when he first woke up, but he can now. Birds, cows. And his sense of smell has gotten out of hand. It’s driving him wild, because of the smells both inside that underground prison of his and outside. He can hold his hand over his arm and he can feel it. And his eyes have adjusted to the dark. He said now he can see plain as daylight inside that hole of a place he’s stuck in. He couldn’t see a thing after he’d worked the blindfold off his face, but he can see now. Where he’s at is made out of concrete blocks and there’s old broken down shelves in there. He’s chained to the wall.”

Buck looked earnestly at his teammate, knowing he sounded like he was coo-coo for Cocoa Puffs. “JD was on top of that bunker, in the park-dream place. I tried to climb up to him, but I couldn’t get there. I don’t know why and I tried and tried. JD wanted me to help him. I… I failed to keep him safe when we were snatched. Hell, if he hadn’t been with me, he never would have been grabbed.
JD, he finally told me to stop trying to save him in that dream world; he said we were connected – he could feel it and he was going to give me some help so that I could find him in the real world. Nathan, he touched his heart and drew out from it a golden kind of rope. He threw it to me and said for me to hold on tight to it and follow it back to him. I tied it around myself. He had to lay down then. Giving me that pretty rope to bind us together – it wore him plumb out. He said he’d be waiting for me. And then I woke up.” Buck grabbed Nathan’s arm. “I’m telling you I can tug on that cord and know which direction he’s at. He’s east of here. I know it sounds like I’m a lunatic, but Nathan… I know I can find him. But we’ve got to hurry. Don’t make me waste time by having to go off on my own.”

“Why didn’t you tell me – hell, or tell Chris -- about your dream this morning?” Nathan was looking thoughtful. Buck looked confused, and then shrugged.

“I didn’t remember it till a little while ago. When you wanted to turn north, I just remembered.”

Nathan was quiet for a moment, and a car passed them by, reminding Buck that they needed to go now because JD… He closed his eyes for a moment, and felt that cord, now invisible instead of golden, become just a bit thinner. JD was so weak. Buck opened his eyes and looked at Nathan when the man began to talk, more to himself than to Buck.

“His senses are becoming hyperactive after a period of isolation. You described meeting him in the spirit plane – soul walking – and you two are bound by a gold cord between your bodies. You had sex together. Sex can be one of the ways the two become synchronized with each other. You’ve always been close – as if you were drawn together from the first time you met. I remember when you met JD. It was like… two magnets being attracted to each other.”

Nathan started the Explorer back up. Buck was prepared to beg, plead, pitch a fit, whatever it took for Nathan to head towards JD, but Nathan pulled out and headed east.

“Just tell me which way to turn, okay? I’m calling Josiah to report what we’re doing and to ask him to do some research. I want him to look for parks or forests with some kind of old underground structures. JD said he went there as a kid, right? I know he and his mom didn’t have much money, so they probably stayed close to Boston.”

“You don’t think I’m crazy? Like some old coot looking for the Lost Dutchman mine?” Buck was grateful but also a little stunned. Why did Nathan believe him? It didn’t make any sense.

“If I’m right… I’m pretty sure I’m right… the more I think about it… Yeah. I’m right.” Nathan pushed the gas pedal down and flipped his lights on for silent running.

“What? What are you right about? What the hell did you figure out, Nathan?”

But Nathan had speed dialed Josiah and with a look at Buck he said, “Josiah. Have you got anything new? Okay. Well, we’ve had a breakthrough. Buck and I think we can locate JD. Can you do some more research? Maybe it will help.” He told Josiah to look for a park near Boston that had bunkers in it.

Nathan listened to Josiah and then said, “I don’t have time to go into the details, but…” and he looked at Buck with a combination of curiosity and amazement, “Buck’s evidently a guide. And JD is his sentinel. They’ve bonded and we’re following the pull of the bond right now. The universe works in mysterious ways, indeed, my friend.”

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Larimer County, Colorado
Saturday, late morning, June 30th, 2001

JD pulled again on the chain that was keeping him in this hellhole. He didn’t want to die here, didn’t want his body to be found adding to the stink of his waste. Gah, smelling his own shit and piss just added to the misery of being abandoned underground. He picked up a broken bit of concrete block and tried to summon up the energy to keep hitting the chain, trying to break it. What the hell else did he have to do? It kept his mind off his troubles and the way that he was hallucinating, hearing sounds. Surprisingly, he could see in the dark now. That was real. He was pretty sure that was real.

The gun deal must have happened and something had gone wrong, but Buck was okay. He knew that. He didn’t exactly know how he knew it, but he did. He’d dreamed about Buck. Buck had found him at that state park he’d gone to sometimes when he was a kid, where he’d raced his bike over the rough terrain. Those bunkers -- homeless people would live there sometimes and his mother told him they were off-limits, but he and his buddies would go explore them sometimes. Probably that was why he dreamed about them -- he was underground and they were mostly underground.

It had been so good to see Buck again. He’d thrown a rope -- it was weird how he’d just pulled it from his heart -- to Buck, so his partner wouldn’t let him get lost. It was a guide rope, and in his dream he’d told Buck to use it to find him. He and Buck -- tied together. Tied the knot together. The other guys on Team Seven had teased them sometimes about acting like an old married couple, most likely because of the way they could argue without really arguing. He and Buck had laughed about it. Now they’d done everything expected of a married couple. They’d had sex. Terrible, forced, sex, but it was with his best friend and that part had made it bearable.

For him, anyway. Maybe not for Buck, though. He’d wanted to beat those idiots who’d fancied themselves pornographers black and blue for what they’d made Buck do, but he hadn’t freaked out because of having sex with Buck. He was more of a two, or maybe even a three, on the Kinsey scale. Although he hadn’t had any encounters with men since he’d been eighteen, and those experiences hadn’t been the kind of sex he and Buck had been made to perform for their demented audience. Back then he’d done mutual masturbation or just touching each other’s dicks and, with Michael, there’d been kissing. He’d thought of it as kid stuff. Just kids experimenting with how their bodies worked. Ever since he’d lost his virginity to Pamela Brian, though, he’d focused on girls.

He guessed Buck hadn’t ever had sex with a guy before, not even kissing or touching dicks together, but he’d known what to do. Buck sometimes talked about how his mother’s lifestyle had educated him to be knowledgeable about a lot of things that had been covered in the class JD had taken on social deviance.

He put down his makeshift hammer, and overcome with dizziness again, laid down on the packed earth floor. He heard a bug on the other side of the room walking on the wall. He could hear cars if he focused. He was hallucinating those sounds. Funny, he didn’t feel like he was going crazy, but then, would a person know when they started diverting from reality?

He didn’t know. He wished he could see Buck again, and the rest of his team. They were his family. His band of brothers. And Casey. He’d thought maybe they would move on from the casual sporadic dating they’d done to something more. He’d miss her, too. He was so tired, and he was going to die soon. Maybe he’d just pass in his sleep. That seemed like a good way to go. It was cold under the ground, and he only had on a pair of jeans. He felt like he was always close to hypothermia. Before he got so weak, he’d moved around as much as the chain would let him, to generate some heat. But
now, if the temperature dropped he’d succumb for sure. He was thirsty, he’d long ago finished the water his kidnapper had left for him. There was moisture on the walls and he kept licking it wherever it gathered. It wasn’t enough to keep him alive for long.

The stale ham sandwich and candy bar that had been tossed on the ground for him was also history. Maybe he could catch that bug, if it came closer to him.

He thought again about Buck. It was irrational, but he just kept sending out mental S.O.S.’s to his partner. ‘Find me, Buck Wilmington. I need to tell you again that what happened to us wasn’t your fault.’ He wanted to scream it, but his vocal cords were so abused from all the shouting he’d done when he’d first woken up in the dark, that all he could do now was croak out the words.

He closed his eyes, but he didn’t sleep. He visualized that golden cord that was attached to his heart and he pictured himself winding it in, a heavy weight on the other side. Sometimes the weight veered off and JD had to tug on it extra hard to get the weight of Buck – yeah, Buck was on the end of the cord – to come along in the right direction.

“You are losing your mind, John Dunne,” he whispered to himself. He didn’t care. He’d play this game of “Buck-find–me” until it was time to cross. Maybe his mom would be there; he’d love to see her again. “Guess I’ll find out soon enough what happens when people die.”

Maybe he did sleep for a while. Or fainted or passed out. He was still on this earth when he came to, though, and the hallucinations were getting worse. He thought he could hear Buck and Nathan calling his name. Maybe it was angels, coming to take him to his mother. He grinned a little. Buck would have snorted at the thought that his voice could be mistaken for an angel’s beautiful tones.

The angels were getting closer. Angel-Buck was demanding that JD answer him, right now, God-damn-it! JD tsked over an angel taking the Lord’s name in vain. If the angel kept that up, he’d be sent down to the other place. JD didn’t want to be responsible for a fallen angel landing in Hell, so he made an enormous effort and yelled as loud as he could. His throat hurt so bad. He hoped the angels heard him and that they would come and make him feel better.

He could hear the angels yelling his name again. He shook his head at the way these angels seemed to be lost. Why didn’t they just appear inside his underground prison?

He yelled again, just Buck’s name, though. That was all could do. He listened as the angels pounded on the door and yelled his name over and over. He was too tired to answer them, though.

Then he heard a gunshot. He was wondering why angels had guns – that didn’t seem right – when the door of his own personal hell opened and the angels rushed in.

Funny, this angel even looked like Buck. And the other one looked like Nathan.

He tried to tell Buck-angel to quit his crying, that he was glad to see him and Nathan-angel, and if it was time to go, well then, he was ready.

But all he managed to whisper was, “Am I g-going to heaven, Buck?” before everything grayed out into darkness again.

* * * * * * * *
Chris Larabee reached over and grabbed Buck’s arm to keep him from walking out of JD’s hospital room. “You’ve got to stop sneaking out as soon as he starts to stir. He asks for you, he worries over you, and then the doctors have to inject stuff in his IV to calm him down. Nathan says that he’s showing too much sensitivity to those drugs – they’re putting him out like a light.”

Buck swallowed hard and made himself look his team leader and old friend in the eye. “I know, Chris. I know. But it’s my fault he’s in that bed and… I can tell him I’m sorry till the cows come home, and he’s just gonna tell me I’ve got nothing to be sorry about, but it was my fault, Chris. I don’t know how he can stand to hold my hand like he does when he’s asleep. I try and slide my hand out and he hangs on even tighter.”

There was a cough behind him and a heartfelt sigh. Buck felt pinned; JD had finished waking up before Buck could get out of his sight. Damn Chris anyway, for keeping him here. Then JD was hesitantly speaking in a quiet voice.

“I need to... touch you because it helps, Buck. You keep the world from become crazy again; I don’t know why.” Buck turned to see JD struggling to sit up in his bed. He wanted to rush over and help him but felt paralyzed with dread. JD managed on his own, and Buck felt like crying because he hated feeling so reluctant to touch his partner, but more than that he dreaded seeing fear of him in JD’s eyes.

JD pitched his voice a little louder and looked directly at him. “And I’ve told you before and I’ll just keep saying it till it makes sense in that stubborn head of yours. It wasn’t your fault we were grabbed.
It wasn’t your fault what … what happened. I’m glad it was you, Buck, and not one of them. I’m okay. I’m sorry that you had to do what you didn’t want to do. If I could change that you know I would. But don’t avoid me now; I want to go home with you. Please?"

Chris gave Buck a narrowed-eyed glare that translated to, “Don’t be a horse's behind,” before giving him a shove towards JD’s bed.

“Kid, this is the first time you’ve sounded like your old self. Buck’s gonna fill you in on a few things. I’m gonna see when your doctor wants to kick your scrawny ass out of here.” He gave a sketchy wave goodbye and headed out, carefully closing the door.

Buck closed his eyes for a second to screw up his nerve. JD was coherent now, not mumbling about angels and his lost hat. Or warning Buck to look out for the tazer. Damn, this kid had been through so much – and he still worried more about Buck than he did himself.

He owed it to his friend – his unwilling lover – to explain how his life had just changed 180 degrees. He shook his head – both of their lives had been flipped around as if they’d been in a blanket toss.

“Buck?” Shit, JD sounded like somebody had stomped on his puppy. Hell, he’d tried to comfort the kid during their kidnapping; he couldn’t be a chicken–shit now and let him think Buck didn’t want anything to do with him. That was just plain wrong.

“Buck?” And finally, he was able to move next to his friend and pat JD’s arm.

“JD, you want some water? You hungry? You’ve been on IV’s for the last couple of days, but I could run to the cafeteria and get you anything you want. How’s your throat? Still sore?”

“Water sounds good. But what happened, Buck? How did you find me? I think… um… I thought you were an angel. And I can hear stuff, Buck. I can hear Chris talking to a nurse. I…” JD cocked his head and listened for a moment. “I can hear your heartbeat. That’s wild. How can I do that stuff?” He looked worried. “I’m not hallucinating, am I?”

“No, you’re not. Don’t you fret about that. Your other senses are stronger too, aren’t they?” JD nodded, looking confused. Buck filled the Styrofoam cup sitting on the hospital table and handed it to his friend. JD drank some, made a face – treated city water -- and handed the cup back. Buck twisted it in his hand while he prepared to drop a bomb on the kid.

“JD, Nathan figured it out. You being kept in the dark alone, the sex we’d had. He says we must have both been latent, but that the gene hadn’t been turned on until all that sex and stress happened. Hell, even all the tazering we had might have helped switch us on. And we’re locked into each other now. Bonded, he called it. The bond helped me find you, buddy, but we’re at the early stages and I don’t know what I’m supposed to do. We’re keeping this to ourselves for now. Only our team knows, and you can’t let on to the doctors. They’re bound to report it and we don’t need the Army breathing down our necks.”

JD listened without interrupting, but he had a perplexed look on his face. Maybe his electrolytes were still out of whack.

“Buck, I ain’t followin’ you. Just spit it out. What’s wrong with me? And you, too, I guess.”

Buck took a deep breath and let it out slowly; JD picked up Buck’s hand and held it tightly. JD -- roommate, friend, teammate, bonded partner… He loved JD. He’d been comfortable with him. But they’d been forced to have sex together, and now everything was changed.

“We’re bound to each other.” Buck studied JD’s hand gripping his own and covered it with his other
hand. “You’re a sentinel, JD, and I’m a guide. I’m your guide. God help us both.”

Federal Building, Denver, Colorado

Josiah motioned Ezra and Vin over to his desk when they returned from a very late lunch. “Chris called. He wants us all to meet at Buck’s and JD’s place tonight around six. JD’s being released this afternoon but he’s not going to be up to coming into the office, and we need a strategy session right away.”

Vin asked, “What’s this powwow supposed to accomplish?” Josiah looked thoughtful, while Ezra walked over to his desk and returned with a small address book.

“I think we should bring information, as much as we can gather, on how new sentinels and guides function. And what legal options JD and Buck have. Also,” Josiah said ominously, “How we should handle the rumors that are making the rounds, thanks to the Parks cousins.”

“Mr. Larabee is most certainly wanting to show JD and Buck that they have our full support. And acceptance,” Ezra said quietly.

Vin nodded, before he slowly spoke, “They’re not alone. But Buck’s feeling pretty low. Thinks JD almost died because of him.”

Ezra opened the address book and started running his finger down the page. “I may be able to provide some assistance from an experienced guide. I’ll contact him and see if I can call in a favor. The boy does owe me.”

“We’re supposed to keep news of JD’s and Buck’s – uh, change – to ourselves, Ezra.” Vin helped emphasize his point with a not so subtle push at Ezra’s shoulder. Ezra looked pained.

“Mr. Tanner. Have you forgotten to whom you are speaking? I assure you that my inquiries will be subtle. I’m just going to touch base with my friend and ask a few friendly questions.”

“I’ll bring the research, Ezra has his own task,” Josiah said. “Vin? We’re going to have to do damage control regarding the porn movie story. Do you care to track down which agents have spread gossip, maliciously or just out of curiosity?” Vin gave a small nod and after a quick touch to Ezra’s arm, he left the room.

Ezra added, “I think I’ll leave now and call my friend from my cell phone. If Mr. Larabee inquires as to my whereabouts, I’ll be at home after meeting with an informant.”

Ezra left, and Josiah busied himself with his own appointed task. He’d met a sentinel and guide pair in Vietnam, and had been awed at what the two had been able to carry out – but was being drafted by the army what JD and Buck wanted? Josiah doubted it. They both could have joined the service and had found other ways to serve their communities. However, now that their status had changed, being drafted was a real possibility, and he researched what he could of the laws, looking for loopholes that would keep his two friends members of Team Seven.
Blair hung up the phone and flung himself down on the love seat, chewing his lip.

Jim wondered if he should do the obvious thing and ask what the phone call was about, or ignore his partner’s body language and put the movie back on play.

Blair looked at him and Jim placed the remote on the coffee table.

“Okay. I’ll bite. Who called and what did they want?”

“Ezra. Ezra Standish. And he didn’t say what he wanted, which makes me wonder what he did want. Because that was not a social call. Ezra had his 'smooth as silk' tone of voice going, and, historically, that usually preceded me getting talked into mischief, or handing over my last dollar – for an entirely worthy cause, of course.”

“I haven’t met him, have I? He’s not somebody from Rainier, is he?”

Blair shook his head. “Ezra and I go way, way back. We met when we were kids, off and on, till we were old enough to be on our own. I ran into him again in Atlanta, before I met you. He, uh, did me a favor. Really big favor, and I always knew he’d call that marker in some day.”

Jim settled himself for another Sandburg tale. Only this time, instead of talking about the ancient history of sentinels and guides, Jim was actually going to learn something about Blair’s own past. For a talkative guy, he really didn’t say much about himself. So why was he telling Jim about this now?

“Chief, what’s up?”

“I’m not sure anything is really up. It’s just, well, he was asking a lot of questions about what I was doing now -- I explained about not teaching this summer and next semester so I could finish the dratted diss. He wanted to know if my guide status had changed, how I liked working for the police, if I was still protesting against the sentinel draft, if my sentinel had bonded with me? Oh, and if my research was keeping me out of whorehouses these days.”

“Whorehouses?” Jim fought a grin that was trying to break through. Oh, yeah. He relished listening to another epic Sandburg adventure.

“See, Jim, if Ezra was bringing that up, he’s reminding me about the trouble he got me out of back in Atlanta. So I’m probably right in thinking he may need a favor. But he didn’t say what he wanted.”

“And you’re telling me because…?” Jim just knew there was a “because” in all of this.

Sandburg bit his lip again. Jim waited. “Um, because he asked if I would be free to come visit him for a week or a couple of weeks, if he could swing it with the P.D. He’s an ATF agent and they can borrow law enforcement guys from other agencies and departments, if they need them. But he didn’t say he absolutely was going to request me. He said there was a possibility he could use me.”

Blair turned troubled eyes towards him. “Anyway, Jim, you’re my partner and if I have to leave for a while, I wanted you to know why.”

Jim felt his almost-grin morph into a frown. “I need you with me, Sandburg.”

Blair shrugged. “I’m not wild about going, if he does ask me to come. But I owe him, man.”
Jim sighed and got up. He walked to the kitchen and returned carrying two extra-large opened bottles of Green Lakes Pale Ale. Organic beer. He blamed Sandburg, of course. He sat back down on the love seat, flat-out crowding his guide. Too bad. Blair hadn’t agreed to the physical stage of bonding, but Jim needed him close enough to at least touch. He handed Blair his beer and took a large gulp of his own.

Blair tsked. “Jim, you’re not supposed to guzzle it. You’re supposed to enjoy it, roll it around your mouth, and tell me what you think of the ingredients.”

“I’m a cop, not a beer connoisseur. It tastes good. Now, quit stalling and tell me what you were doing in a whorehouse and how your pal finagled you out of trouble. I can’t see you paying for it, Chief.”

Blair looked offended, which made Jim want to poke him in the side. “Well, of course not. I had stopped in Atlanta for a couple of days to see my friend John, after I came back from an expedition. He asked me if I wanted to go with him when he interviewed some of the working girls and boys, to help him with his questionnaires – he was a sociology grad student doing research on prostitution. It was our bad luck that Atlanta Vice busted the place that night.”

“And your buddy Ezra…?”

“Was one of the Vice cops. He recognized me, even though we hadn’t seen each other since we were kids, and he kept John and me from being arrested. Probably I could have made a case in court that I was there doing research, but I didn’t need the hassle, or to have to come back to Atlanta for the court case. So yeah, I owe him a favor. We’ve kept in touch; he’s a good guy.”

“You were kids together? Where, Chief? I thought you didn’t stick around much in one spot growing up.” Actually, Jim's impression was that Blair and his mother had hop, skipped, and jumped from place to place, his mother always looking for her heart’s desire. Jim liked Naomi, she was an interesting woman, but she never seemed to have figured out that whatever she was looking for was probably under her nose. She needed her own pair of ruby-red slippers to click together. At least Blair had a home now. Jim wasn’t positive what they would end up being to each other, but he loved his guide and enjoyed their life together.

“It’s kind of complicated… Maybe I should draw a kinship diagram?”

“Sandburg.”

“Okay, here goes. Ezra’s mother and my mother both had a relationship with the same man. Not at the same time; Ezra’s mom was with him first. And the guy wasn’t Ezra’s father and he sure as hell wasn’t mine.”

Blair made a face at the memory. Not one of Blair’s happier moments, apparently. “In fact, he didn’t pay either one of us much attention. He schlepped Ezra, and later, me, when mom was with him, over to his sister as much as possible. We called her Aunt Molly, and she was as great as her brother was a total loser. And when our respective mothers dumped the guy, they kept on good terms with Aunt Molly, and she ended up keeping us with her from time to time when it wasn’t convenient or possible to stay with our mothers. That’s how I met Ezra. He was staying with Aunt Molly when Naomi dropped me off for two months while she traveled in Africa.”

Blair smiled. “Ezra is older than me, and he wasn’t thrilled about having a little kid tagging after him, but we learned to get along and actually had some pretty good times together. Over the next few years, we stayed together at Aunt Molly’s place a couple of times. In a weird way, he’s kind of like a
“So your kissing cousin wants you to come visit him.”

Blair gave Jim a sideways look. “Strictly platonic, man, but I did spy on him kissing Janie Hancock once.”

Jim extended his arm in the old stretching-his-arm-out maneuver, until he was in place to tug Sandburg tight against him. Blair cocked his eyebrow when Jim pulled him into a hug.

“Sandburg, if you end up going, then I’m coming with you.” Jim had made up his mind as soon as Blair had mentioned the possibility of leaving. Maybe he was feeling a little insecure, a little territorial – that’s what his guide would say, anyway – but with only a partial bond in place Jim didn’t want to take any chances on his guide losing interest in him and meeting a more compatible sentinel.

Blair sighed and snuggled against him. “Jim… You’re a doofus; you know that, right? You should know by now that I’m not interested in forming a bond with anybody else.”

’So why won’t you complete the bond with me, Chief?’ Jim thought, but Blair was a pleasant, heavy, weight against him, and if he brought up the old argument then the mood would be spoiled. Jim transferred his beer to the hand on Blair’s upper arm, leaned out with his free hand, and plucked the remote off the coffee table. He pushed “play,” and, for the moment content with holding his guide, settled into drinking some fine organic beer, and watching “Shane,” his favorite cowboy movie.

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Dunne and Wilmington apartment, Denver, Colorado

Buck opened the door quietly and let Nathan and Chris into his home. Vin and Josiah had arrived a few minutes ago and were sitting at the table, drinking coffee. JD was in the bathroom taking a shower; he’d told Buck it still felt like the stink from that hell-hole was clinging to him, with the hospital smells layered on top of that. The kid had been too wiped out when they got home from St. Anthony Hospital around four to do anything except take a nap. Some nap. He’d woken himself up with a nightmare, he’d told Buck. Not that he’d gone into details about it, and Buck had the feeling JD held back because he didn’t want to get Buck all worried about him. Hell, if JD hadn’t woken up yelling his fool head off, he probably wouldn’t have told Buck that much.

Nathan sat down at the table and Chris went into the kitchen and poured himself a cup of coffee. He gave Buck a slight tilt of his head, indicating that Buck should join him.

“How is he?” Chris spoke softly. Buck shrugged.

“And how’re you doing?” Buck shrugged again.

Chris gave him one of those glares, and Buck found himself spilling the beans.

“He’s having a lot of trouble adjusting to his senses being so different. And once, back at the hospital, he just went straight off into the ozone. Purely checked right out of his head. It, ah, happened when I was in the bathroom in his room this afternoon. After I’d told him what he was, well, what we are. When I came out he was sitting up in bed, eyes closed, and I couldn’t rouse him.
Shit, he scared me good. I tried talking to him and he was just a JD sized lump. I was fixin’ to holler for a nurse, but first I touched him and I felt he was a bit more back with me, so I, uh… Damn, Chris. I kissed him. Like he was Sleeping Beauty and I was Prince Charming. And it woke him back up.

He grabbed Chris by the arm, almost causing Chris to spill his coffee.

“I don’t know what the fuck I’m doing, Chris. I’ve got no notion of how this sentinel-guide thing works. You know why he was out of it? He was listening to me washing my hands and he said he got lost in the sound of the water. And he probably ain’t thought much on it yet, but I have. We’re going to get drafted, aren’t we? What is it? Five or ten years mandatory service? JD and me are screwed.”

“Ten. Look, you and JD aren’t in this leaky boat by yourselves. We’re gonna figure this out.” Chris nudged him. “We take care of our own.”

Chris glanced at his watch and said with deceptive mildness, “Ezra’s late. I say we call him and make him pick us all up some pizzas.”

It made Buck grin a little, Chris using behavior modification on Ezra, but even so he doubted Ezra would stop being late to meetings.

Chris pulled out his phone and was punching numbers, when Buck startled and turned towards the bathroom.

He was feeling that golden rope sensation again, which meant… JD was thinking about him, or needed him, or something was wrong…? Hellfire. He knocked on the bathroom door.

“JD, you okay in there?”

When he heard the groan from inside the bathroom, he tossed out the giggling-in-the-back-of-his-head worry about what the other guys would think of him barging in on JD buck-naked in the shower and opened the door, appreciating that they’d never gotten around to fixing the lock.

He stepped into the bathroom and softly called, “Hey, partner,” and then pulled back the shower curtain. JD looked like he was frozen in place, eyes screwed shut, shampoo in his shaggy, dark, hair, -- and he was making soft pained sounds.

Buck reached over and shut off the shower. JD started shaking and Buck didn’t have a clue what he should do. The kid really needed to rinse off but apparently the shower had messed up his senses, and he seemed lost. Jesus Christ, what were they going to do if even a basic routine like this could throw JD?

“Can you tell me what’s wrong?” Buck tried to make his voice low and soft; somewhere he’d gotten the notion that guides talked like half their vocal cords were gone.

“C-cold now, and it- it started hurting, like needles hitting m’-m’ skin.” JD tried to open his eyes and cried out, “Owww” before shutting his eyes tightly again.

Buck took a few steps backwards and shut off the overhead light, then went to the sink and flipped on a night-light. Its soft blue light dimly illuminated JD’s wet, naked body. Buck wanted to touch him, but he didn’t feel aroused by looking at him. He just felt like he needed to smooth those goose bumps away.

“I’m going to touch you now, partner. Try and warm you up a bit. I think a towel would be too
rough for you.”

“Y-you getting fresh with me, Buck?” It about broke and warmed Buck’s heart to hear JD trying to tease him. He was a great kid, and Buck felt a wave of protectiveness towards him that just kept building in intensity. He’d do his God-damnest to help JD figure out this sentinel stuff, and he wouldn’t let the sex they’d had mess up their friendship.

He laughed, and the sound of it seemed to relax the muscles on JD’s face and body. He reached out tentatively and stroked a finger down JD’s arm and when JD didn’t tense back up, he tried smoothing JD’s arms and his back with his hand, hoping the calluses wouldn’t make things worse.

JD sighed and said, “That’s helping, but the soap on my skin feels itchy and I’m wanting really bad to scratch and I know I shouldn’t. Let’s try the shower and see if it feels like just water this time.”

Buck turned on the shower but quickly turned it off when JD immediately started hissing in pain again.

“We could try slowly dribbling water from a cup over you,” Buck said doubtfully. JD nodded, gritting his teeth, but when Buck tried, the slow flow of water barely rinsed JD’s forearm before JD cried out again in pain.

“Well, damn, Skippy. You feel better when I touch you, though, right?” JD nodded and Buck again ran his hands down JD’s arms and chest, back and legs. Buck could feel the tension again leaving JD’s body.

“Hmm. Got an idea, but I’m going to have to get real close and personal with you. You okay with that?” JD nodded, and Buck stopped stroking him and quickly stripped off his own clothes; he stepped in the tub behind JD and wrapped his arms around him and plastered himself to JD’s wet body.

JD had watched him get undressed without saying anything, but now he softly asked, “Buck? Are you okay with this?” The boy sounded dead serious; there was no teasing quality to his voice now.

Buck swallowed. “I think so, partner. Hell, it’s just skin, and you know I love you, right? I’d do anything for you, JD, so holding you is no hardship. What about you? Does me cuddling you so close bring back bad memories?”

JD relaxed against him even more and gave a comfortable sigh. “I’m warming up good. Thanks, Buck. I have bad memories about us being tazered, and those assholes watching us, and of that root cellar you found me in, and being scared they’d injured you when they grabbed us. But you making love to me ain’t a bad memory. They saw it as fucking, but I made love to you, Buck, and you made love to me. I know you’re straight, but me, I’m a little more flexible. Do you remember me whispering before our first time that I’d fooled around with boys when I was a kid? I’d be okay with us making love again, but I know you’d hate it. I want us to stay friends.”

Buck kissed the top of JD’s head. “That’s a sweet offer, and honestly, I don’t know what will happen now between us. If you’re remembering right, then you know you made me feel good. In a way, ignoring that lovemaking would kind of be like shuttin’ up the barn after the cows got out. Let’s just take things one step at a time, and the first one is holding you when I turn the water back on. You can’t go around with shampoo in your hair. Take a couple of slow deep breaths and tell me if the water hurts you.”

JD followed the suggestions, and Buck brought the shower back up to its normal pressure. He
moved JD and himself slowly into the spray and kept his friend tucked up close to him. JD sighed blissfully as his skin and hair accepted the feel of the water.

“That was a good idea, Buck. Thanks.” Buck finished rinsing JD off and reached for the faucets.

“Maybe I won’t be a total failure as a guide after all.” Buck did feel a little less panicky about letting JD down.

The towels didn’t pose a problem – as long as Buck kept contact with JD, and they quickly got dressed, his senses having stopped their painful surges.

They’d walked out of the bathroom and Buck felt four pairs of eyes on the two of them. Well, begin as you mean to go on. He didn’t know much about what a bond was, but he’d heard enough to know it was a permanent kind of thing. He wasn’t going to skulk around corners acting ashamed of JD and himself.

“Gents, thanks for coming over. Let me be blunt for a moment. JD and I didn’t ask for this bond to happen to us, but it did and we’re going to live with it. Now I’m the first to say I don’t rightly know exactly how we’re going to manage, but touching JD is a big part of it. It seems to keep him from being in pain. If that makes you feel uncomfortable then – hellfire. Get over it. And just to keep the speculation down you all know those sorry sons-of-bitches forced JD and me to have sex, but we’re still friends and maybe we’ll be lovers, or maybe we won’t. Before we found JD, it felt very wrong to consider sex with him – like incest, kind of. I might be changing my notions on that, just to let you know.”

JD just smiled at his teammates and turned his thumb towards Buck. “What he said.” Then he added, earnestly, “Chris and Buck have told me how hard everybody worked to try to find me. I’m real grateful and I want you to know I thought a lot about you guys, especially when I was in Hell— that root cellar.”

Vin stood up and walked around the table and shook hands with JD, who then yanked Vin into a hard hug. Nathan was next, then Josiah, who laid his hands on JD’s shoulders after his turn at hugging, and said, “One may experience sorrow during the night, but joy arrives in the morning.”

“Amen, brother,” Nathan agreed.

Vin didn’t say anything, but he, too, nodded his head.

JD cocked his head to one side and grinned. Buck watched, fascinated, as JD started sniffing the air before he walked over to the door and yanked it open. Chris got up, too, and stood behind JD, peering down the hall.

“What is it?” Buck said, a puzzled look on his face.

“Well, I don’t see anything. JD? What’s going on?” Chris asked.

“Just wait.”

In a few minutes, Chris called back to the others, “Ezra’s here.”

JD laughed. “Oh, those pizzas smell wicked good, and Ezra’s muttering about how he’d better not get stuck with the bill.”

Willing hands divested Ezra of the pizza boxes and then JD gave him a bear hug, evidently surprising the man into hugging JD back. Buck was glad that JD’s senses had decided to settle down
for a while, and his partner’s lighthearted mood was good to see. Guess coming back from almost
dying could cheer a fellow up; make him take notice of the positive things in his life. He was glad
they’d been able to talk JD’s doctor into releasing him today so he could come home and be more
comfortable.

After the pizzas were gone, the group moved to the living room, JD and Buck sitting side by side on
the love seat, and Vin and Josiah carrying in table chairs, while Nathan, Ezra, and Chris sat on the
couch.

Chris started the ball rolling.

“Buck, JD – you’re not alone with this sentinel and guide stuff. We’ve got your back. I know you
haven’t had time to figure out what happens next, so we’ve done some checking for you.”

Chris held his hand palm up and tapped his little finger. “First though, I want to update everybody on
where the cases stand that your kidnapping affected.

“The cigarette warehouse case – and that was great thinking, Buck, to take those assholes where you
knew there was surveillance – is on the back burner until the owners get cocky enough to try their
swindle again. We’ve spun it as a straight robbery attempt and our inside man is still on the job. The
cover story is that he was able to call the cops before they knocked him out.”

Chris ticked off the next case, touching another finger. “Buck, you blew your cover as “Buck
Wilson, shady gun dealer.” Buck nodded. He’d figured as much.

“Since there wasn’t a chance for Greer to take the bait before James Carson – Jimmy C – hijacked
you two, we still don’t know who he’s fronting for. We’ll have to put in somebody else as bait, and I
know that nobody on our team will be able to do it, since Greer and the Parks cousins have seen us
all as ATF agents. I’ll be working with headquarters to see who we can pull in.

“The D.A. is looking at kidnapping and assault charges, plus attempted murder for the Parks.” Buck
put his arm around JD and watched Chris ball his hand into a fist. “We did make the Parks cousins a
deal that if they provided information that led to JD being found the attempted murder charges would
be dropped. They told us Morgan had mentioned Jimmy C used to worked as a ranch hand, but the
DA is telling their lawyer that weren’t enough to find JD, so no deal.”

Buck tightened his arm around JD. The kid was bound to have nightmares for years about that dank,
dark, abandoned place of misery. Buck kept saying that a hawk – I’m sure it’s JD’s spirit animal guide since only Buck could
see it – kept crying out and circling and then diving down to where Jimmy C had abandoned JD.
The place was well hidden with its sod roof and tucked into the hill. It had a ton of straw bales
stacked in front of the door, so if you didn’t know it was there, you’d miss it. And the bastard had
locked it from the outside. Even if JD had gotten free from his chains, he couldn’t have gotten out.”

JD mumbled something to himself and then flushed when he realized everybody was looking at him.
“Oh… the lock. I didn’t know that. But it explains why I thought I heard a gunshot.” He grinned
suddenly. “My angels shot the lock off, didn’t they?”

Buck softly bopped JD on the back of his head. “God’s gonna be choking up in Heaven if you keep
calling me an angel. I don’t exactly qualify.”

JD shook his head. “Sorry. To me, you and Nathan were angels that day.” Then he started to laugh. “Course, I expect your halo is pretty tarnished.”

This set the rest of them to chuckling. Stress relief. They’d all been under such worry and concern, and it was good to laugh. When the sounds of mirth died down, Buck asked cautiously, “What about the camera, Chris? Is that footage evidence?”

Chris rubbed his head. “There’s was nothing on there that I could hear specifically, but… there was voices in the background that I couldn’t make out. I had to turn it over to the techs, in case the kidnappers said where they were planned to take JD. It’s on record now that they did order you to have sex or be tazered again.”

JD groaned. Buck had been given time to consider the consequences of turning the camera over for evidence, but JD hadn’t. Shit, he sure hoped those Parks idiots would take a plea bargain so they wouldn’t have to go to court.

“I’m sorry, partner,” Buck told JD. “I wanted to smash that camera so bad, but if there was a chance…”

JD scrubbed his hands over his face. “By now it's common knowledge about us – between the porno stuff and the way Shorty and Blondie probably babbled. I don’t want to have to testify, but more than that – I don’t want to let those walking bags of shit get away with – well, raping us. Guess we’ll just have to deal with the fall-out.”

Vin said, “There’s been talk going around already. I had a few words with some folks who ought to know better than to run their mouths, and they agreed to shut the hell up.”

“I’ll be speaking to other department heads about their people’s behavior,” Chris added. “Still, you boys should expect some agents, ours, the FBI, Denver PD, to act like horses’ hind ends about this. Might help, for a while, if you aren’t by yourselves when you come to headquarters.”

JD sighed. “Babysitters, Chris?”

“Backup,” Chris told him gently.

Chris waved his arm towards Nathan. “Nathan, you figured out what was happening to JD and Buck. Have you had training about sentinels and guides and if so then what can JD and Buck expect, being newly bonded an’ all?”

Nathan gave a this-and-that movement with his hand before answering. “My Tactical Medic training covered some basics, since sentinels and guides often work in law enforcement. Had some experience during my army medic days, too.”

He continued, “Apparently, they both have the right DNA and they bonded due to several factors – the sex, JD’s senses emerging from being isolated, the stress – and I wonder about the electrical shocks, also. A fully bonded pair has both a physical connection and a spiritual connection such as the golden rope Buck described. Breaking the bond at this point would cause a serious rebound effect on them. They could die. I don’t advise it.”

Nathan shook his head a little, looking straight at Buck and JD. “You both had a slew of medical tests so the bond’s going to show up in your blood work and in your EEGs. I’m sorry. In these days of advanced medical techniques, it’s harder to stay undetected.”
“Chris,” Nathan turned to look at their team leader. “I don’t know anything about how sentinels and
guides fine tune the bond. But they need to learn and learn quickly. JD is going to be very vulnerable
to sensory spikes and zones until he and Buck become stabilized.”

Chris frowned. “What about Buck? Any negative effects for him?”

“Yes. Regular bonding sessions keep the guide’s endocrine system from malfunctioning. Otherwise a
toxic effect starts to build that can make a guide very sick and will eventually cause death. The
sentinel gets a backlash effect from the guide’s withdrawal from the bond and has serious spikes, and
the zones can slip into comas. That’s about the extent of what I know.” Nathan looked at the oldest
and tallest member of their team. “Josiah, you want to take over now?” and Buck hoped he had
found something helpful in the research he’d done.

Josiah coughed, then said, “Congress pushed through the draft laws based on bonding medical
problems. Scientists had finally realized what they were dealing with, that those non-typical seizure
states, episodes labeled as psychosis, the coma effects, and the strange readings in the blood work
were actually symptoms of dysfunctional bonding.” Josiah continued in his lecture-hall style, “After
identifying sentinel and guide pairs, by law they were sent to the Army for education and training.
Saving bonded pairs who otherwise were going to die justified the draft, according to those in favor
of such actions. The ACLU protested, and other groups joined them, but they haven't been able to
make much of a dent in changing the law.”

Josiah got up then and went to his briefcase. He returned and passed out a packet of information to
each of them. “This is what I found out about sentinel and guide laws. JD and Buck have thirty days
to report to an Army recruiting station from the time medical tests name them a bonded pair, and the
Army notifies them by registered mail. Anyone withholding knowledge that a bonded pair has not
reported within the thirty-day grace period is liable for prosecution.”

“Ah, shit,” Buck whispered. JD was silent.

“There is a loophole but I don’t know if it’s usable in their case. If a bonded pair report in, and they
can show proof that the sentinel or guide is a police officer, a rescue worker, a firefighter, etc, and…”
Josiah looked thoughtfully at JD and Buck, “And they can also be shown medically to have a stable
bond, then they can serve their ten-year commitment as civilians, as long as they remain employed in
one of the protective community services.”

JD choked. “Ten years!”

Chris looked regretful. “Don’t get ahead of yourselves; you’ve got thirty days to decide about the
Army, but for now, you work on getting your bond stabilized.”

“What if the Army didn’t find out? I sure as blazes wouldn’t turn them in.” Vin made eye contact
with the others, but nobody ducked their heads to avoid his gaze.

“They’ll know. Didn’t you understand what I said earlier? JD and Buck both had blood work done
and it’s a standard test, as common as checking the red blood cell count. The Army's notified within
seventy-two hours of the lab tests coming back.” Nathan looked at Vin as he spoke. “I’m sorry. For
what it’s worth,” he shifted to lock eyes with first Buck and then JD, “I wouldn’t have turned you in.
There were no sentinels in my family, but there were slaves – and I don’t hold with the sentinel draft
laws at all.”

Josiah spoke up. “At least with the sentinel draft there is a time limit -- unlike slavery. I’m the only
one of us who was ever drafted into the service, since they dropped it after Vietnam, but even the
regular old draft wasn’t fair. College deferments kept some from being considered and many a local
draft board favored the poor kids over the rich ones.”

JD spoke hesitantly. “Maybe it’s my duty to go, but I hate for Buck to have to join, too. I want to think about what’s right, and Buck and I need time to decide what to do.”

Chris looked at Buck, who’d been silent so far. “Buck?”

“I passed up the services in favor of police work – I couldn’t see me saluting and yes-sirring officers all the live long day – but if JD thinks he should go, then I’m going with him. But I’ll probably end up a private for the whole dang ten years.” Buck felt numb. Leave Colorado? But JD needed him, and aside from the guys on his team – and he felt grateful for their loyalty and understanding – there wasn’t anybody who would miss him. Maybe Inez would down a whiskey once in a while, remembering him.

Ezra cleared his throat and waited to speak until he had everyone’s attention. “Mr. Larabee is correct. The highest priority is educating our new sentinel and guide on how to maintain a stable bond. And I have just the person who can teach them. He’s a guide himself, and a doctoral candidate in sentinel studies. He works for the Cascade police department in Washington State as a consultant and is available to be borrowed. He has rather fiery views on the sentinel draft, and is no doubt in touch with the sentinel underground, should JD and Buck decide not to enter the Army or not achieve a level of stabilization that would allow them to remain with us. His name is Blair Sandburg, and he can be here tomorrow, if I call him and our Mr. Larabee fills out the paperwork to borrow him.” Ezra looked smug to have pulled this rabbit out of a hat.

“He can show me what to do?” Buck asked, with relief in his voice.

“He’s a gifted teacher. Not that there’s any call to tell him I said that. But Blair will know what to do, and he’ll be discreet.” Ezra suddenly frowned. “Well, he’ll be discreet about why he was summoned here. However, he’s certainly a very noticeable individual, since he’s a second-generation hippie and dresses out of a ragbag most of the time. He’s an anthropologist and tells the most outlandish stories. He’s quite entertaining. I’ve found him to be a good friend and -- despite a deplorable tendency to land himself in sticky situations – he’s very level-headed.”

“Make the call, Ezra, and set up the travel arrangements. I’ll fax over the paperwork first thing in the morning. Anything else for tonight?” Nobody answered and Chris rose and nodded his head to JD and Buck. “Then we’ll leave you to get some rest. Stay home tomorrow and work on this bond. Call us if you need anything at all.”

Buck let loose a long sigh after the herd had stampeded out the door, after assorted handshakes and hugs had been exchanged. JD had stumbled over to the couch and was lying down. Buck was tired, bone tired, and he was looking forward to getting horizontal on his mattress. He locked the doors and windows, while JD watched him from the couch.

“I should be doing that.”

“What for, partner? I can tell that your get up and go has got up and left.” Buck thought JD had pushed it all evening; it wasn’t a surprise that he had run out of steam.

“Sentinels are supposed to secure their territory. Everybody knows that.”

“Maybe, maybe not. There’s got to be a lot of pure bullshit in with the accurate stuff about this whole
sentinel and guide deal. Anyway, you’re exhausted and I’m capable and willing. When this Sandburg guy gets here, we can find out what’s real and what’s just a load of crap.” Buck walked slowly over to the couch and reached his hand down to JD, who grabbed it and let himself be pulled to his feet.

“Now here’s what I think. I don’t want a repeat of what happened in the shower, so why don’t you come upstairs and sleep with me. Maybe bodily contact will keep your skin from feeling like a prickly pear. Sleepin’ tucked up together might help this bonding shit we’ve got to get under control. We’re both too tired to talk about what to do about the draft till tomorrow anyway.”

JD looked uncertain. “You sure you want to sleep with me?”

Buck snorted. “Old son, that horse ain’t only out of the barn, it’s three fields over into the next county. No sense in locking the stalls now. I might be bothered if it was somebody other than you, but touching you doesn’t seem wrong. And tonight, we’re just sleeping. So come on, let’s go to bed.” He slung an arm around his sentinel, his tired, beat-up friend, and steered him towards the bathroom.

A short while later, holding JD in his arms as they made themselves comfortable on the bed, he fought against remembering their time in that awful little cabin. They were safe now. JD was safe. And they were together and would be together. No matter what. They would be together.

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Dunne and Wilmington apartment, Denver, Colorado

*Tuesday, early morning, July 3, 2001*

Buck was on his second cup of coffee when there was an insistent knock on the door. He wondered who was stopping by this early and hoped they wouldn’t wake up JD. His partner was still deeply asleep, the weakness from days of starvation still affecting him.

He checked the eye-hole and groaned to himself. Casey. She was holding a grocery bag in one arm and raised her other hand, preparing to knock again. He quickly unlocked the door and held his finger to his lips to caution her to be quiet as he ushered her in. He was uncomfortably aware that JD was asleep in his bed, and he really didn’t want to explain why to the girl JD had started to date. Hopefully, he could get her to return when JD was awake.

“Casey, darlin’, JD’s asleep. Why don’t you come by later or how about JD gives you a call when he wakes up.”

Casey placed the bag on the counter and started unpacking Tupperware dishes. “I’ve been worried sick about JD, and he was asleep every time I stopped by the hospital. Look, I’ve brought a turkey noodle casserole and Grandma sent cookies and banana bread. I’ve got to get to the clinic, the vets have a full day scheduled, but I just can’t wait anymore to see him.” She thrust a large clear container filled with cookies at Buck, and as he tried to not drop it on the floor, she made a beeline for JD’s room.

“Casey, please? Don’t open that door.” Buck knew it was a futile hope. Casey was stubborn and headstrong besides being sweet as cotton candy.

She opened the door, and Buck prayed that if JD had woken up, he had the sense to stay put.
His prayers went unheeded because Casey walked out of JD’s room, questions in her eyes, just as the upstairs bedroom door opened and JD stumbled down the circular stairs. He’d grabbed Buck’s robe, which was way too big on him, and his hair was still sleep mussed. He obviously had just climbed out of bed.

“Now, Casey. If you’d asked I’d a told you we swapped beds last night. JD had a notion to sleep upstairs and …” He faltered, knowing how dumb that had sounded.

“No. Oh, no. JD? You and Buck? I should have known; I should have known. Best friends? Bullshit! Why did you lie to me? Buck’s not your friend, he’s your boyfriend and how could you lie about that and go out with me? I never want to see you again!” Casey had tears leaking from her eyes as she stepped backwards toward the hall door.

“I never lied to you! Casey, we have to talk. Things are different now, but I never lied to you! Buck, tell her. Tell her what happened.” JD was coming down the stairs but he wasn’t going to reach Casey before she was out the door.

Buck thought Casey wouldn’t stay, but he tried. He intercepted her as she was flinging the door open and asked her if she wouldn’t stay and listen to them. She flung his hand off her arm and ran out the door.

JD brushed past Buck and started to go after her, but Buck caught him around the shoulders and stopped him.

“He turned JD around made eye contact. “What do you want to say to her? Do you even know?”

JD looked troubled and shook his head.

“Well, it’d be better if you figure out what to tell her before you see her again.” Buck snapped his fingers. “We got an ace in the hole. Vin can talk to her granny and smooth the way for you. Casey doesn’t know what happened to us when we were kidnapped.” Buck gave JD a soft thump on the side of his head. “Why in tarnation didn’t you stay up there, quiet-like, and let me tell her you’d gone to the doctor or were with Chris. I’d have come up with something to explain why you weren’t in your bedroom.”

JD rolled his eyes. “You’d already told her I was asleep. It would have been worse if she’d come up the stairs and found me in your bed. And Buck? I don’t want to lie to people, especially people I care about.”

Buck walked over to the counter and filled another mug with coffee, and handed it to JD. “I’d have told her I forgot you had an early morning meeting or something.”

JD sighed. “Casey’s not stupid; she’d have figured out something was off. Shit, Buck. Casey and I weren’t lovers -- yet. We’d gone out on a fair amount of dates, did some things together that we both enjoyed -- like fishing. And kissing. I like her, but now I’m thinking maybe it would be better if we didn’t see each other. If I have to join the Army for ten years, I couldn’t ask her to go with me. Or wait for me.”

“If we have to go into the Army. This bonding thing. I don’t know much about it, but I’ve figured out this much – it’s like that bible story about Ruth and Naomi. We’re sticking together, JD.”
JD looked solemn. “‘Where you go, I will go; where you stay, I will stay.’ Is that what you mean, Buck?”

Buck reached out and cuffed JD very gently on the back of his head. “Yeah, partner. That’s exactly what I mean.”

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**Denver International Airport**  
*Tuesday, late afternoon, July 3, 2001*

The steady stream of travelers debarking from the gate had slowed considerably before Ezra had spotted Blair. If anything, the boy’s hair was longer than the last time he had seen him, the curls dancing around his face as he walked alongside a tall, well-built man with short hair whose alert eyes were scanning the airport waiting area.

Ezra raised a finger and touched his brow, catching Blair’s companion’s eye. He watched as Detective Ellison deftly maneuvered Blair towards Ezra. Watching Blair alternate between gawking up at the white mountain-like ceiling of the airport and punctuating the air with his hands while he conversed with Detective Ellison brought a smile to Ezra’s face. Blair hadn’t appeared to change much since coming out as a guide.

Blair finally caught sight of Ezra and moved quickly to reach his side. Ezra braced himself and smiled again as Blair caught him up in a hug.

“Mr. Sandburg, it’s a delight to experience your company again.”

Blair snorted and shrugged his backpack off his shoulder, dropping it to the ground. “Mr. Sandburg prefers to be called Blair, as you well know, and he’s got about a ton of blackmail material from your nefarious teen years to share with your team if he needs to.”

Ezra laughed. “Blair, it’s good to see you again.” Detective Ellison joined them and they shared introductions and handshakes. Ezra had waited impatiently for the United Airlines flight to deliver his childhood friend – not that either of them had experienced much of a childhood, not with the mothers they’d been blessed with – and the sentinel. The man had insisted to Chris that he had to accompany Blair – or Blair’s captain wouldn’t agree to this temporary transfer of his consultant. And they needed Blair. JD and Buck didn’t have much time to prove they had a stable bond before the Army would take them. It embarrassed Ezra to let the other members of his team know how much he had come to reluctantly care about them -- but he did, and he wanted his team to stay intact. Blair could help. Perhaps this sentinel could be of assistance, also.

Ezra picked up the beat up, sturdy backpack and shook his head when he handed it to Blair. “I despair of you ever owning decent luggage.” Blair made an exaggerated expression of shock and proceeded to expound on the virtues of his backpack as they left the gate area.

They walked along Concourse A and Ellison had to single-handedly propel Blair along, since Ezra's childhood friend kept stopping to gaze at the Rocky Mountains.

“Jim, Jim!” Blair was now walking backwards in front of Ellison with a look on his face Ezra remembered from times Blair had talked him into doing something he had sworn he would avoid.

“What, Sandburg?” Ellison sounded gruff, but Ezra caught the undertone of amusement.

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“Camping! We can take our brand new guide and sentinel camping. It will be so cool! JD learning how to control his senses surrounded by the wildness of the Rockies, Buck learning how to guide as we sit around a campfire -- they could bond under the stars!”

“And the fact that we’ve wanted to go camping all summer has nothing to do with this grand plan of yours, does it? But it’s a good idea – if they feel up to it.” Ellison turned to Ezra. “Do you think they’d want to give it a shot? They were camping when those men kidnapped them.”

Ezra nodded. “I believe it would appeal to both of them. Buck grew up in Colorado and enjoys showing JD the natural beauty of this state.” Ezra gave a small shudder. Playing Daniel Boone in the woods had never appealed to him.

“Want to go too, Ez?” The words sounded innocent, but Ezra could hear the mischief behind the question.

“Thank you, kindly. I’ll pass.” The DIA was a large and busy place, but there wasn’t anybody walking near them as they headed towards the vehicle he had borrowed from Chris. There simply wasn’t room in his Black Jaguar for three people. Ezra judged their surroundings private enough to dispense with the polite small talk.

“My team leader, Mr. Larabee, Chris, asked me to brief you both on our current situation…”

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Art by Pattrose

**Denver, Colorado**

*Tuesday, early evening, July 3, 2001*
“Buck, there’s an accident up ahead, so we should take the next exit and detour around to get to the ranch. You know, it’s kind of cool that I can see stuff that far away.”

Buck moved into the exit lane and said, “I’m fine meeting up with Sandburg, he sounds like he could be a real help to us, but I ain’t so sure about Ellison. Chris said they thought it best we meet each other in neutral territory. I don’t like it.”

JD reached out and lightly smacked his distrustful partner on the shoulder. “When Ellison and I meet, it’s not going to be like that stupid movie you saw back in the dark ages. C’mon. Do you really think that we’re going to circle around each other and then throw down to see who’s in charge? And the winner gets to keep the other sentinel’s guide to add to his harem? How can you take seriously anything called, “Twenty Captive Guides?” JD rolled his eyes. Buck was a great guy, but he did have a tendency to believe some outlandish bullshit. He flashed briefly on their epic “discussions” about how valid love potions claims were. Buck was certain there was truth in all the hype about some plants’ abilities to enhance the libido.

Buck replied a little heatedly, “Well, of course I don’t think it’s gonna be like that movie. Not exactly. I’m just saying there’s probably some truth buried under the baloney.” JD gave him a skeptical look and Buck said defensively, “I just think we should watch ourselves. I wasn’t counting on dealing with another sentinel.”

JD said, with an almost serious tone to his voice, “I won’t let him make you his love-bunny, Buck.”

“We know what’s important. We’re partners, and we’re going to help each other through this. Buck, will you tell me the truth about what you think about us going into the Army?”

“I did already, JD. I’ll go if you go. I’m not against serving my country, but whether or not the Army can tolerate me… that’s a horse of a different color. What about you? Don’t make your decision based on what I said. Do what you think is right.”

JD drummed his fingers on his thigh. “I considered joining the Navy when I was in high school, but after thinking it through, I became a cop. I wanted to do something to help people and it appealed to me more than being a sailor. I’ve never regretted my decision to join the Boston PD, and later the ATF. I like our team; we do good work and I don’t want to stop. But, I think I should talk this over with our guys who have served. Anyway, we may not get a choice.”

Buck glanced at him, his expression somber. “Would you leave, go to Canada to avoid the draft?”

“My gut says no. I still want to protect and serve. How can I do that by hiding in Canada?”

Buck made another right turn. “Checking with our team -- that’s a good idea. I think Vin might have gone into the Army to try to get ahead of living on the streets. The Army drafted Josiah, but he did volunteer for a second term. Chris, he went in after high school. Navy helped pay for his college. Nathan – not sure what helped him decide to sign up.”

JD closed his eyes. “I don’t like the idea of being drafted. I think sentinels and guides should decide like everybody else – on a voluntary basis. I don’t like the idea that we don’t get a choice.”

Buck reached out his right hand and wrapped it around JD's. “We’ve had a bellyful of not having any choices, haven’t we? Are you okay, JD? You know before we return to work the shrinks have
to clear us.”

“I’m all right. I’m not going to let those assholes win by making me afraid of living.” JD kept his eyes closed and Buck squeezed his hand again.

“Me neither, partner. Me neither.”

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**Larabee Ranch, Denver County**

*Tuesday evening, July 3, 2001*

Chris watched Ellison cock his head to the side while he answered the most recent question Chris had asked about any undercover cases the Cascade detective had worked. Ellison was a bonus, and Chris wasn’t inclined to waste manpower. He had an idea of just how he could use the sentinel.

The tantalizing smell of cooking meat wafted up from the grill and he gave an appreciative sniff. The hamburgers were almost done, and he expected JD and Buck to arrive soon.

“There’s a vehicle coming down your road. Sounds like a truck.” Ellison picked up his beer from the patio table and fixed his gaze down the gravel road.

“Probably Buck and JD.” Just then the grill fire blazed up and Chris had his hands full with spraying the flames with water, so they didn’t end up with charcoal bricks to put in their buns.

In a few minutes, Chris heard Buck’s truck pull into the driveway. Sandburg popped his head out from the kitchen where he was making potato salad and bullshitting with Ezra.

“Where’s Ji– Oh, I see. He’s feeling a compulsion to bond.”

Chris turned around and saw that Buck and JD had gotten out of the truck; Ellison had almost reached them.

“What the hell --? Do I need to stop him?”

Blair laughed and the sound of his mirth made Chris realize he could probably relax. Well, Ezra had said Blair Sandburg had been a mischievous imp as a child and it didn’t look like he’d outgrown that trait.

“I don’t think anybody could stop him from running his hands over that truck. Jim loves classic trucks; at home he’s got a Sixty-Nine Ford that he calls, “Sweetheart.” He’s probably crooning right this minute about what a beautiful color that candy-apple red is, and making lovesick eyes at the chrome grill. I’m going to finish cooking; he’ll be a while quizzing Buck about how he restored his truck – it’s his truck, I’m guessing. JD has a motorcycle, doesn’t he? And Buck did restore it, right? Ezra mentioned a while back that he’d helped restore a friend’s truck, although I told him I’d have to see photographic proof before I’d believe it.”

“We all helped, Mr. Standish included. So… no special precautions about two sentinels meeting for the first time?”

“No. We didn’t come into JD’s and Buck’s living space -- their territory, so to speak -- so Jim and JD can relax. Now, when I meet JD, you can bet that Jim will hover over me. That’s because our bond isn’t completed.” Blair turned around to head back to his potato salad or whatever else he was
pulling together from the ingredients in the fridge and cupboards.

“So?”

“Until we complete the bond physically and spiritually, a sentinel -- well, Jim, at any rate -- worries that his guide might break the bond for another sentinel. Really, really, very unattractive genetic imperative.” Blair turned again towards the kitchen.

“Hang on. Why haven’t you completed the bond?”

Blair looked stone-faced at Chris and said, with no trace of amusement in his voice, “That’s personal, Special Agent Larabee. And if we want to have potato salad with the hamburgers, I need to finish up.” He returned to the kitchen and Chris felt his eyebrows rising in speculation as he turned his attention back to his grill.

After a few more minutes spent babying his burgers, Chris took a plate and slid them on it. He’d brought up a forbidden subject, that was for sure, and now he was curious. Why didn’t Sandburg and Ellison have a full bond? There was so much about this bonding shit that they just didn’t know.

He hollered that supper was ready to the three men who were conversing and looking under Lady’s hood. He supposed Ellison admiring Buck’s truck was as good a way as any to break the ice.

The three men walked up to the patio and found themselves seats at the picnic table. Chris stuck his head into the house and yelled to Sandburg and Ezra that the burgers were done and to fetch the potato salad on out. He snorted to himself when he heard the topic of conversation between Ellison and the other two and sat back down to listen to the old argument once again.

“Of course a truck can be female. Mine’s a real sweetheart,” Ellison was telling JD, who was rolling his eyes.

“Lady was just waiting to be rescued. She’s a beauty, ain’t she? I could show you pictures of the sad shape she was in before her knight in shining armor found her. She’s my Lady in Red,” Buck enthused to Ellison.

JD looked pityingly at both Ellison and Buck. “Trucks aren’t girls. Now, a smooth little number, like a Corvette, sorta like a snooty sorority girl, I could maybe see that comparison.”

Chris decided to interrupt them, as entertaining and familiar as this comedy routine was. “Supper’s on. Beers and pop are in the cooler; help yourselves.”

Sandburg had predicted Ellison’s behavior to a “T,” all right. The other sentinel had kept an arm draped around Sandburg when JD and Buck introduced themselves. He sat next to his guide during supper and even tugged on his curls once in a while. Sandburg didn’t seem to mind, which made Chris wonder even more about their incomplete bond.

By mutual unspoken agreement, the conversation at the cookout was kept to law enforcement topics, and the fat had been comfortably chewed by them all by the time Blair – who had made himself right at home in the kitchen – had dished up ice cream for everybody.

Chris causally remarked, “Tomorrow all of my team will be here for a Fourth of July beer and brauts cookout. JD and Buck are sleeping here tonight. You two are also bunking at
my place, unless you’ve got an objection.” He looked at the two men from Cascade, but they just nodded. “Now, this is what I’ve got in mind about work schedules. Sandburg, you’re with Buck and JD every day, until that bond of theirs is stable. Will you need Ellison or can I have him for a little project?”

Ellison grumbled good-naturedly, “You could ask me, you know. Blair’s my guide, not my keeper.”

“He’s the expert consultant. You’re a tag-along. In my book that puts him in charge,” Chris replied, but without any heat in his voice.

“Jim could be a big help to JD, explain things from an insider’s perspective, but he wouldn’t be needed all the time. Maybe two days a week after the first one. Jim and I think going camping with Buck and JD would be very beneficial, since Burton’s research postulates that sentinels and guides developed in tribal societies in wildernesses. Our modern-day society with all the environmental stress associated with technology plus overcrowding tends to overwhelm a sentinel’s control of his senses, especially in the fragile days of initial bonding.” Sandburg looked ready to lecture for the rest of the night, and Chris held up his hand.

“JD and Buck can go, but I won’t order them.”

JD and Buck looked at each other, wordless communication flying back and forth and then Buck spoke up. “Sounds fine to us.”

Ezra muttered softly that getting insect bitten didn’t sound fine to him, and then looked chagrined when JD and Jim both laughed at him, realizing that the two sentinels had heard every syllable he’d said under his breath.

They teased Ezra a while about his “delicate sensibilities,” then Ellison spoke into the lull of the conversation. “What’s this little project you mentioned? What do you have in mind, Larabee?”

“Well, since Buck blew his cover – he was posing as a gun seller with contacts to sell big shipments of arms illegally – I need a new undercover guy. You’ll do.”

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Chris motioned for Buck to join him as he walked out to the barn to check on his hay supply. Ezra and Blair were playing a game of chess and JD, after finding out Ellison had been an Army Ranger, had asked to talk to him about his time in the service. The two sentinels had gone for a stroll down the gravel road, so this was as good a time as any to check on how his old friend was handling the changes that had landed in his lap.

“How’re you doing, you old dog?” They were walking side by side, their flashlights hardly needed since the almost full moon was visible high in the sky.

Buck looked at him and said simply, “I’m hopeful. I’m hopeful that JD and I can make this bond work and that things won’t change too much. I’m hopeful that JD will decide to stay with the ATF and not join the army, but don’t you tell him I said that. If he decides to go, I’ll go willingly. And I’m crossing my fingers that Blair can teach me what I need to know to keep JD in one piece.”

Chris stepped inside the barn door and flipped the light switch. “Has he been having more trouble with spikes?” He walked over to his stack of hay bales and started counting, while Buck chewed his
lip before answering.

“Some. We’ve found that it helps if I’m touching him a lot. And, uh… Chris? We’ll only need one bed, so why don’t you put us in the den and we’ll use the pull-out couch.” Buck scuffed his boots on the ground and stared at them.

Chris turned around and said, “You sleeping together or are you sleeping together?”

Buck slowly raised his eyes to look at Chris. “Yes. And no. But… maybe. Hellfire, I don’t know where we’re headed with this. I never was much attracted to men, but I liked – well, my body liked – having sex with JD. I think I could get to liking it fine if we tried it again, because, well, I love JD, loved him for a long time as a friend, and now – well, it’s friendship, and brotherhood, and lovers, and it feels good to touch him. Maybe that’s the bond – Sweet Jesus, I don’t know.”

Chris blew out a long breath. “You think you could be with JD and still see women on the side?”

“I don’t know! I’ve been wrapped up in what happened to us and dealing with JD almost dying, and then getting him back. And that’s what’s important. I got him back. I never really was serious about any woman. I’ve never loved a woman like I do JD. But I don’t know. I haven’t had any desire to go get laid, I do know that.” Buck looked down again, and Chris wasn’t going to have that. He punched Buck lightly on the arm and caught his eye when he looked back up.

“So you better talk to him before you go and do something stupid.”

Buck gave a tired chuckle. “That I’ll regret, you mean. Such as looking up some floozy to help me reassert my heterosexuality? JD, he says he’s okay with whatever I decide. He says he’s always been a little bit bent, so having sex with me won’t shake him up. But I don’t know, he and Casey were starting to get tight. She came over this morning and jumped to the conclusion that I was JD’s boyfriend and he’d been lying to her all this time. She’s a nice kid, and I didn’t enjoy seeing her get upset. JD thinks if he’s going in the army, then they should break up anyway. But if we stay here? I’m thinking he might like to see her, hell, maybe marry her. It’s just a mess, Chris.”

Chris walked over to two large garbage cans and lifted the lids to see how much horse feed he had left, since he was going to have to order more hay. He leveled an assessing gaze at Buck, who was looking tired. He’d probably been worrying for days over all of this.

“Buck, Ellison and Sandburg act like there’s no personal space between them, and they’re only partially bonded. With a full bond like yours – Casey might not cotton to seeing you and JD being so tactile.” Chris reached out and gave Buck a gentle shove towards the door, walking beside him as they left the barn and headed back towards the house. He heard Ezra’s motor start and the sound of that fancy car of his driving away.

Chris stopped on the path, Buck following his lead. They were silent for a few minutes, taking in the stars. Then Chris said quietly, eyes still on the heavens, “Take this one step at a time and learn about being a guide. Don’t have sex with JD unless you both know what kind of relationship you want. And why don’t you find JD and call it a night; you’re both still wiped out.”

Buck made a grunt of agreement and gave a wave before heading for the patio, where JD was sitting looking up at the night sky. Chris went on inside and spotted Ellison and Sandburg seated on the couch, talking softly to each other.

“Ezra said to tell you he’ll be back around noon tomorrow. It was great to catch up with him.” Blair yawned and looked up at Chris with his eyes half-shut.
Chris wanted to get everybody settled so he could go to bed. It’d been a long week and he was looking forward to sleeping in a little longer in the morning. Probably Ezra wouldn’t get up till after eleven. If he were here on time tomorrow, Chris would eat his hat.

“So, one bed or two?”

“Two.”

“One.”

They’d answered his question at the same time. Blair was looking a little bit flushed and Ellison a tad stubborn. Well, Blair’s request trumped Ellison’s, as far as he was concerned.

“Blair, you’ve got the couch. Sheets and blankets are in the hall closet. Ellison, you’ve got the room at the end of the hall.” He called back as he left them staring at each other, “Breakfast is at eight.”

* * * * * * * * * * *

Larabee Ranch, Denver County
Wednesday, late evening, July 4, 2001

“Man, I miss watching fireworks from our balcony back home.” Blair, sprawled out in a padded patio chair, sounded wistful as he stared up at the brilliant stars in the Colorado sky. Personally, Jim didn’t miss the explosions rocking his eardrums or the searing lights against his retinas at all.

“You can’t expect a bunch of ATF guys to shoot off illegal fireworks, Chief,” Jim pointed out reasonably as he shifted in his patio chair. Sandburg could be such a kid sometimes. Jim might not care for the fireworks display, but he always enjoyed watching Blair “oooh” and “aah” over the annual light show Cascade put on each Fourth of July.

“Yeah, I know. Hey, speaking of all these ATF guys, what’s your opinion of them? You’re going to be working with them, after all.”

Jim sighed to himself. He was nicely mellowed out and really didn’t want to get all analytical this late at night. Maybe if he played possum and didn’t answer… He raised his beer to his lips and finished it off, then lined up the latest dead soldier with the other two on the table.

“Okay, Jim. Give. We’re alone. Everybody else has gone home or gone to bed.” Blair was looking at him with curiosity written all over his face. He had some choices here. He could stall and put this off, claiming the beers he’d had were drowning his brain cells. But why bother? Blair would just bring it up again. And again.

“C’mon, Chief. It’s a nice night. Haul your butt out of that chair and let’s walk down the road a bit.” He pointed to his ear and Blair nodded that he understood. They did have a rookie sentinel around and he’d rather have privacy for this conversation.

They walked silently for a mile and a half down the road in the bright, silvery moonlight, Jim enjoying holding tight to Blair’s hand, before he answered Blair’s question.
“They – all of them – remind me of my old unit. You can tell they’ve been through some tough times together and they trust each other. Body language and scent was fairly obvious about that. I did pick up on some worry-scent – they’re concerned about Dunne and Wilmington – and not entirely sure about me. You, though, everybody’s pretty relaxed about you being here. The Blair Sandburg patented charm at work again.”

Blair gave a small chuckle.

Jim was silent, thinking over his impressions of the men he’d met yesterday and today.

Blair spoke up. “Buck seems like he’s got the usual guide constellation of personality traits: He’s kind, cheerful, and shows a lot of empathy in his dealings with others. If he and JD agree, I’d like to add them to my research population, have them do some personality tests and take my questionnaire.”

“Being around Wilmington is easy; he’s a jokester, gets people smiling. He and Dunne feel right to me. I don’t have any uneasiness around either one of them.” Jim left unsaid, “Unlike Alex,” but he knew Blair would understand.

“JD’s confident and resilient. Smart, too. Ezra told me that JD’s a member of MENSA. His accent is a hoot. Part Boston and part western. He’s the youngster of the group, but he’s respected. The teasing he gets? It’s the group’s way of showing him affection.” Blair almost tripped over a larger rock on the gravel road and Jim took the opportunity to pull him up next to him.

“I’d like to show you some affection, Chief. Team Seven doesn’t have a monopoly on the stuff.” Jim kissed his reluctant guide. Several times. Blair was panting and flushed when Jim finally stepped away from him.

“Blair…”

“I want to, Jim. You know I want you and the bond. But not at the cost you’d have to pay. I’m sorry, but we can’t. Not yet. Not till I find out…”

“Find out what! Why won’t you tell me what you’re waiting for? And what’s this about the cost that I’d have to pay? You didn’t mean to let that slip, did you?” Because Blair’s scent had changed from sexy-aroused to guilty-worried.

“Umm… Please, Jim. We agreed I could have as much time as I needed to make my decision.” Blair was running his hand through his hair in a nervous gesture and Jim capitulated. Like usual. He might top Blair by seven inches or so and outweigh the squirt, but somehow the deciding vote was always cast by Sandburg.

“Will you at least sleep with me tonight? It’s been two weeks since we slept in the same bed and I miss feeling you at night.” Jim hated groveling like this, but to go to sleep with Blair’s scent surrounding him was just so right… and he always had less trouble with his senses after one of their sentinel-guide nights.

“Jim, each time we do that we come closer and closer to playing with fire. We can’t afford to get burned. We’ve been on the verge of the bond manifesting physically for a long time, and I’m betting that if we have sex, even just one time, bammo – we’d be fully bonded.”

“I’m willing to take that risk. Sleeping together, I mean. And I think I have enough self-control to not jump your bones, Chief.” Jim didn’t like pleading like this. In a way, he understood the stereotype of the primal sentinel carrying off his or her guide and forcibly seducing their reluctant partner. He
could fantasize about it, sure. Just toss Blair over his shoulder and haul his delectable butt away to a private place, stocked up with blankets and food. First thing to do would be to strip him, and make him comfortable in a nest of blankets and pillows. Then he’d begin at his feet, massaging them and sucking on the inside of his ankles…

“Earth to Jim. Hey, are you trying to zone? You got a little glassy-eyed there. You okay?” Blair -- fully clothed and probably too ornery to be seduced by sucking on his ankles – Blair was looking at him with a mixture of concern and trepidation.

Jim coughed. “I had a thought sidetrack me. But I won’t hit on you in bed, Chief.”

Blair laughed wryly. “I know I could trust you, Jim. It’s me that would probably crack and start kissing your nipples and running my hands down your belly, following your treasure trail –“

Blair stopped talking, and Jim prided himself on his quick action of gagging Blair with his palm. “If you’re not going to do it, then keep it in your head, okay? So, will you sleep with me tonight? Strictly platonically, and if you get amorous I’ll dump your cute little ass right out of bed onto the floor.”

Blair looked up for a minute, then nodded. Jim removed his hand and kissed him. “We’re still vertical, Sandburg; save the protest. Let’s go on back in a minute. Anyone else in particular you want my take on?”

Blair shrugged. “Vin seems quiet. I think whoever said still waters run deep had him in mind. Nathan and his girlfriend look like they’re pretty tight. He’s a clever guy, to have put together the sentinel clues and he was willing to listen to Buck, when even Buck thought he sounded crazy about how he knew where JD was. So, I’m thinking he’s pretty open-minded.”

“T’ll agree with your character study, Professor. Now, Sanchez, he’s an educated and well-read man, but something about the way his eyes look makes me think he could come across as a little fanatical or crazy. I think I’ll see if we can disguise him a bit, and have him pose as a survivalist attending the gun show where I’ll be hawking my stock. He can rave and rant about Jesus and guns -- act like a real whacko -- and get me noticed in a hurry. Maybe he can claim that I sold guns to… hey, I got it. The Sunrise Patriots. I know enough about how Kincaid operated that I could bluff through any questions. And if asked, I’ll deny I sold those bastards anything, but I’ll wink when I say it and they’ll be sure that I did.”

Blair reached up and ran his hand over the crown of Jim’s head. “Seeing you bald is gonna be weird, but I guess I should get used to it.”

Jim growled. Sometimes it was fun to play up the supposedly primitive streak sentinels were known for showing. Blair just snickered.

“If I wasn’t afraid you’d trip over your own feet, I’d make you run, Sandburg. Then I’d pounce on you like my alternate spiritual self and --”

“Hah! You wouldn’t do anything to me except maybe blow raspberries on my belly,” Blair said breathlessly.

“To start with… But I can think of some other things to do to you when I’ve got you laid out under me and helpless to stop me.” Blair’s arousal-scent wafted around them and Jim decided he’d better stop flirting before they got into over their heads. Blair was dead serious about not moving ahead with their bond until he had no more doubts about being his guide for the rest of his life.
“Something like this, Junior.” Jim rubbed his knuckles over Blair’s scalp, giving the kid an impressive noogie.

“Aaaah! Will you cut that out! My tangles are gonna have tangles.” But Jim had diverted Blair away from producing those intoxicating pheromones, so he’d achieved his mission goal.

He slung his arm around Blair -- he enjoyed how Blair’s small, sturdy frame fit neatly against his side -- and started them walking back to the ranch house.

“What about Ezra? You left him out. And Chris. Of course, you know I trust Ezra and we’re like day and night but, really, we’ve always gotten along. Chris – Ezra told us about his wife and son, so we wouldn’t do the foot in the mouth bit by asking if there was a Mrs. Larabee. What a horrible thing to happen to him, to lose his family that way in a bombing.” Jim tightened his arm around Blair’s shoulders in sympathy as Blair kept talking.

“Chris is actually on the little side – I mean, he’s pretty wiry, but the way he holds himself you’d think he was half a foot taller and fifty pounds heavier. So, what do you think about our temporary boss? He doesn’t bellow like Simon does, but he gets his points across just the same.”

“I think he’s a good team leader, looks out for his men, he’s practical, and I suspect he’s been to the edge and back again. Did you notice he didn’t drink any beer?” Jim also noticed his interest in Mary, a pretty blonde woman who’d come to the cookout. The man was attracted to her… and to Vin Tanner. Tanner returned the interest, from what Jim could tell through identifying scents. But if they’d ever crossed that line from teammates to something more intimate, Jim couldn’t tell. He was keeping that observation to himself. It wasn’t any of his business, anyway.

“Standish. He strikes me as liking the finer things in life going by that Rolex watch and his clothes. Comes across as a bit of an outsider, but the others trust him. I’m betting that trust was hard-won, too.”

“Ezra’s mom is a lady who always looks out for number one.” Blair smiled cheerfully. “I learned that over the years from eavesdropping, mostly. She’s a bit of a con artist and she tried really hard to convince Ezra to join her in that way of life. Really inconvenient for her that Ez developed a set of ethics somewhere along the line. There’s a little of her in the way he sizes things up. Still, glass houses, stones, and mothers. I avoid the topic of Maude, if I can.”

“They’re all good men. If they’d been in my unit I’d have been proud to serve with them. I think we’ll get along fine. So. Tomorrow we start officially training; I’m glad we had a day or so to relax with Wilmington and Dunne. Wilmington’s got a nice place picked out for primitive camping and between Tanner and Larabee, we’ll have enough camping equipment for us. The rookies have their own stuff.”

They had walked back about a quarter of a mile when Jim put his fingers to his lips. Blair gave a small nod and slid his arm around Jim’s waist. They walked on in companionable silence. Soon, they’d be sliding into the big bed in his room and Jim would be able to relax with the weight of his guide against him. He hoped it wouldn’t be too much longer before Blair made his decision. He was sure that Blair would decide to complete the bond and not break it, instead. Now if only Blair would figure that out for himself. If they’d been fully bonded then that disaster with Alex would never have happened, and he kicked himself mentally once again for his part in that cluster-fuck. Blair looked at him, alerted maybe by a change in Jim’s muscle tone, that something was bothering him, and he made an effort to relax again, smiling down at Blair’s quizzical face. He leaned down and kissed Blair one last time, so that he could go to sleep with the taste of Blair’s lips on his own.
Jim raised his razor to the top of his head, bypassing his beard. He watched his progress at shaving in the mirror, and mentally prepared himself for the gun show he would be setting up at this afternoon. Wilmington had drilled him on what he should know, and he felt ready to go undercover as a legitimate gun dealer who was a gunrunner on the side. He’d also been spending a fair amount of time letting his face be seen at bars where, according to Wilmington and Dunne, customers met with shady dealers.

He thought that the past three weeks had gone by smoothly. Mostly. Dunne and Wilmington had suffered a few bad days, times when something had triggered memories that had kept Wilmington moody and Dunne quiet. They’d apologized for the occasional nightmare they’d had during their week of camping, and he and Blair had tried to make them not feel embarrassed about it. Blair had
talked about the nightmares he’d suffered after he’d been kidnapped by Lash, and Jim shared his childhood memories of sleepless nights after finding his coach’s body. He could have brought up Alex and the damage she’d wrought, but he found himself reluctant to bring her name and her actions up during campfire confession time.

He took a towel and wiped off the remaining foam from his chrome-dome – Blair’s new favorite word. The kid had stammered out the name between bouts of the giggles after his first look at Jim Anderson, gun runner. Still, Blair couldn’t keep his hands from smoothing Jim’s bald head and Jim made him pay a kiss as a forfeit every time he did it. He’d let his beard grow out while they were camping; the face he saw in the mirror looked older and rougher than the man who lived in Cascade.

Overall, the trip up into the Rockies had been good, and he’d demonstrated for Dunne what a sentinel was capable of achieving. He’d also talked to the kid about the pros and cons of being in the service. Dunne still hadn’t decided if he would voluntarily join up or not; he had a strong sense of duty and was painfully sincere about wanting to do the right thing.

Blair had included the current controversy over the draft with his lectures on the history of sentinels and guides. When Blair was in his college professor persona – well, he almost had a PhD, but his dissertation wasn’t completed – he left out his personal opinions. Blair was passionately against the draft, but he wouldn’t try to sway the rookies. This wouldn’t be an easy decision for Dunne to make, and Jim was glad the levelheaded kid was searching out his team's veterans' opinions about their time of service.

One of those veterans would be acting this afternoon in the little drama they’d put together to give Jim some street cred. Sanchez could rant like nobody’s business and the script called for him to name Jim as one of the gunrunners for the Sunshine Patriots.

Jim took his contacts out of their case and put them in his eyes. He didn’t look so Aryan with brown eyes, but he didn’t want to be recognized as one of the cops who’d taken down Kincaid and his bigoted men. Blair didn’t like the contacts -- Jim could tell from his body language -- but he didn’t bitch about it. His partner was pretty good about accepting things that couldn’t be changed -- probably from all those years of meditating.

Blair had taught Dunne and Wilmington to meditate, and how to do visualization exercises that would help the young sentinel gain control of his senses. This was something that Jim still struggled with himself. A simple dial for each of his senses worked best for him. Dunne, with his technological bent, had clicked with the idea of a bar graph like the one displayed for volume control on his TV. He said he even mentally pushed the button on the remote for displaying which sense he was trying to balance out. Hey, whatever worked for the kid. Jim reached for his plain black t-shirt and pulled it on. It was a little tight on him, so that his muscles were more noticeable.

He sat down on the closed toilet seat and pulled on his socks, then pushed his feet into his boots. The ones with the lifts. Funny how two more inches of height made him feel twice his normal size.

He opened the bathroom door and stepped out into the hall. Blair, Dunne, and Wilmington were out doing field-testing today on Denver’s streets. Dunne was improving on his ability to stretch his senses and it pleased Jim to see how quickly the young man had caught on to the things Jim and Blair had taught him. Wilmington had a deft touch with the kid and was good at realizing when Dunne was in a pre-zone state; most of the time the rookie guide could avert his sentinel from falling into a full-blown zone.

He’d also had some private chats with his fellow sentinel about the care and feeding of guides. He could see the two-way protectiveness that went between the other two men. He’d shared how Blair had saved his life after Blair had figured out Jim was a sentinel, when he hadn’t accepted yet that
Blair was right. He’d stormed off only to be zoned in the street by looking at a damn Frisbee; Blair had saved his ass. Dunne had examples to pull out, too, of how Wilmington had saved his life on some of their cases, and his stories sounded a damn sight better than one about being rescued by his guide from being run over by a garbage truck.

Jim wandered out to Larabee’s kitchen and made himself a ham and cheese sandwich. He poured himself a cup of coffee and turned off the coffee machine. He’d leave to pick up his stock and then head over to the Merchandise Mart, which was hosting this week’s gun show. He was alone, and it was a welcome respite, despite the fact that he’d enjoyed their camping trip and time spent with the members of Team Seven. Jim smiled, remembering the long talks at the campfire, three of them drinking Irish Coffee and Dunne content with his mug of hot chocolate. They discussed politics, vehicles, how annoying working with the FBI could be, and groaned at Dunne’s attempts to tell jokes. Blair was good at tying in sentinel and guide education into the conversations.

Jim carried his coffee and sandwich out to the patio, and sat where he could look out over Larabee’s ranch. He took a bite of his sandwich and thought about how Blair was teaching the rookies what they needed to know to stay out of the draft. He was doing a great job and Dunne and Wilmington were becoming much more confident about using their gifts. He was very proud of his guide’s talents. Blair’s spirit animal was a wolf, a social animal that mated for life and stood for the ability to connect with others as a teacher. The wolf was perfect for Blair.

Around the campfire, there’d been some hilarious moments when Blair had de-bunked some of the commonly held ideas about sentinels and guides. His guide had been careful to include the kernel of truth within some of the outlandishly held beliefs. Sentinels could feel territorial, but they weren’t slaves to any compulsions to beat the shit out of other sentinels that had intruded on them. Jim had explained that it was more of a feeling of awareness – and a feeling of caution. Dunne had agreed that he’d felt that way, too, when meeting Jim.

Another moment of truth had been that the guide “voice” couldn’t hypnotize a sentinel into a trance state. It was useful for helping a sentinel focus and calm down, and provided grounding, and the familiar sound of his guide’s tones could help stop a sentinel’s zone. Wilmington had been amusing as he’d groused about the now lost chance to make Dunne cluck like a chicken or walk like a duck.

Jim finished his food and sipped at his coffee. He’d have to leave soon but he’d try to soak up as much peace and quiet as he could before he climbed into the beat up van that the ATF had provided for his use.

Blair had made sure to cover every perception the public had about sentinels and guides. He’d explained that there was no secret order of sentinels or guides, which was a popular myth that popped up in novels and movies. Also, a sentinel or guide couldn’t shape-shift into their animal spirit. Hearing that he wouldn’t wake up some morning and find himself in an animal body had relieved Buck.

Blair had questioned them both about dreams or hallucinations they’d had about animals. It was clear that Dunne’s spirit animal was a red-tailed hawk. In the dream he’d had when JD was missing, Wilmington had followed the bird to find his missing teammate sitting on an abandoned bunker in the park Dunne had played in as a youngster. When Wilmington and Jackson had arrived at the deserted ranch, a hawk’s cry over and over had attracted Wilmington’s attention to the hidden root cellar the boy’d been buried alive in.

Wilmington’s spirit animal hadn’t made its appearance yet, in his dreams or in the physical world, as far as they could tell. Wilmington was getting impatient to find out what it would be.

Blair had been in his element, explaining what he knew about spirit guides. Jim had let him tell about
the times Jim had seen his black panther – or melanistic jaguar, to be one hundred percent accurate, but even Blair would slip and call the big cat a black panther – during times of emergencies.

Blair had only seen his own wolf once – and that was when Jim had followed his drowned partner down the path of the dead – and the wolf and the panther had joined. That was when they had completed their spiritual bond, and it had brought Blair back to the living world. Even now, thinking about how he’d tried CPR on Blair with no success, and how even the medics had given up on him, made Jim feel almost dizzy with anxiety and fear.

And afterwards, regret and recrimination.

Jim no longer felt peaceful and stood up, restless with remembering how much he’d fucked up with his guide.

Blair, caught up in the wonder of the spiritual bond, had extended an invitation to Jim to join him fully. Jim had been stupid, stupid, stupid to put him off. And for what? He’d gone after Alex, murderous, sensual, criminal Alex with her stolen nerve gas. Blair, being Blair, had followed, against every doctor’s restriction, and had seen Jim and Alex kissing on the beach. The offer to fully bond with him had gone by the wayside then. And really, Jim couldn’t blame him. It was hard to explain the influence the female sentinel had exerted on Jim, even when he knew he didn’t really want her. Blair was his guide; the forced journey to the spirit world Alex had drugged him into had been all about Blair. Jim came out of that mess knowing he wanted the full bond with his guide. Blair came out of it determined not to let himself be hurt by betrayal again. So, he’d refused the physical bond but wouldn’t abandon Jim. It had taken a long time for Jim to get him to reconsider a total bond. And now the kid had let slip he had some other concern for Jim that were holding him back. Jim needed to get him to spill the beans about that. Jim wanted them to be together in every sense of the word. Domestic partners, work partners, and fully bonded to each other, physically and spiritually.

Lovers.

They’d been walking a very fine line, the two of them. It was possible to have a physical bond without having sex, but the physical intimacy – the skin to skin contact that would precede the bonding hormones production – very naturally usually led to having sex. They were only human.

Jim carried his coffee cup and plate back into the kitchen and washed them in the sink. He placed them on a towel and reached in his jeans pocket for the van keys. He locked doors and walked to the van. There were bumper stickers on it with slogans making it clear that he didn’t believe in government regulations. He climbed in and started the engine. As he drove back towards Denver, he focused on what was most important to him – Blair agreeing to be his guide in every way. Right now, there was wiggle room for Blair to change his mind. Jim’s genes were almost fully turned on; Blair’s weren’t as much as Jim’s. Right now, Blair could leave him without physical repercussions, but it was only a matter of time -- if they had sex or more intense skin-to-skin contact -- before full bonding happened.

If Jim became fully engaged as a sentinel, he would have to have a guide’s touch. He would need the guide whose touch had initialized him. Impressed on him. If the guide withdrew from his sentinel, he was risking their health. Theirs would be a symbiotic relationship.

Up at the campsite, Jim had ducked out when Blair had begun explaining the birds and the bees of bonding to the rookies. He was uncomfortable talking about his needs, for crying out loud, with his own guide. He didn’t want to get into it with two other guys. When he was out of sight, Blair had cheerfully whispered to him that he was a dick for bailing, causing Dunne to choke on his drink and
Wilmington to pound on the kid’s back. Jim had quietly -- and with, he hoped, dignity – asked Dunne to tell Blair he was going for a hike and he’d be back in an hour. Blair had stuck him with cooking and KP duty when he returned.

Jim made an exit from the Interstate that led to Denver and traveled some back county highways for while before turning onto the winding gravel road that led to a state of the art security fence beyond which a few isolated storage units could be seen. The gate was unlocked, and he pulled up next to the storage unit the guns had been transferred into so that there wouldn’t be a direct trail back to the Federal Building. Tanner and Larabee got out of Larabee’s black truck and met him at the door of the unit. Jim took a discreet sniff and yep, they were both floating in pheromones, but no actual arousal scent. He reminded himself again that this wasn’t his business, and concentrated on the job at hand.

Once they’d inventoried and loaded the guns, and Jim signed off on them, he drove to Merchandise Mart, registered, and set up his sales tables. He decorated his booth with some very attractive bait. A poster advocating that the government keep its nose out of private citizen’s lives. NRA banners. Survivalist manifestos. And in a visible place, the symbol of the Sunrise Patriots. Then he waited for Sanchez to make his appearance.

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Larabee Ranch, Denver County, Colorado
Thursday, early evening, July 26, 2001

JD slumped down in the big armchair in Chris’ living room. He felt tired and kind of down in the dumps, actually. He hadn’t done very well on their town field trip at all. He’d had three incidents of zoning, and come close to it a half-dozen other times. Buck was able to snap him out of it pretty quickly, but filtering through car traffic noise and the hum of machinery in buildings to identify scents and sounds had given him a headache. Blair had only let him take a baby aspirin, and he wasn’t looking forward to the teasing he figured the rest of the team would dish out once they heard about it.

Blair and Buck were listening appreciatively to Josiah relating how he and Jim Ellison had put on the best floor-show since Gypsy Rose Lee.

“Ellison kept denying that he’d ever sold guns to such a righteous group as the Sunrise Patriots. Said it would have been his honor to do so, but that he couldn’t allow me to leave under such a misapprehension. So while he was ‘correcting my error’, more and more people started to gather round, listening to me exult him for supplying weapons to the finest group of Americans of this century.”

Ellison walked out of the kitchen and said, “You really came across as a religious nut. You know your bible, that’s for sure. It’s a wonder the police weren’t called to cart you away for disturbing the peace.”

Josiah gave an acknowledging wave of his hand and continued. “It was the winking that was the finest touch.” He turned to JD and Buck and gave a toothy grin. “After he’d swear that he never had the pleasure of doing business with the Sunrise Patriots, he would wink. I’d say that everybody who saw him firmly believes he was the supplier of the Patriot’s weapons.”
“I heard a lot of buyers and sellers saying just that after you left, Sanchez.”

Buck rubbed his hands together greedily. “Now we wait and see who takes the bait. Greer, we know from informants, is a straw purchaser. It’s likely he’ll check you out. And maybe, if we’re lucky, a few others will, too.”

Blair raised his eyebrows. “Straw purchaser?”

Ellison answered him. “Somebody who legally buys guns to pass them to others who can’t buy them themselves. And I’m getting hungry. Did you pick up some steaks on your way here?”

“I did. Who’s staying for supper? I’ve got salad stuff, too, and I thought I’d make this rice dish…”

“Sounds good, Blair, but I think I’ll pass,” Josiah said, and stood up.

JD thought to himself that he might as well talk to Josiah now as later, so he got up, too, “Josiah, I’ll walk you out. Been meaning to talk to you.”

The two men walked outside together and JD thought about what a study in contrasts they were. Tallest to shortest. Oldest team member to youngest team member. Philosopher to tech geek. But none of that mattered because he and Josiah were both members of Team Seven, and Josiah had always made time for him, when he was troubled.

“What’s on your mind, John Dunne?” Josiah said encouragingly, which JD appreciated.

“A lot. Can I ask you some things that are kind of personal? I’d understand if you’d rather not let me pester you.”

“You’ve never been a bother, son. And this isn’t the first time we’ve talked together, is it? I’ve told you often enough to come see me if you need somebody to listen. I stand by what I said. So, what can I do for you?”

“During the Vietnam War, the army drafted you. How did you feel about it?” JD asked the question as respectfully as he could. Josiah didn’t often talk about that war.

“Been expecting you to bring that up. Well, John Dunne, my country said it needed me, and so I went. Lots of mistakes were made in that war, and I followed orders I sometimes didn’t agree with. That’s part of what it means to be in the service, you know. You follow orders and policies that you, personally, may not agree with. Now, with the volunteer army, when you sign up, you are choosing to put yourself in that position. A conscripted soldier, he doesn’t put himself in that place, he gets forced there. Of course, we always have choices, even if they are hard choices. A lot of good men chose to say ‘No’ to the draft and went to Canada or Mexico or Sweden. I can’t fault them. It’s not an easy thing to do to walk away from your home and family for your beliefs, thinking you could never come back again to the land of your birth.”

JD flashed on what it would mean to Buck to never be able to return to Colorado. Buck didn’t have any family here anymore since his mother had passed away, but just the same his roots were in Colorado.

“Law says that a soldier can’t be forced to follow an illegal order. But in circumstances where you’d question an order, it’s likely you’ll be in battle or under serious pressure to follow that order. It’s not easy in those circumstances to know what’s right. And, you’ll be hoping your superior officers will see it your way during the inquiry you’ll face for refusing an order.

“Some of the men in my unit considered the draft as being necessary, the price you pay for being a
They were proud to serve their country. Hell, JD, I was proud to serve; I signed up for a second tour in ‘Nam. And I served with a sentinel and guide pair. They saved our lives many times. I know that the talents you would bring -- you and Buck -- would be invaluable in the service of our country. But those same talents would also be invaluable right here in Colorado being utilized by the ATF. And speaking selfishly, I hope you and Buck can remain members of our team.”

Josiah looked over for a while at the sunset, evidently lost in his memories. Then he sighed. JD used his “gifts” as Blair called them; his teammate's scent made him think of sorrow and regret with a tinge of anger. Josiah stroked his chin, before he spoke again.

“Others felt like the Army owned them, that they were slaves until their time was up. They were bitter – especially because the draft was never fair, not even the lottery.

“When it comes right down to it, son, the fact is that when Congress relieved the rest of our citizens from their obligatory draft responsibilities – of course, it had always been stacked against the poor – sentinels and guides got left behind. They didn’t have enough political clout – just too few of them. But I don’t believe that made it right. “

Josiah reached out and squeezed JD’s shoulder. “Krishna once told a man who was in despair about what decisions in life he should make, ‘Know what your duty is and do it without hesitation’. You’ll figure it out, John Dunne. And I’ll support you when you do.”

He gave one last squeeze and stepped backwards, turned and walked to where his ancient Suburban was parked, climbed in and drove away, waving to JD as he passed him on the driveway.

JD focused on the Suburban’s taillights till they were mere pinpricks of red, then extended his hearing to find out what his guide was up to. Buck was drinking a beer and joking about a girl who had flirted with Blair at the bar they’d had lunch in. Blair had said that having lunch there was a dry run for times when, as a sentinel, he’d have to meet with informants at places like that, but JD suspected that he’d just wanted a bowl of the chili that JD had described to him on the street outside of the bar and grill. Blair was always coming up with tests for his senses, and talking to Buck about how important testing was to keep up. He’d started Buck on filling out notebooks about the reactions JD had experienced and the things that tended to bother him. But, Blair said that he didn’t seem to have as much sensitivity as Jim did, and Jim managed to do his job as a detective. Blair said he’d be okay. So did Buck.

JD shook his head as Jim asked Blair about that girl.

Blair was denying that he’d been interested in her, and JD bet that Jim was on that like white on rice. Jim would be listening to Blair’s heartbeat and watching for all the other signs of not telling the truth. The man was crazy about his guide and since Blair and he hadn’t done the full bond, Jim tended to act a little possessive.

He could understand that.

He and Buck hadn’t decided how to handle the physical end of their bond, except they did a lot of cuddling – in bed and out of bed. So far, that level of intimacy was enough to keep them both healthy. But it was hard. He got hard, all the time, when he was close to Buck and touching his skin.

Blair hadn’t been interested in that girl; he was telling the truth. But it had been more fascinating to him that Buck hadn’t made any effort to flirt with her and there had been no signs of arousal from him. And that was good. He guessed. He wanted Buck to be happy, and if that meant that Buck cuddled him and had sex with women, then that would be what he would settle for. But it wasn’t what he wanted.
He wasn’t interested in getting tangled up with a woman, either. Not even Casey. She still hadn’t returned any of his phone calls, so Vin had spoken to her granny; Nettie had told her about JD’s and Buck’s kidnapping and bonding.

He shook his head. Maybe he and Casey would have had something together, if the last month hadn’t happened, but it had and they didn’t anymore. He didn’t think they ever would. Not now.

Still, he’d hoped they could stay friends. Vin said she was real sorry to hear what had happened to him and Buck but that she was hurtin’ too bad to see him, that the wound was too fresh and lookin’ at him or talkin’ to him would just make it worse. He felt bad for Casey, but he just couldn’t start sleeping with her when the person he wanted for his lover had a mustache and a bent for practical jokes. And muscles. Real nice muscles and sexy skin.

He sniffed the air and smelled the steaks cooking, and decided to go back inside the ranch house. Thinking about Buck had made him want to sit next to him and drink in his scent. Later tonight, there would be at least some skin to skin touching, when they went back home and went to bed.

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Art by Mella

Rocky Mountain Arsenal National Wildlife Refuge, Commerce City, Colorado
Sunday, early evening, July 29th, 2001
“Blair, I want to have a little palaver with you. Privately.” Buck indicated JD who was sitting under a tree, some distance from them. JD was meditating, trying to regain some of the control that had slipped earlier today when they’d been in the thick of things at the Pearl Street Mall. Well, Blair had wanted some place that would be unpredictable for them to use for sensory testing and between the mimes, street musicians, stoned or drunk college kids, stand up comedians, and the carnival atmosphere – hell, usually there was even a fire-eater there – JD and Buck figured that going over to Boulder would fit the bill.

Blair wanted chaos; Blair got chaos.

But it had been hard on his teammate, although he’d done pretty well, considering all the distractions around him. However, as the afternoon had gone by, his ability to keep from zoning had diminished and Buck had resorted to keeping an arm around him to keep him grounded. Even so, JD had zoned big time when, blindfolded, he’d tried to track a child’s voice as the child flitted from area to area. The companionable arm Buck had slung around JD’s back and shoulders hadn’t kept JD from falling into that blank state and talking to him hadn’t brought him back to full awareness, either.

Blair didn’t help Buck. Blair couldn’t help him anymore. Buck had to prove he could pull JD out of a zone by himself for the Army doctors. Finally, he did the thing he’d done in the hospital, the first time he’d seen JD in a zone. He kissed him. He kissed him till he felt JD kissing him back.

Blair had decided they deserved a break after that, and Buck had suggested that they come to the Arsenal. Blair expressed a lot of fascination about the history of the place: how it’d been a weapons manufacturing area that had become an environmental hazard but also had functioned as a wildlife refuge. Fish and Wildlife converted it to a wild life center. It was a good place to go to unwind, and just eleven miles from downtown Denver. Jim was going to meet them there later, when he finished for the afternoon. He currently was hanging out at one of his friendly-to-gunrunners bars, trolling for straw buyers.

Blair didn’t answer his request for a private chat, just held up his hand, and then rummaged in his backpack. He pulled out three small contraptions that Buck recognized from watching JD set up stuff as white noise generators and turned them on, placing them in a triangle pattern.

Blair gestured to Buck to sit down with him inside the triangle. When they were facing each other, cross-legged, he asked, “What’s on your mind?”

“We’ve got to see the Army doctors this Thursday. That only gives us four more days to get this right. Blair… If JD and I were to, you know…”

Blair said nothing, just looked encouragingly at Buck.

“Tarnation. If we were to have sex, would it improve our chances of passing the Army tests?”

There. He’d said it.

Blair bit his lower lip and said, “Man… I would think that would depend on you, Buck. If you become his bonded lover, and you don’t really want the sexual aspect, then he’s going to know it. And… I feel that would make things worse. So be really clear about what you’re offering, and why. But if you want to love him as a lover – I know you already love him as a friend – then it would strengthen the bond, according to what I’ve read. There’s a promising line of research into the beneficial effects of orgasm upon bonding.”

Buck sighed and rubbed his palms on his jeans. “We were forced to be together, before. This would be different. JD’s willing, but he’s told me he’s always been open to the notion of sleeping with men,
although he was just a kid the last time
he fooled around with guys, and he’d never done most of the things those sons-of-bitches filmed us
doing. We tried, you know, to ignore what they would yell to us, or their ugly, grinning faces. We
tried to have our own little world – a Buck and JD world – where they didn’t matter.”

Blair nodded. “You guys did great. You’re both very resilient people and you didn’t turn against one
another but supported each other. I admire both of you.”

Buck gave him a half-smile.

“Buck… are you sexually attracted to JD? Does he turn you on?”

“I didn’t want to stop kissing him earlier today. Hell, up at that old cabin, with them watching, I had
to convince myself I wanted him, because the price of me not being able to get it up woulda been JD
being shocked with that tazer again. I let all my feelings about him kinda snowball together and just
appreciated him for the smart, tender-hearted, sweet guy that he is, and I’ve always thought he was
cuter than a spotted pup. The way his hair is always trying to fall in his eyes, and how he can look at
you with those big brown peepers, and how he’s such a shrimp – no offense, Blair – compared to the
rest of our team, and damn it, now I know what his skin tastes like and I’ve kissed him and I liked it.
I liked it. I love him and I like touching him; I like him touching me.”

Buck rolled his eyes. “Reckon I’ve just figured out what I’m gonna do. I’d be a fool to pass up a
package deal like this – love and sex together for a change. The other guys have always said I’m a
ladies’ man, an’, yeah, I purely did enjoy the times I’ve spent with the fairer sex. But here I am, at my
age, and I’ve realized that I’ve never really loved a women like I love JD.”

He bit his lip. “That ain’t exactly right. I’ve been in lust, and in like with my ladies, I just never
wanted to take things deeper. I was never serious about anybody I went out with, and I surely didn’t
want to get married or even live together. I’ve never felt towards anybody the care I feel towards JD.
I worry about him. I worry he’s gonna kill himself on that fool motorcycle of his. I want him to be
happy. I wanted him to have somebody to love. I encouraged him to date Casey, tried to open his
eyes to see how that little girl was interested in him. I’ve… I’ve cried when he’s been hurt. I’ve sat at
his hospital bed and begged God to keep his eye on this little sparrow and don’t let him die.”

Buck sighed in relief and smiled at Blair. He was sure glad Blair had come along. He was easy to
talk to, and he knew so much more about this sentinel shit. But he and Ellison weren’t totally bonded
and Buck didn’t know why. There wasn’t any doubt in his mind that Blair and Jim Ellison would
suit each other in the sack. What did JD call the other sentinel's and guide’s bantering and kidding
around? UST, that was it. Buck had asked him what in the hell that was, and JD had told him it
meant unresolved sexual tension. So what the hell, tit for tat. He’d talked about embarrassing
personal stuff with Blair; maybe Blair needed somebody to talk to about Ellison.

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JD kept his eyes closed and concentrated on breathing the way Blair had shown him. He could feel
himself slowing down and it was a good feeling. A concept came to him that he wanted to explore –
his feelings about Buck – and he felt himself drifting but at the same time he felt anchored. He
pondered – as Buck called it – upon the closeness and love he felt for his partner…

He was feeling like he was hovering a little above his body. White and yellow balls of light floated in
his vision, despite the fact that he’d closed his eyes.
A warm, fresh, tingly feeling – like chewing mint gum – was growing in his chest as he contemplated Buck and how he’d taken JD under his wing from that first day he’d met his team.

Buck was so kind to everybody and had the knack of making a person feel comfortable with him right away. But he and Buck had felt a special connection, even before they’d become bonded. The rest of the team had known it – where one was, you’d be sure to find the other.

That tingly, sparkly feeling grew and grew until JD felt his whole being glow with it. The lights grew brighter and he opened his eyes, sure it was what he was supposed to do.

He could see a strange sight across the way, a wolf and a lion lounging together on the grass companionably. There was a bubble surrounding them, a milky colored bubble, and if JD pushed against it by using his hearing, it would sink inwards, but he couldn’t get through it.

He wished he could see them clearer through the bubble, listen to them. He heard a whooshing sound and looked up at the sky over his head. A bird was plummeting down to him, dropping down to circle him before it sat on his shoulder and tugged on his ear with its beak. Then the hawk flew off towards the lion and wolf.

He followed the hawk’s flight with his vision and listened to the sound of its wings strongly flapping as it came up to the opaque bubble that surrounded the two animals. The hawk took its sharp beak and tore at the bubble, and tore at it again and again on different sides of it. When the hawk finished, the bubble was rent and gaping, but the animals didn’t notice the change in their surroundings.

The hawk flew straight back at JD. He didn’t flinch or turn away as the hawk’s outstretched beak came close. Instead, he felt a jolt as the bird first reached him, then an uplifting sensation, as if he could fly, too, as the hawk melted into him. He felt himself come back to full awareness of the world and felt like his soul had realigned with his body. He no longer felt like he was outside of his own self.

He looked over again at the wolf and the lion and saw them shifting into Blair and Buck, and he could hear them talking.

“So, this Alex, this female sentinel, she put some kind of a whammy on Ellison? Made him want to fuck her? Blair, do you think that was a woman thing or a sentinel thing?”

He heard Blair sigh, saw him worry his lower lip with his teeth.

“I think it was both. Jim, he, uh… Until he really got a good grasp on what effects pheromones have on people -- and especially on him, as a sentinel -- he could be led around by the nose. There was this other chick named Laura, and you know what, she was a criminal, too; she might as well have led him around by his dick physically, because that’s what he was letting her do, practically. He did get his head straight about her, though. Finally.

Blair picked a long blade of grass and started shredding it as he talked.

“I worry sometimes that my pheromones influenced his feelings about me. I was no doubt sending them out like an advancing army, because I took one look at him and started lusting. But Jim didn’t act on them as much, I guess because I was a guy, and the more rational part of his brain put the kibosh on him getting too physical with me. And maybe because I didn’t make a real pass at him. If I had, maybe we’d have rolled around together in the sack. I didn’t know he was a sentinel when I first met him at the Cascade PD. I observed some of the sensory problems he was having and told him I could pass along what I’d learned that guides do to help sentinels.”
Blair rolled his eyes and threw the shredded grass away.

“It took me a while to figure out that I was a guide and what we were doing was playing with fire. But… I had quickly come to care a lot about Jim, and I couldn’t keep from helping him. He was trying to keep it quiet about his sentinel abilities emerging, but after a court case where he claimed to see a perp shooting from a distance no ordinary guy could see from, the Army had him tested. The doctors classified him as an emerging sentinel, but not bonded, so he didn’t meet the rules for drafting him into the service.

“And that’s another problem. Jim had a really rough time, at the end of his term of previous service in the Army – he was a Ranger, you know. He spent eighteen months in the jungles of Peru, after a covert operation went bad. He lost his entire team – had to bury them himself. He completed his mission, amazingly enough, because a local tribe took him in and they became allies. They held the Chopec pass and Jim functioned as their sentinel. He kind of repressed all that when he was finally found again. I don’t want Jim to do another ten years of service. And the law is kind of gray in that area, since he wasn’t a bonded sentinel at the time of his earlier hitch. I’ve been looking into it, through Citizens Against Sentinel Draft, and it’s one reason I haven’t allowed myself to bond physically with Jim.”

JD followed the conversation, watching Buck lay a gentle hand on Blair’s knee and gave him a pat before moving his hand back to his own lap.

“If you don’t mind my asking… ? How did you two end up with a spiritual bond first, without going through physical bonding? From what you told JD and me, that’s kind of ass-backwards, ain’t it?”

Blair gave a quick grin. “We don’t do things the normal way, me and Jim. It goes back to Alex. I was trying to help her with her sensory control, but Jim kept cutting me off whenever I started to tell him about her and … I got a little pissed off and stopped trying to let him know I was helping another sentinel. Big mistake on my part. Jim was having all these visions of her spirit animal – it was a jaguar – and of me as a wolf; he was feeling edgy and out of sorts and when in his vision he shot me with an arrow, he decided I wasn’t safe around him and told me to leave. In fact, he packed up all my shit and practically shoved me out the door.”

Blair closed his eyes and gave a small shudder.

“I was feeling hurt and humiliated, but I tried to talk to him. He wouldn’t listen. We’d been living together for years by then, and since he hadn’t told me about his dreams, I didn’t really know why he was acting so strangely. He made our loft into a very sterile, very pared down place. And not just because he’d gotten rid of all my, shall we say, more interesting possessions. He’d gotten rid of his own stuff, too.

“Anyway, Alex – beautiful, tall, blonde Alex -- was found out as a criminal: she stole nerve gas from Rainier University, and then she came for me. She held a gun on me. Apparently I was a loose end that she needed to deal with because I knew about her weaknesses. From some earlier conversations we’d had, she knew I wouldn’t become her bonded guide, so she’d decided to kill me.”

Blair swallowed and was silent for a few moments, and JD could scent fear rising from Blair’s skin.

“She made me leave my office – I’d stayed for a night at a motel room but I couldn’t afford to keep doing that, so I was hiding out in my office – anyway, she made me walk over to this fountain on campus, and it was really early in the morning and nobody was around and she had her henchman there, too, and she hit me in the head with the gun when I tried to run for it, and I was mostly unconscious when they dumped me into the fountain. But not quite. I remember drowning. I…”
Buck got to his knees and reached over to Blair, and gave him a tight hug before turning him loose and sitting back down.

“Um… Sorry. It still kind of gets to me. I was in this jungle, and everything looked blue. I was a wolf and I was walking slowly down this pathway. I knew I had died, but I felt removed from really thinking about it. Then I felt this tugging at me, but there wasn’t anybody touching me. The tugging kept getting stronger and I turned around to see what was pulling at me. And then I saw the black panther and I knew it was Jim. He started towards me and I had a choice. I could ignore him and keep walking down that path or I could go to him.”

Blair shrugged and then grinned. “What can I say? It was Jim. I chose Jim. We started running towards each other and then we crashed together and we… we… exchanged parts of our souls. We became spiritually bonded. I don’t remember this part, but I started breathing and coughing. Jim and some of the rest of Major Crime had found me; Jim had realized I was in danger, and – this is kind of cool, I think – and even though he couldn’t see me in the fountain, when he got to the building my office is in… he turned around and went straight to where I was floating in the water.”

Blair shrugged again. “That’s how we were spiritually bonded. While I was recovering at Cascade General, I asked Jim to fully bond with me and he turned me down. He went chasing after Alex, and I went chasing after him. When I saw them kissing on the beach, I was glad we hadn’t fully bonded. Now I think maybe… if we had been fully bonded, Alex wouldn’t have had such a hold on him. Still, he was able to keep her from influencing him later, even after she had drugged him. She’s in a hospital now, she fried her brain on the drugs she found in the Temple of the Sentinels.”

Buck nodded his head, and JD remembered Blair explaining about the temple when they were camping.

“So Ellison fucked up and you got cold feet. And because you’re a guide you still want to protect him so you won’t bond until you know if bonding means he has to re-up in the service. But he’s already served, so wouldn’t that make him exempt?”

Blair made his hand flip back and forth. “That’s being looked into. And because he was in the service, I’m not sure that the loophole you and Buck could use would apply to him. They might recall him back to active duty. It’s being worked out in mediation even as we speak. And Jim doesn’t know I started the ball rolling about it. He’s told me that if we bond and he has to go back to the service, that we can go to Canada instead. But I know he’d make that decision for my benefit and not his, and I want him to have more options than that. Jim really loves being a detective in Cascade. So, I wait. And it’s been hard. I think I’ve forgiven him for what I saw him and Alex doing on that Mexican beach. And…”

Blair looked away and then looked into Buck’s eyes. And JD knew how looking into Buck’s eyes could encourage you to spill your guts.

“If I’m being really honest here, I have to say maybe I’ve used Jim’s behavior as a smoke screen so I wouldn’t have to really commit myself to him. The only time I didn’t have reservations about bonding with him was right after I died.”

Buck was silent and Blair bit on his lower lip, till JD was sure he could see the tooth marks if he tried. Finally Blair resumed his story.

“When I was in the hospital, after I drowned, I was almost giddy from feeling the spiritual bond, and I invited him to join me – be my lover and do the total bond thing. Man, I sure wasn’t thinking about the Army and how a full bond would limit our choices. But I’ve never really committed myself to anybody in my life before, and it’s not like I learned how to do it from my parents. I don’t know who
my father is, and mom’s had a lot of short-term relationships. Anytime somebody started to get serious with her, we’d hit the road. So maybe that’s why I’m being chicken-shit about becoming lovers with Jim. He certainly turns me on and it’s gotten harder and harder not to ask him to make love. He would in a heart beat.”

Blair ran his fingers through his hair, and sighed. Then he smiled at Buck and arched his back.

”JD’s been meditating for long enough now. I wonder how he did?”

He looked over at JD, and JD waved at him.

“JD, are you able to hear us talking?”

JD waved again.

“C’mon over here, Skippy. Didn’t your mama ever teach you not to eavesdrop on people?” Buck sounded a little peeved. JD felt somewhat abashed, but then he didn’t exactly mean to horn in a private conversation. He watched as Blair switched off the white noise generators.

He got up and stretched and extended his hearing and sight around him in an automatic gesture. He became aware of another sentinel coming close and realized that Jim was near. He spoke in an ordinary voice to tell Jim they were on the Woodland Trail. Jim estimated he’d catch up with them in about ten minutes. Then he walked down the path to where Buck and Blair were sitting under a tree. He sat down across from them, picked up one of the generators, and turned it over and over in his hand.

“I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have listened. I didn’t really stop and –“

“It’s okay. Tell me how you got through the white noise? That’s difficult to do.” Blair had on his teaching face and JD responded.

“After I had meditated for a while, and I felt this amazing tingly feeling in my chest, I resurfaced. I tried to listen but it was like there was this big bubble around you guys. Then my hawk came out of the sky and tore up the bubble. The hawk dove into me – didn’t hurt or anything -- and then I could hear you talking just fine.”

Blair beamed at him. “JD, that was great, that was a real accomplishment, man. You used the power of your spirit guide, how cool is that? And that tingly feeling --that was probably your heart chakra in action. What were you meditating about?”

JD felt himself start to blush and looked covertly over at Buck. Blair noticed and chuckled a little, and said, “Never mind, JD. I think I can figure it out, but what a cool buzz you must have had, with your heart chakra allowing you to feel the way you described.”

JD thought he’d try to shift the subject away from what his heart wanted.

“I saw your spirit animals, too. Blair, you’re a wolf; and Buck, I think you’re going to like who your spirit guide is.” He whispered sotto voce to Blair, “He’s been fretting that his animal guide's a butterfly or a kitten.”

Buck reached out and grabbed JD’s second best ball cap off his head. He held it out of JD’s reach and waved it.

JD laughed and said, “Okay, Buck, okay. It's a lion, a really big African lion, with this huge mane. He’s really beautiful and I hope someday you’ll be able to see him. Can I have my hat back, purty-
please? Since my favorite one is still in the evidence locker.”

Buck tossed it to him with a pleased expression on his face. “A lion. Blair, you told us that spirit animals are partly reflections of our personality traits. JD’s hawk shows his um… courage, wise use of opportunities, clear sightedness, truth and uh –“

Blair added, “Also creativity and overcoming problems. That works well for a tech wizard, don’t you think? And Buck, a lion’s traits also include courage. And brotherhood and strong family ties. Self fulfillment. Strength and letting go of stress. I see all of those things in you, my brother.”

Blair turned to JD. “Maybe, since the topic of privacy was brought up, we should discuss it a little more. JD, you’ll be aware of so many things about people and what they’ve been up to. You’ll know when a woman is menstruating or ovulating. When people have slept together. When they want to sleep with someone. Some kinds of illness are detectable also. You’re going to overhear lots of secrets. You’re going to have to really practice being discreet and tactful. Sometimes, you’re going to realize things about other people before they have figured it out for themselves.”

JD nodded. He felt a little embarrassed that he hadn’t put it together what the bubble had really meant.

Blair reached over and popped him one on the upper arm. “Hey, I’m not jumping on your shit, man. So don’t worry about bustin’ our bubble, just file it under things a sentinel has to be concerned with. And if you heard me talking about Jim and me, well, I don’t mind. Just don’t pass it along to Jim, okay?”

JD opened his mouth to warn Blair that Jim was very close by, when he heard Jim’s voice softly say, “What?” Too late.

“Blair, Jim’s here. He, uh, heard you say that.”

Blair got a guilty look on his face and Buck eyed him thoughtfully.

“JD, it’s time we finished our hike and headed home, and I believe Jim has just scheduled a little chat with our teacher.” He stood up and pulled JD to stand beside him, then reached his hand down and helped Blair up.

“Blair, we’ll see you tomorrow. Uh, call before you come over, all right. And I’m thinking we won’t be getting up real early, so don’t call before…” He looked at JD and grinned a wicked grin. “Say before ten o’clock. And good luck with –” He gave a nod towards the path where Jim was loping along in an easy run.

Blair smiled at them, and JD and Buck turned and started to walk towards Jim. As they passed him Buck said, “That kid loves you, Ellison. Don’t be a jerk, okay.”

Jim gave them a wave and continued moving towards Blair.

“C’mon partner. They’ve got to work out their problems and I’ve got something very important to talk to you about. Let’s walk down to the wetlands and sit a spell.”

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Jim had slowed down to a walk when Blair, with a resigned look on his face, met up with him.
“Look, Chief. Don’t you think it’s time you were open with me about what’s going on in that head of yours? I mean, you can talk to Wilmington and Dunne about us, but you can’t, well, talk to _me_ about us?”

Blair didn’t say anything, and alarm bells started ringing in Jim’s head. The day Blair Sandburg didn’t offer an opinion on _any_ subject was the day Jim would become seriously worried for his normally motor-mouthed friend.

“Blair…?”

Crap, Blair was looking at him, and there was no trace of his normally cheerful and slightly mischievous expression. Shit, maybe he’d better backpedal before he lost ground instead of gaining it by pressing Blair to talk to him about becoming his guide. At least, he guessed it was about becoming his guide.

“This is about us becoming bonded, right? It’s not about, uh, us joining the ATF, is it?” Larabee had done some low pressure recruiting, not for his team, per se, but perhaps to join the Washington branch of the ATF.

That ended Blair's silence.

“What? Do you want to give up Major Crime and switch to the ATF?”

“I told him I wasn’t particularly interested in doing that, but that I would have to talk to my partner before any decision would be made. You see how that works, Chief? The ‘talk to my partner’ part? Could we give it a try?” Jim slung his arm around Blair’s shoulder and turned him to go back on the Woodland Trail, but in the opposite direction from where Wilmington and Dunne had headed.

Blair slid his arm around Jim’s waist. They walked along in silence for a half a mile, Jim shortening his stride a bit so Blair didn’t have to jog to keep up with him.

Jim tried again to get Blair to explain himself. If his partner didn’t talk about his concerns after that, then Jim would let it go. Again. This wasn’t his first time at this dance.

“After Carolyn married me we didn’t talk about things we should have. Set us right up for that divorce. A sentinel and guide bonding, it’s like a marriage. No difference, really. Well, the mystical stuff adds a certain quality that my marriage never had. Anyway, Blair, I’ve had one failed marriage. I’ve made a lot of mistakes, but I hope to God I’ve learned from them. Why the hell won’t you talk about bonding with me? I’m asking. Please.”

Jim could feel Blair’s anxiety in the tightening of his neck and shoulder muscles and in the changes in his scent. He’d made his pitch. The next move was up to Blair.

They continued to walk along the path, but Jim hardly paid any attention to the birds and other wildlife he sensed.

Finally, Blair said, “Okay. I will, Jim. I promise I will. But not here and not in Denver. But I promise that when we return to Cascade, and we’re home, then I won’t put it off any longer.”

“I’m going to hold you to that, Blair. So, just to make sure we’re on the same page, you’re telling me that when we go home, and we’re in the loft, with privacy, you’re going to tell me why you haven’t bonded with me and what needs to change so that we can bond. But you do want to bond? Please tell me at least that much. I tell myself that you do want me, both as a sentinel and a man, but if I’m wrong…”
Blair stopped Jim from walking by tightening his hold on Jim’s waist. He stepped in front of Jim, lifted up and bent Jim’s head down before kissing him till they were both breathless.

“I want you, Ellison. You’re not wrong about that.” Blair gave Jim another kiss, before reaching for his hand.

“C’mon. I’m tired and ready to go back to the ranch. And let me tell you what JD learned how to do today…”

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Dunne and Wilmington apartment, Denver, Colorado

*Monday, early morning, July 30, 2001*

JD woke up before Buck started stirring. That was normal. Since they’d started sleeping in the same bed, JD usually woke up before Buck. When JD would attempt to disentangle himself from his sleeping guide, Buck would try to hold tight to him. JD would wriggle around, trying to slide out of bed quietly, but he’d always wake Buck up. Hair sticking out wildly in every direction, Buck would look at him blearily, and then the alarm clock, before rolling over to go back to sleep, calling him a danged rooster.

But today was not a normal day.

Today was… an in-between day. Yesterday morning, he’d woken up in his friend’s bed. Tomorrow morning, he’d wake up in his lover’s bed. But this morning was the start of all the rest of his mornings for the rest of his life and it was… strange. And wonderful. And comfortable. And puzzling. And just a bit nerve-wracking.

He pushed himself a little closer to Buck, feeling Buck’s chest against his back, Buck’s groin against his butt. He could feel Buck’s morning wood pushing against him. He rocked his ass slightly against Buck’s dick, enjoying the feel of it swelling against him.

Buck had made his choice last night. He’d shown JD in words and actions that he loved JD -- that he could show that caring in a physical, sexual way.

The sensuality he had shown made JD realize how well Buck had earned his reputation as a lover.

He was JD’s lover now.

Buck had given his word that he wasn’t feeling pushed into making love with JD; he’d promised that he’d be faithful and JD had repeated the words back to his bonded lover.

He couldn’t imagine making love with anybody else, ever again. He felt a warm glow remembering how Buck had told him, in between exploring his body with those deft hands and his warm mouth, that he loved JD.

They were more than teammates, now. They were more than a sentinel and guide pair. They were beyond the closeness of bonding. They were family now to each other.

Family.
After losing his mother, he’d found a brotherhood in his team. And now he had a mate, a life partner. A spouse.

A spouse who was awakening from a sleep state. His senses were feeling sharp and steady this morning, and he could keep track of the minute changes in Buck without even trying.

He pushed back against Buck a little harder, a little more insistently. Buck was starting to respond to his invitation – even in his half conscious state – by beginning a slow thrusting against his ass.

Yesterday at the Arsenal, Buck had sat down under a tree, down by the wetlands, and pulled JD to sit down in front of him, between his knees, and buried his face in the back of JD’s neck and hair. He wrapped his arms around JD and held him snugly, while he muttered awkward words with small kisses for punctuation. JD had asked him a few pointed questions regarding the difference between feeling obliged to do something you didn’t really want to do, and wanting to do it for its own sake.

Buck had sworn to him that he wasn’t offering out of duty, but out of love. He’d allowed that he was getting the better part of the deal, since he was sticking JD with an old reprobate. A reformed one, he’d hastened to add, and he gained a lover who was smart, and loyal and funny – despite the fact said partner couldn’t tell a joke to save his life -- and who was cute and had hair that begged for fingers to run through it and whose skin was so soft that he, Buck Wilmington, wanted to run his hands over every part of JD Dunne’s body, and that included the male parts.

JD had brought up women then, and Buck had told him that he’d probably always look at a beautiful woman with an appreciative eye, but that he wasn’t going to mess up his home life by cheating – not in his mind and not with his body. He’d said it firmly, and JD believed him.

JD hadn’t used his sentinel senses to see if Buck was lying. Buck couldn’t do the same to him, and being one-sided like that seemed unfair. Buck was going to have to trust him; he was going to have to trust Buck. That was how it worked.

Buck had asked him about Casey, and JD said it was over between them. He was sorry she’d been an innocent victim in all of this, but dating her or marrying her seemed as far removed now as the peaks of the Rocky Mountains.

They’d fallen silent then, JD relaxed against Buck, and he didn’t bring up the Army. They’d know soon enough if they would serve their mandatory ten years in the service or right here in Denver, with their team.

It was only when JD heard other hikers approaching that their interlude ended. They’d had one drugging kiss, deep and hot and breath-taking, before they’d pulled apart and started walking back to the Visitor Center, where Buck had parked Lady. JD had slid his arm around Buck’s waist and Buck had slung his arm around JD’s shoulders in response. They’d stayed that way, even when they’d passed the other hikers. Buck’s breathing had remained even, and JD felt his concern that Buck would feel anxious about being seen as gay ease a little. Buck usually didn’t care what other people thought of him and went his way in his own style, but JD worried about Buck feeling uncomfortable that observers would realize he enjoyed JD’s touch. Other people… but not Team Seven. He had no fears that anyone on his team would look at him and Buck in distaste.

Buck had insisted that they go out to dinner, and had picked Steakhouse 10 over on Elati St, reasoning that this was going to be their anniversary date and they deserved to celebrate at Denver’s best restaurant. The steaks had lived up to their reputation and the rest of the evening out had passed in stolen touches, laughs, and comfortable conversation until they’d walked into their condo.

JD and Buck had started kissing each other, in between struggling to remove each other’s clothes.
Doors were hurriedly locked, and windows checked, both working together to secure their territory. Then a quick shower, together, and they walked up the stairs naked to resume kissing, standing beside the bed, before JD announced that he was tired of getting a crick in his neck and pulled Buck into bed with him.

Remembering their evening together re-exploring the intimacy that their captors had forced on them previously, the overwhelming feeling JD had felt had been a sense of safety. He was safe with Buck, and Buck was safe with him. He had banished thoughts of the last time he and Buck had made love together and the whispered words from his partner had re-assured him Buck wasn’t going to fall into flashbacks to the old cabin.

Sliding into sleep, sated and satisfied, spooned up against Buck, JD pulled Buck’s hand to his heart and understood that he’d never be alone again.

And now daylight was starting to filter through the skylight and windows, and before they began their workday, JD wanted Buck to watch him fly apart, since he’d been able to see so very clearly Buck’s every expression last night in the darkened room. Fair was fair, after all.

He moved away from Buck, who grumbled sleepily and mostly incoherently, so that he could roll over and face his lover.

Afraid that gentle touches would soothe Buck back down into sleep, he used his nails and teeth to tease Buck fully awake.

Buck retaliated by grabbing JD’s hands and levering himself over JD, holding JD’s hands down over his head with both of his. JD grinned at him, to let him know feeling restrained wasn’t going to trigger unpleasant memories, and then proceeded to yelp and moan and laugh as Buck used his mustache and tongue to tantalize and tease JD’s skin.

“You’re a randy little rooster, and I’m gonna make you crow, JD.”

Buck slid his body back and forth on top of JD, the friction between their bodies building and building till JD felt his feet start to arch involuntarily and he stammered out Buck’s name, looking into Buck’s eyes as he orgasmed, feeling like time had stopped while his body pulsed and pleasure flooded through him.

Buck didn’t stop his own movements and soon closed his eyes and grimaced and groaned as he came.

Buck collapsed on top of him fully and JD enjoyed the weight of his partner till his bladder staged a protest.

“Buck, lemme up. Gotta pee.”

With a sigh, Buck rolled off him and JD slowly pushed himself off the mattress. Buck followed him, and picked up a pair of boxers from the pile of old laundry on the floor and swiped it over his belly, then handed it to JD, who shrugged – it was his boxers – and used it the same way.

JD turned to go down the stairs and gave a yelp when Buck gave him a smart slap on his ass.

“Blair won’t be here for hours. I vote that after we hit the john we come right back up here and take a nap, and then fool around some more.” Buck was yawning and JD decided a nap sounded pretty darn good.

And so did fooling around.
“You know, Buck, someday you’re going to have join the twenty-first century and learn a whole new way of doing business.” JD watched the other vehicles on the road as he teased Buck about not using direct deposit for his paycheck.

“Dang it, JD, I just know those incompetent – what’s that Boston word for idiots again?” Buck’s heart wasn’t really into this argument; he was just passing the time with JD. He eased Lady over to pass a Ford Ranger truck, and then glanced at his watch. They’d get to the Federal Building in plenty of time for the weekly staff meeting.

“Chowderheads.”

“Anyway, those chowderheads would lose my paycheck if I let them get their mitts on it. I’d rather pick up my paycheck the old-fashioned way and know for sure that I’ve got it.”

JD shook his head. “Direct deposit is safer than physically carrying around your check. You might lose it or somebody take it. But if that’s what you want to do, I won’t argue with you. Dear.” He grinned as he said it and Buck had to laugh.

“JD, that was actually funny. This is a historic day.”

“Should we make it a historic day in another sense, too, Buck? How would you feel about telling the rest of the guys that we’re really together now?” JD was looking curiously at him, and Buck shrugged.

“I’ve got no notion of trying to hide us being lovers. That’s just not the way I am. Besides, none of them will mind. We might get an old-fashioned shivaree, though. Well, actually that would be more my style than the rest of our team’s way of welcoming us as a couple. So we’re probably safe from them standing in the hallway of our building and banging pots together and making a hullabaloo. How about you, though? Do you want to share the good news or keep it private?”

JD turned towards him and reached out his hand. Buck squeezed it as JD said simply, “They’re the closest thing we have to family and I want them to know. I want to celebrate. I don’t want anybody thinking that what we have is like a… a shot-gun wedding or something. We made the choice to be together. Those assholes who forced us to have sex have nothing to do with our decision. Let’s invite everybody over to the Saloon after work, and blow off some steam. Okay with you?”

Buck raised JD’s hand to his lips and kissed it. “Sounds like a plan to me.”
Chris peered through the blinds of his office and counted heads. As expected, there was still one missing. He walked back to his desk and added another date to the tally sheet he was using to keep track of Ezra’s misdemeanors. Two more times of being later than a half hour to work and Mr. Standish would be helping him wade through a pile of statistics for a report he needed to finish by the end of August.

Actually, he probably would have asked for Ezra’s help anyway, since his business degree came in handy when it came to dealing with numbers, but he wasn’t about to tell his tardy team member the truth. Ezra seemed to do better knowing Chris was watching over him, seemed like having a bit more structure kept him settled down. Chris grinned to himself. Ezra kept him on his toes, that was for sure. Chris had never regretted taking a chance on bringing Ezra on board his team; the boy liked fancy clothes and fancy talk, but he was a good man and he did a great job for the ATF. Or perhaps it was fairer to say that he did a great job for Chris and his other teammates. Ezra’s loyalties were more tied to the people he personally had connections with, rather than the bureaucracy of the ATF or FBI.

He walked out of his office and pulled up an extra chair. Ellison and Blair were here, too.

He looked at Buck and nodded. Buck opened his bottom desk drawer and pulled out the rubber chicken he kept there. It was a silly way to start their weekly meeting, but by now it was a time-honored ritual. Or a well-beloved bit of bullshit.

Buck tossed the chicken to him and he held it up and said, “Meeting’s started. I want to hear where everybody’s at on their cases, and then it’ll be open season. I’ll go first.”

He glanced over at Ellison, who was grinning, and then at Blair, who was also smiling and looking like he was bursting to say something. He knew Blair well enough by now to know that it would be a psychological, sociological, or anthropological comment. Well, it could wait for a bit.

He sat the chicken down on the floor by his feet and then looked over at Buck and JD. “Those two assholes who were in on your kidnapping have decided to continue pleading innocent to all charges, the kidnapping, grievous bodily harm, and sexual assault ones included, but the judge denied bail. It’s going to come up before the federal grand jury. That’s the bad news, since it means you two will be on center stage. They are going down for what they did, though, between your testimony and that homemade porno flick they shot. Hopefully, the DA can get them to plea bargain so it won’t go to trial.”

JD and Buck looked at each other and Chris saw the resignation in their faces and eyes. They had known it might play out this way, but they all hoped that a trial could be avoided. The media on the case had died down some over the last couple of weeks, but a trial would stir it all back up. He made a note to discuss what Buck and JD could expect from the press with Mary. She was fair-minded as a reporter and had proved herself a good friend; he knew he could trust her. He wouldn’t mind seeing Billy, either, although he wasn’t going to get attached to the little guy.

He spoke back up. “The end of the month reminders: don’t forget to fill out your time sheets, sign them, and turn them in for July. Human Resources wants you all to know that if you’re gonna change anything on your forms – insurance, life insurance beneficiaries, address, phone numbers – any of that kind of stuff – to do it today if you want it to go into effect for August.”

He passed the chicken over to Vin, who held it up briefly also, then sat it on his desk next to a mug of coffee that was so black that it looked oily. He summed up his progress on his current cases and passed the chicken over to Nathan, who also updated Chris and the rest of the team on what was happening with the cases he was working. He also told Chris he was going to take off a week at the end of August, tie it into Labor Day weekend. He and Rain were going to take a vacation.
“Girl’s been working too hard; the only way for her to get away from the Women in Crisis Center is to go out-of-state and make her leave her cell phone at home.” Nathan reached out and touched her picture on his desk.

The door opened then and all eyes turned to watch Ezra walk in the door. When he was close enough, Nathan hurled the chicken at him and he caught it before it hit him in the face. The boy did have good reflexes and quick hands.

“All right, Mr. Standish. Glad you could join us. Care to share what kept you from getting here on time today?” Ezra glanced so briefly at JD and Buck that Chris almost missed it. He shook his head and walked over to his desk and dropped the chicken with the air of a butler disposing of a dead mouse.

Chris had expected another one of Ezra’s tall tales, which were entertaining as all get out. Something was wrong.


Ezra gave a sigh and then looked apologetically at JD and Buck. “I’m afraid I was detained by the need to educate some of our fellow agents on how to not behave like cretins. They had seen you in the building earlier and were speculating on sentinel and guide bonding practices. In strident and attention-getting tones. They appear to have acquired their information from pornographic comic books, the loud-mouthed ignoramuses.”

Chris said, with heat in his voice, “Anybody else runs into that kind of attitude I want to know about it. JD, Buck, Jim, Blair – if anybody gives you shit, we want to know about it. Ezra – you get a free pass for being late. You’ve got the chicken, catch us up on your cigarette warehouse case.”

After Ezra, and then Josiah had spoken, the chicken passed to Blair, who beamed when he became the recipient.

“Wow, this is so cool, a modern-day council of war and your own version of the Indian Talking Stick. And developing your own rituals! Man, this is culture evolving right before us.”

He opened the notebook Chris had noticed that he carried with him everywhere he went.

“Okay, whose idea was it to use the chicken as the substitute for the talking stick, and where did you get the idea from?” He looked expectantly around the room and Buck sheepishly answered him.

“JD here was a Boy Scout and he gave me the idea, said they used to do it in his scout meetings. I got my chicken out when it was my turn to talk one day, and it just kind of snowballed from there. Lord, I sure wasn’t thinking about culture – I just thought it was funny.”

Blair opened his mouth – probably to ask more questions – but a soft, “Chief” from Jim made him shut it again.

“Okay, you’re right, Jim. Another time. All right. JD and Buck are doing really well, and I feel they are a lot more prepared for the tests the Army is going to inflict on them. They’ll report to a recruiting station initially and then be taken to a base; here’s what they can expect: blood tests, pheromone testing, EEGs, a general checkup to pinpoint any areas where problems are developing. These tests are going to confirm what the hospital’s earlier blood test had shown – physically, they’re bonded. The spiritual part is harder to confirm, Amy doctors will question them about dreams, visions, hallucinations, and also give them some simple psi tests. There will be a sentinel there to read their
truthfulness. If it's still unclear, then a shaman will induce a trance state and check their auras. The shaman can see a manifestation of the bond on the spirit plane, for example, the golden cord that JD and Buck shared that allowed Buck to find JD.”

He grinned mischievously.

“"The Army so does not like to admit that they have to rely on a shaman.”

Blair got up from his chair, walked around behind it, and placed his hands on the back of it, rocking a little on the balls of his feet.

“First they're going to ask if JD and Buck want to sign up. If a sentinel and guide do that, then -- wham, bam, thank you, mam, they’re inducted right away and the testing takes place on an Army base. They will play on patriotic feelings.”

He rubbed the side of his temple with one finger for a moment, as if a headache was starting to develop.

“If the pair doesn’t sign up right off the bat, then the docs do the physical tests. Results are back to the recruiting station within a couple of hours. If those results show that they are bonded but that there are imbalances, then they are officially drafted at that point. The Army takes them to a base that has a sentinel and guide program, and teaches them what to do, which is pretty much the same stuff I’ve been showing JD and Buck this past month. The spiritual part is also confirmed, since a guide and sentinel have to have both sides, physical and spiritual, for the army to draft them.”

He resumed gripping the back of the chair. Chris noticed he was holding it tight enough for his knuckles to turn white. Jim looked like he wanted to go over to his partner, but he kept to his seat.

“If the physical tests show that they have no problems, the Army still takes them to a base for up to two weeks. They will use this time to test the bond's stability and confirm the spiritual end of it. They will give recruitment their best shot. In other words, they’ll try to show that JD and Buck do not have a stable bond under stress to justify drafting them and will be throwing propaganda--”

“Chief,” Jim said again and Blair glanced at Vin and then Josiah and Nathan before looking apologetically at Chris.

“Sorry. I guess it’s no secret where I stand on the draft issue, but I do respect our veterans and if I offended anybody here, I apologize.”

Vin said quietly, ‘I’m not offended. I don’t hold with the draft laws neither.”

“Blair… what’s to keep the Army testers from flunking them on purpose?” Nathan had asked the question but Josiah and Ezra were nodding their heads also.

“There will be observers monitoring, and they’ll testify if need be during a dispute. Congress approved Citizens Against Sentinel Draft and Amnesty International to oversee the process after a lot of protest work and grass-roots initiatives.”

JD spoke up. “So, on Thursday we should bring a packed bag with us and not leave any milk in the fridge.” Blair nodded and passed the chicken to Jim, who gave Blair a pat on his back and a concerned look as he took it from him. Obviously, even talking about the testing procedure bothered Blair.

Chris listened thoughtfully as Jim reported on his undercover efforts as a shady legitimate gun dealer with access to illegal guns. Having a sentinel work the gun show had proved beneficial in other
ways, as Jim had observed other illegal transactions and had started several more promising investigations.

But so far he’d only had minnows falling into the net, not the larger predator their informants had said was swimming around, circling, waiting for the right moment to strike. They needed to do something to make that shark smell blood in the water and attack. Right now he was too far out of their grasp.

Jim got ready to toss the chicken to Buck, but changed his aim when Chris held out his hand.

Once Chris had re-positioned the chicken on the floor, he said, “We’ve got to give whoever is behind Greer – and possibly other major players -- a reason to quit stalling. Let’s hear some ideas.”

Nathan answered him first. “Ellison could put the word out that he’ll be leaving town – with his bag of goodies if he can’t sell them here.”

Chris nodded his agreement. “What else?”

Ezra spoke up. “Perhaps if the concept of serious competition for the stock were advertised, our buyer would decide it’s time to make that sale before another consumer gets the bargain.” He looked thoughtful. “Informants being who they are, however, we can’t exactly divulge the plan to plant false information. I propose that we question our informants for rumors that a new player with serious intentions is in town and looking to buy an arsenal of weapons.”

“Maybe a Mexican drug lord looking for AK-47’s and such to take back home,” Vin added, with a solemn nod to Ezra.

Buck blew out his breath slowly, obviously thinking while he did it. “Lots of times those Mexican drug gangs pick up their guns in the border states, so we should throw in that they think buying in Colorado would be less noticeable, less likely for them to be under surveillance. Hot diggity damn. I wish JD and I could be in on the fun, but it looks like we’ll be busy for the next ten days. Or the next ten years.”

Buck’s attempt at humor fell totally flat for nobody in the group smiled or laughed.

Blair spoke up firmly. “You both are going to totally ace those tests. And we have today and tomorrow to do more field tests. You two could go along with Ezra or Josiah when they meet with informants, practice the techniques we’ve been working on in a real investigation. You’re ready to move up from Sentinel and Guide 101 to the advanced levels, anyway.” Blair looked eager to get started.

“All right then, we’ve got a plan. Get with each other after the meeting and coordinate your schedules and stories.”

Chris noticed JD giving him a small wave. He and Buck didn’t have any current cases to report on but obviously he had something to say. He tossed the chicken to JD.

JD leaned over and placed the chicken on Buck’s desk, then got up with a nervous look on his face. Buck pushed out of his own chair to meet him. Suddenly everybody’s attention was on the two of them; Blair closed his notebook, and Ezra and Vin stopped talking softly to each other.

JD cleared his throat. “We’ve got something to say.”

Buck added, “Tell, actually. We wanted our team to be the first to know.”
“Because like I was telling Buck this morning, you guys have been like family to both of us.”

“Chris and I – we go back to high school.”

“When I left Boston, I sure didn’t know I’d become such wicked good friends with everybody.”

“JD and I talked things over.”

“Things are going to be different now.”

“And dang it, it’s not because we felt we had to do this.”

“Nope, we wanted to do it. It’s the right thing to do.”

Chris interrupted them before they confused the team any more than they’d already done.

“Buck, JD, would you just spit out whatever the hell you’re talking about?”

JD looked up at Buck, who was of all things starting to blush.

Buck Wilmington. Blushing.

All of a sudden Chris figured he knew what they were yapping about and JD confirmed it when he reached up on his toes and kissed Buck square on the lips.

Buck finished off that kiss in a way that made JD kind of stumble a little and then he said, affection and pride in his voice, “JD and I are together. Hell, Chris, we’re lovers now and we intend to stay that way. Is that clear enough for everybody?”

Nobody was in their chairs now. There was handshakes and hugs and questions and best of all – acceptance. Finally the racket started to die down a little and Buck announced that they were all invited to the Saloon to celebrate with them tonight. Seven o’clock sharp.

Chris let them mill around a while longer, then asked JD and Buck to come with him. The rest of his team went back to work and the lovebirds followed him into his office and sat down, waiting for him to say his piece.

“You going to have a ceremony or anything? And remember that you’ll need to re-do some paperwork for the ATF.”

JD spoke up. “Okay. We’ll go down to Human Resources before we leave here this morning. We thought we’d sign the forms for the state this afternoon. It’s considered a civil union and we’ll have the same protections under the law as a married couple.”

“Means you can’t marry other people, am I right?” Chris wanted to make sure they knew what they were doing.

“We know, Chris. Blair went over all this stuff with us when we were camping. And…” JD suddenly found the floor fascinating. “We didn’t talk about a ceremony, but I’d kind of like to exchange vows with our team as witnesses. Buck?” Now he looked up and Chris found himself grinning when he saw the indulgent look on Buck’s face.

“Sure, partner. We’ll get the city hall stuff done this afternoon and we can say our pledge to each other at the Saloon. I’ll call Inez and see if we can have the back room.” Buck looked at Chris and asked, “Anything else you wanted to say, Chris?”
“Congratulations. And what are you going to tell the Army when they ask you both to join?

JD took Buck’s hand. “That I respect the work the Army sentinels and guides do, but we’ve got our own kind of work waiting for us back home. If we pass all their tests, that is.”

“Glad to hear it. Now go see who Blair’s got you working with today, and I’ll see you both tonight.”

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J Watson’s, Denver, Colorado

*Tuesday late evening, July 31, 2001*

It had been a good party and a touching ceremony, Blair thought as he helped clean up the debris of plates and silverware, and take down decorations from the wall. Little blond-headed Billy Travis, who was Mary’s son, was having a great time whacking a balloon around the room.

The invitations to Buck and JD’s commitment ceremony had grown considerably since the staff meeting early this morning. Everybody on Chris Larabee’s team had thought of one or two other people who really would love to attend this wedding.

When Buck and JD had walked out of Chris’ office, Vin had asked if Nettie Wells could come. He’d assured Buck that Casey’s grandmother wasn’t taking sides between JD and Casey, and that she genuinely wanted to see Buck and JD happy together. They’d agreed, and JD has said he was fine with Casey coming, too. She hadn’t, though. When Nettie had entered the Saloon, carrying a lot of party stuff, she had quietly told JD that Casey wished him well but it was too upsetting for her to watch him get married to somebody else.

When Nettie had found out that there was only today to get ready for this party, she had volunteered...
to organize the decorations and bring a cake. She’d also taken over contacting the rest of the invited
guests on the quickly put together list. She’d called Inez and they’d worked out a buffet menu. The
rest of the team and Jim and Blair had pitched in to pay for food and drinks.

Everybody had known each other from previous get-togethers out at Chris’ ranch, so the
conversation had flowed and people had enjoyed themselves. Buck had put himself in charge of the
music and brought a stack of CDs that played quietly during the meal; he kicked them up to dancing
levels after the ceremony and cake. Plenty of people had cut the rug, and Jim had even taken Blair
out for a spin or two around the makeshift dance floor. Blair had met more ATF agents and their
significant others, including Team Seven’s supervisor, Orrin Travis, and his wife, who were Mary’s
in-laws.

After folks had eaten, Josiah had spoken a few words, quoted poet’s thoughts on love, friendship,
and marriage and then Buck and JD had faced each other, holding hands, and had spoken the
traditional vows of marriage.

Blair had asked them later about why they had chosen those time-honored words of ritual, and not
written their own vows, but they both had agreed those simple lines had captured what they wanted
to promise to each other.

Blair recited the words in his head as he bagged up garbage and carried it out to the dumpster.

Only he substituted his name and Jim’s name.

*I, Blair Sandburg, take you, James Joseph Ellison, to be my spouse, to have and to hold from this
day forward, for better or for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to
cherish; from this day forward until death do us part.* He gave a little shiver as he said it and he
didn’t know if it was from excitement or dread.

He went back into the backroom and looked around for anything else that needed finishing up. Vin
was pushing tables and chairs back to their original places and Blair started doing the same on the
other side of the room. He didn’t want to talk to anybody right now.

Was commitment what he wanted? Did he want to make himself so totally vulnerable to another
person? But wasn’t he already there anyway? If Jim were to hurt him again, it would be just as
painful whether or not they’d finished bonding and had become lovers. He’d forgiven Jim for Alex.
Jim was asking that Blair trust him to not hurt Blair like that again. Going through with the bonding
and, hell, a ceremony like this one, would be a pledge that he did trust Jim, he trusted him with their
future. And that Jim trusted him.

So… he’d jumped off a cliff with Jim. He’d jumped out of a plane for Jim. Could he make that
emotional leap of faith for Jim also? With Jim? They’d be doing it together. Could he envision living
without Jim?

The answer to that last question was -- no. When he thought
of himself two, five, ten, twenty years down the line, he always saw himself with Jim. So who was he
trying to kid? Himself? He was being a fool.

He’d checked in with his friends at Citizens Against Sentinel Draft this afternoon and they told him
that almost certainly he and Jim could serve their time as civilians working for the police.

He did want to bond. He did want to marry Jim. They could call it a civil ceremony but, hell, it
meant being married. He needed to tell Jim that and stop him from worrying about Blair changing his
mind and taking off.
He craved their own space, though, for that conversation, because after asking Jim to bond with him and marry, he needed privacy. A lot of it. Chris’ guest room wasn’t really what he had in mind and going to a motel seemed too impersonal. He wanted their loft and the big bed in Jim’s room under the skylight. He yearned to wander around naked in the living room and kitchen, before dragging Jim back to bed.

Although… maybe going camping would work also. Someplace really isolated. That would be cool.

But Jim couldn’t get away now. With the extra pressure being placed on the buyer to make a move, Jim had to be available at a moment's notice. He also needed to keep being visible to prospective buyers, which meant more gun shows – there was another one starting Friday at the Holiday Inn out by the airport – and spending a lot of time nursing drinks at bars where informants had said gun deals were made.

He startled when a warm hand settled on the back of his neck. He’d been so deep in his own thoughts that he hadn’t noticed Jim coming up behind him.

“C’mon, Blair. Time to go back to the ranch.”

They had gotten as far as the main barroom when Jim’s cell phone for his undercover work rang and he answered it by saying, “Anderson.”

After a few moments of “Yes” and “Okay,” Jim replaced the phone on his belt.

“Need to go talk to Larabee for a moment, Chief. Greer’s asked for a meeting.”

JD and Josiah returned from carrying wedding – okay, officially civil union – gifts out to Josiah’s Suburban. They’d gotten an assortment of useful and gag gifts from their friends. He wasn’t sure what category the Lava lamp they’d been given had fallen into. Blair had reminded him to be careful not to zone while looking at it. The new sheets would come in handy, after they’d been washed in baby detergent or Ivory Snow. Blair had reminded them about doing that, too, before they tried them out and, since he had no desire to break out into welts, he had every intention of washing them first.

Josiah had offered to drive them home, since they both were probably legally drunk, even if they weren’t staggering yet. JD grinned to himself because Buck would have to ride with him on the back of his bike tomorrow to pick up his truck. That should be fun. Buck would probably keep his eyes closed for the entire trip. He’d have to snug up tight to JD, so the bike would balance right, and JD was looking forward to feeling Buck’s big body behind him as his Kawasaki roared down the highway.

He looked around for Buck, automatically extending his hearing and found him talking to Inez. His slightly muddled brain kicked in to warn him that they might be talking privately, and he should butt out.

Too late. He caught his own name on Inez’s lips and there was no way he wanted to back away from listening now.

“JD is a sweet guy. But, Buck Wilmington, as long as I’ve known you, you’ve been chasing women. You’ve chased me. I’ve lost track of the times you’ve tried to kiss me. You are an old leopard, amigo, and I am skeptical that you can change your spots.”
He heard Buck’s voice answer her with that slight slur that meant Buck was sloshed. “Well, Miss Inez, you’re wrong about that. Turns out I’m not a leopard at all, with or without spots. I am a lion and that means I’ve got pos… positive personality stuff. I am one of the good guys, m’dear.”

JD started walking closer to the kitchen, and a small feeling of dread was knotting his stomach. They’d exchanged vows just a couple of hours ago, and it sounded like Buck was trying to flirt with Inez, just like he’d always done. Inez always shot him down, but Buck would just grin at her and watch for another opportunity to flirt and maybe steal a kiss from her. They’d been friends since Buck had helped her deal with her asshole ex-boyfriend, but Inez wasn’t interested in being Buck Wilmington’s casual lover.

“The female population of Denver will have to go on without me from now on, because, to quote a great man, “I have steak at home. Why should I go out for hamburger? JD’s my steak; he’s my heart. Where is he, anyway?” Buck hollered out, “JD! Come here and tell Miss Inez that I’ve given up hamburgers.”

JD felt his stomach unclench and he hurried through the kitchen doors and headed for his spouse. “Sorry, Buck. I was listening and I shouldn’t have been.” He slid his arm around Buck’s waist and Buck leaned into him.

Inez put her hands on her hips and gave a mock scowl. “And who is this great man, that you have quoted?”

Buck blinked at her and JD knew they’d better end this conversation and get themselves into the Suburban before Buck forgot how to walk.

“The great man I ref… ref… talked about is Paul Newman. He’s been married for an eon – that’s a really long time, you know – to his wife, and he’s been faithful to her. Now if Paul Newman can do that, then I can, too. Because I really love JD, and not meaning to hurt your feelings or anything, Miss Inez, because you are my friend, but I never loved you ’cept as a friend. You were right to keep turning me down. I liked you plenty, though, and I know that some hombre will love you the way you deserve. The way that JD and me love each other. Don’t we, JD?”

Inez broke out into giggles and leaned over and kissed JD on the cheek, and then kissed Buck on his cheek.

“I will keep your kind words in my heart, Buck Wilmington, until the man of my dreams arrives to take their place.” She winked at JD. “You are going to have your hands full with this one, JD. Life should be very interesting for you both. I am happy for you and I have something for the two of you. You understand that I had to do my shopping right here, yes?” She walked away to the back of the kitchen and entered a storage room, then returned with something in a brown sack.

“JD, I think maybe you should carry this. Perhaps you would like to put it away and get it out for your anniversary next year. Age will only improve its quality, which I hope will also be true for the love I see between you. Go on now and get your man home to bed before he needs to be carried.”

JD whistled when he looked in the bag. “Thanks, Inez. And we’ll drink a toast to your generosity next year on our anniversary. C’mon, Buck. Josiah’s waiting for us.” Buck planted a big kiss on JD’s lips, then halfway bowed to Inez.

“Miss Inez, darlin’ we thank you for your hospitality. JD, let’s go on home.”

Inez laughed again and blew them kisses as they left the bar.
Market Street, Denver, Colorado  
Tuesday, late evening, July 31, 2001

Josiah made a right turn onto Market Street and glanced back at Buck, shaking his head. JD figured he knew what he was thinking; Buck was bound to feel like crap tomorrow morning. JD intended to get some aspirin and a quart of water down Buck’s throat before they went upstairs to bed. And while he wasn’t asanked as his spouse, JD thought it would be a good idea if he were to do the same thing, too. At least they could take it easy tomorrow. Blair told them they should just relax and rest tomorrow, since they’d done just fine with all the practicing earlier today.

Buck was blinking as he listed towards JD so he gave Buck a shake. Josiah had told them he’d play chauffeur and they should make themselves comfortable in the back seat of his car.

“Hey, try to stay awake. I don’t think I can carry you over our threshold.”

“I could carry you. You’re just a shrimp, but you’re exactly the right size for being JD.”

“You know what? I’m going to miss Blair when he goes back to Cascade. He’s the only one I know working with our team, or hell, the Denver branch, that’s shorter than me. Did you realize that, Buck? Blair’s smaller than me, so I’m not the shrimp, he is.”

“He’s Ellison’s shrimp. You’re mine.” Buck yawned and listed again towards JD.

Josiah was chuckling in the front seat. And that reminded JD…

“Josiah, thank you again for, well, I guess, standing in as a preacher tonight. Everybody liked what you said. Who were you quoting when you were talking about friendship? I – we – thought what you said was really good. Um… would you mind writing down the words you spoke tonight? I’d kind of like to have them.”

“Of course I’ll do that, brother. I imagine some of the photos taken tonight will also find their way to you. And I quoted Rumi and the Song of Songs and Gibran.”

Buck spoke up, proving that he wasn’t as far-gone as he’d seemed because he’d been following the conversation, apparently.

“Josiah, say the one about friends again, would you?”

Josiah’s voice, warm and sincere, filled the Suburban. “Your friend is your needs answered. He is your field, which you sow with love and reap with thanksgiving. And he is your board and your fireside. For you come to him with your hunger, and you seek him for peace.”

Market Street was reborn as Walnut Street as Josiah drove the car towards the Broadway entrance. JD reached over and took Buck’s hand as they drove in silence for a while.

“Josiah?”

“Yes, John Dunne?”
“If we have to stay in the Army, will you write to us, and tell us what’s going on with everybody on the team?”

“I will. I promise.”

“Josiah?”

“Yes, John Dunne?”

“Will you say again what you said to us in Inez’s back room. I…” Buck raised JD’s hand to his lips and kissed it, but seemed content to be quiet. “We’d really like to hear those words again.”

Josiah said, “This is from the Song of Songs, also named the Song of Solomon.

“By night on my bed I sought him whom my soul loveth; I sought him, but I found him not. ‘I will rise now, and go about the city, in the streets and in the broad ways, I will seek him whom my soul loveth.’ I sought him, but I found him not. The watchmen that go about the city found me: ‘Saw ye him whom my soul loveth?’ Scarce had I passed from them, when I found him whom my soul loveth: I held him, and would not let him go.”

Buck stirred. “I found you, JD. I found you, and I ain’t never letting go. I knew you were suffering and it broke my heart, but I found you and we’re all right now, partner. We’re all right.”

Josiah said a soft “Amen” then spoke more clearly. “This is a poem from Rumi that made me think of the two of you.” He waited till he’d turned onto their road before continuing in a quiet, commanding voice. JD and Buck held hands in the dark of the car while they listened.

“A moment of happiness,
you and I sitting on the verandah,
We feel the flowing water of life here,
you and I, with the garden’s beauty
apparently two, but one in soul, you and I.
and the birds singing.
The stars will be watching us,
and we will show them
what it is to be a thin crescent moon.
You and I unselved, will be together,
indifferent to idle speculation, you and I.
The parrots of heaven will be cracking sugar
as we laugh together, you and I.
In one form upon this earth,
and in another form in a timeless sweet land.”

JD repeated the last lines of the poem to himself as he looked with his enhanced vision and saw their apartment building in the distance. “In one form upon this earth, and in another form in a timeless sweet land.” He thought of Buck’s spirit animal – that majestic lion, so strong and graceful, and of his own hawk, with its sharp talons and bright eye. Another form for sure.

“Home sweet home,” Josiah said, as they pulled up to the curb.

After they’d hauled everything up the stairs and inside the apartment, after water and aspirin, after cleaning themselves up and wearily trudging up the stairs, JD snuggled up sleepily to his spouse, his mate, his guide and thought of that poem again. “Apparently two, but one in soul, you and I.” and thought truer words had never been spoken.
Thorton Parkway, Denver, Colorado  
Thursday, mid-morning, August 2, 2001

“Chris, if we’re drafted, I don’t know if we get leave or not. So we wrote out a note giving you permission to put our stuff in storage, in case we can’t get back. And here’s our vehicle keys. You’ve still got a key to our place, don’t you?”

Chris nodded and accepted the envelope Buck passed over to him. He drove through a yellow light. They’d be at the Army Recruiting Center soon. He could see that Buck and JD were nervous.

“Didn’t Blair tell you two to think positive thoughts – some wacky theory about positive and negative energy and I think he threw in something about Karma, too.” Chris saw their destination and pulled into the parking lot. He turned off the engine and turned so that he could look at both of his men and gave them a fake scowl.

“Sandburg says your bonding is solid. You’ve got the skills to pass these tests, so I expect to have both of you back where you belong after you’ve shown these Army boys that the ATF can kick ass.”

JD gave a half-hearted chuckle. “Or else you might have to shoot us, right?”

Buck pasted a meager smile on his face. “Chris, you take care and keep an eye on the rest of the guys. And if we don’t come back… you can have my chicken and my Jimmy Buffett CD collection.” He extended his arm and Chris shook it. JD leaned over Buck, and Chris gave him a handshake, too.

JD opened the door and slid out, going to the back of the truck and removing their sports bags. Buck and Chris looked at each other for a long moment, then Buck broke eye contact and got out of the truck. They gave a last half-wave to Chris before Buck opened the door to the building, keeping it open until JD walked inside, right under his arm.

Chris gave a small shake of his head. If by some bad luck they didn’t pass the tests, then the Army was going to have its hands full with those two. He hoped to God it wouldn’t turn out that way.

He backed the truck out of the parking space and headed back out on Thorton Parkway. He considered spending his drive time cursing those idiot asshole cousins, the Parks boys, for helping to start this whole mess, but then he stopped to consider the other consequences to JD's and Buck’s kidnapping.

JD and Buck had become sentinel and guide to each other. Well, they’d been okay without it, so he wasn’t seeing that change as much of a blessing. But they’d figured out they loved each other – romantic love, sexual love, forever and ever love – and maybe that realization would be worth the pain they’d suffered.

Anyway, it was out of his hands. He turned his thoughts to the meeting with Greer tonight that Ellison had set up. He doubted if any action would happen just yet. Greer had to negotiate with his people and he’d probably want to buy some samples of the guns to bring to the table. If they liked what they saw, then the real deal would be on. Greer had said he planned to be at Mickey’s, one of the joints Ellison had made a point of hanging out at, around eight. If Greer wanted to buy guns
tonight, Jim would have Greer follow him to a rented storage unit where the “samples” were kept. Josiah and Ezra would be stationed nearby with surveillance equipment to monitor the transaction. But he doubted Greer would work that fast. Jim would wear a wire but not a radio mic because Blair would be at the bar wearing a hidden mike so he could communicate with Chris and Vin, who would be in a van outside. He could whisper instructions to Jim, and if Jim needed to pass along information, he and Blair would visit the bar restroom at the same time. If Jim needed to ditch the wire he was wearing, he would give it to Blair in the restroom.

He hit the accelerator as he shot up the entrance ramp to I-25. He traveled south on the highway, his mind wandering as he drove fast and skillfully to the exit nearest the office. He drove the familiar streets, not thinking about much at all, until he found himself pulling into a parking space at the Federal Building garage.

He scrubbed his hands over his face before opening the truck door. There was no sense in borrowing trouble; if Buck and JD were drafted then they’d deal with that heartache when it came, and it would be some comfort to know his two friends would be together. But for now, he needed his team to concentrate on their jobs, because getting sloppy and absent-minded tended to get agents killed.

The rest of his men would take their cues from him, so he’d walk into his office projecting confidence that Buck and JD would be back before two weeks was up.

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Mickey’s, Denver, Colorado

Wednesday, early evening, August 8, 2001

“Anderson, besides the previous order, my customer requires additional firepower. Can you supply 500 QBZ-95s, 300 Heckler and 600 Koch G36s, and for handguns, he would be interested in 400 each of Glocks and Sig/Sauers. Possibly there could be some negotiation on the handguns. Waltthers and H&Ks would also be acceptable.”

“I’d need to get in touch with my China connection for the QBZs. 800 more handguns then, besides what he asked for last week? I’m starting to get old; I can’t do math in my head that well anymore.” Jim pulled out a small notebook and jotted down some numbers. He wrote a final figure down and circled it, then shoved the notebook across the table to Greer.

“That’s an estimate that includes the previous order, with some wiggle room built-in depending on what kind of handguns. The Glock 17-C is very smooth; not much recoil at all. The Walther PPK remodeling got rid of the old problem of pinching the firing hand. Anything else? Grenades, maybe? Frag, concussion, smoke? Grenade launchers?” Jim picked up his Miller and drank it down, then set the bottle to the side of the table. “I’m hitting the john. You need another beer? I’m getting one.”

Greer looked at his glass of draft beer and said, “I’m fine. And possibly yes to the grenades. It’s still being considered by my customer.”

“Well, be sure and find out what he’s got in mind, okay? I wouldn’t want to deliver something he didn’t want.” Jim slid out of his seat and headed to the restroom. Out of the corner of his eye, as he pushed open the restroom door, he saw Blair hop off the bar-stool where he’d been following the game on the TV – the Colorado Rockies were playing against the Cubs in Chicago and Sammy Sosa was kicking butt,
he’d gotten a triple by sliding into third base in the third inning – and follow Jim into the restroom.
Jim went into a stall and removed the wire he was wearing. Blair went into the stall next to him and
after Jim had listened to make sure they were alone, he passed the wire under the partition to his
guide. They were building a case against Greer, even if the deal fell apart, and for that they needed
evidence. Blair would also be a witness to this meeting and had taken some photos with a concealed
camera. Jim briefly stroked Blair’s fingers – a promise for later that he intended to keep tonight.

Then Jim used the facilities, leaving Blair still there, and walked up to the bar to order another beer.
After he’d sat back down at his table in the far corner – chosen for privacy – he’d raised his
eyebrows at Greer. The man looked perfectly affable, dressed in business casual wear. Gun running
was just another transaction to him, no more impinging on the man’s conscience than buying a load
of wheat. Jim didn’t think that tonight would be the night he would be asked to bring the guns to a
secret location, but just in case, they had planned his losing his wire before he would be in a private
place and subject to a body search.

He and Greer had been dickering around about this order and prices for almost a week now, after
Greer had inspected samples of his order while Jim was stuck at the last gun show. He was getting
impatient to have the deal be closed and the bust go down, so he and Blair could head back home to
Cascade.

“I think this concludes our meeting for the evening, Anderson.” Greer laid a ten-dollar bill on the
table. “My treat. The potato skins are very good and enjoy the rest of the ball game.” He left then,
but Jim stayed put and actually did watch the rest of the ball game and order potato skins to go with
his beer. Quite possibly Greer had somebody planted in the bar, watching him.

Blair had established his cover with the bartender; he was in Denver with his wife to visit her sick
mother, and he came to the bar to get away from the stress in the house because he and the wife
weren’t exactly getting along that well. Blair would come and play pool and darts and watch ball
games on TV. He’d had women, and a few men, try to pick him up, but he would point to the ring
on his finger and shrug his shoulders. He and Jim had never talked openly at the bar.

They left in separate vehicles and took roundabout routes out of Denver, as a precaution against
being tailed, but Jim was confident nobody was following him. He met up with Blair at a gas station
and Jim followed him discreetly back to the ranch, sure that Blair didn’t have a tail on him, either.

It was a relief to finally be able to really touch Blair, to hug him and kiss him when they’d gotten out
of their cars. Even at the gas station, they hadn’t talked to each other, or even exchanged direct
glances.

“Jim, how much longer is it going to take before this deal is done and the arrests are made?”

“I don’t think too much longer, Chief. Greer can’t settle things on his own, you know. He’s got to
check back with his buyer. Shit, I’m getting tired of being undercover. And that gun show last week
wore me out. I don’t like just sitting there for days at a time. Anyway, I want a shower. You, too. We
need to get the smoke and bar stink off of us.” Jim slung his arm around Blair’s shoulder and Blair
reciprocated by wrapping his own arm around Jim’s waist, their usual way of walking together. They
went into the ranch house, and Jim prepared to spend some almost bonding time together with his
almost fully bonded guide. Jim figured Blair had made his decision about completing the bond, his
body language was much more relaxed, but since Blair’d requested that their “discussion” be tabled
until they were able to go home, Jim was willing to wait. Anyway, he wasn’t wild about the lack of
privacy and the press of time they would have to struggle with here, if they bonded now in Denver.

The house was dark, but Chris had left a porch light on for them. They quietly moved through the
house and into their room. Blair had stopped sleeping on the couch the day JD and Buck had left for
the recruitment center. They gathered clean T-shirts and boxers and headed for the bathroom at the end of the hall.

Later, lying on their bed, they talked softly about what they’d do when they returned home, and then stripped off what little clothing they’d put on and got comfortable under the sheets. They were both half erect from being so close to each other, but didn’t act further on their desires. Jim could be patient; he would wait. Blair was too important to him and he would let this bonding happen at Blair’s own pace. He ruthlessly stamped down his old fantasy about acting out any primal sentinel instincts in order to overwhelm and seduce his guide. There was fantasy and there was reality, and he wasn’t going to fuck this up.

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Chris stirred in his bed, woken up by Jim and Blair walking down the hall. He listened for a while, half asleep as they entered their bedroom and then the bathroom, then squinted at his alarm clock. Almost eleven. He’d gone to bed early tonight.

He wondered how JD and Buck were doing. They’d been allowed to make a phone call in the afternoon after Chris had dropped them off at the recruiting center and had informed Chris that they’d passed the medical tests and were on their way to Fort Carson, south of Colorado Springs, for the stress testing.

The rest of the team was worried, too, but not talking much about it. Chris knew, realistically, that these six men and himself wouldn’t always be a part of Team Seven. Someday, someone would get promoted, or family circumstances would change, requiring a move, or a bullet would… No. He wasn’t going there. Not at night, with too much time to think. Not with almost losing Buck and JD so recently, not after hearing Nathan describe how Buck had carried JD cradled in his arms to Nathan’s Explorer and how he’d again carried the boy into the ER, not letting him be placed on a gurney. Chris suspected that Buck was acting instinctively – that at some level he knew JD’s best chance to live was if he was in physical contact with him.

At night was no time to think about being lonely either. Not while he was lying in the bed that he’d shared with Sarah. This bed, where Adam had laughed gleefully when he’d climbed in with them early in the mornings. This bed, where he’d slept alone since Sarah had died.

He’d had women since that black day. But he’d picked women who wouldn’t fall in love with him and who he damn sure wouldn’t mind never seeing again. The booze had blurred their features, and all he wanted from them was softness that he could sink into and lose himself for a time.

Buck had kicked his ass till he stopped being so self-destructive. Buck, who’d bedded more women than Chris ever had, but who’d gone to them with a smile on his face and appreciation for the gift of their bodies, even the good for nothing tramps. Despite Buck’s past record with the ladies, Chris had no trouble believing he would now be faithful to JD. The man was as loyal as they came. Blair had said that Buck’s aura showed a lot of royal blue – the color of loyalty and friendship and laughter.

He felt a smile curving on his lips as once again he realized Blair had snuck more of his hippie ways into how Chris thought about things. If the kid stayed here much longer, he’d have them all doing mantras, channeling positive thoughts, and eating organically. Although Ellison said that organic beer was pretty good.

He could stand to think more positively, and he contemplated asking Mary out on a real date. He liked her; she liked him, and she was spunky as all get out. He liked Billy, too, and sometimes he
wasn’t sure if he liked Mary for herself or because she was Billy’s mother.

He didn't want to get serious with her, didn't want Mary to think they might have a future together. He was through putting any family of his in harm’s way

Maybe, for now, he’d table that date idea.

Maybe he’d talk Vin into going camping with him, while it was still summer in the Rockies. Vin had been through a lot these last few weeks, since killing those two men at the warehouse; he could use some time away from the city. He was a quiet man, although he didn’t hesitate to speak his mind when it was important. He just didn’t… chatter. It could be restful, being with Vin.

Yeah. A camping trip with Vin was sounding more and more like what he would prefer to do. Once Buck and JD were back with them again.

He rolled over and closed his eyes and started thinking about camping sites and equipment, and hiking with Vin till he felt himself drifting back to sleep, a smile on his lips.

Fort Carson Army Base, Colorado
Tuesday, late evening, August 14, 2001

Buck was dreaming. Or at least this felt like a dream. He’d been here before, walking in this park, during that terrible time when JD had been missing. Missing. *He* was missing JD tonight.

He walked down the path on his big padded feet, and felt his tail lashing back and forth as he searched for JD. He needed to see him, make sure he was all right. A movement in the trees caught his attention and he recognized his sentinel’s spirit guide, as the hawk flew down from the tall pine tree and landed on his shoulder.

Well, all right then, the hawk would show him where JD was waiting for him.

The bird flew off and Buck loped after him, his strong feline muscles moving him forward at an enormous pace.

Down the path where trees lined the edges of the winding trail he loped, following both an internal sense of where JD was and the way the hawk was leading him to his partner.

He saw him then. Like before, he was sitting on top of that concrete structure. What in blue blazes was something like that doing in the woods anyway? He watched as the hawk flew right into JD’s chest, disappearing from sight. Buck made a mighty leap onto the top of the bunker and faced JD, stretching out his paw to swipe at him. In the very act of reaching, he saw in a blur his limb re-arrange itself into a human arm, and he gripped JD’s shoulder.

“Hey, buddy. What’s up? Why are we here? I miss you, ya know. Damn those Army S.O.B.s anyway for making us sleep apart tonight.” He plopped himself down next to his seated friend and put his arm around JD. JD felt cold. He wore a dirty pair of jeans – no shoes, no shirt. Buck recognized the outfit as the clothes JD had worn when he and Nathan had broken into the old root cellar.

“B… Buck. You came. You came for me. I put all m… my energy into calling for you. And now I’m c… cold.” JD shivered and Buck tugged him into his lap and wrapped his arms around the kid,
sharing body heat.

They stayed that way for a while, till he felt JD’s skin becoming warm again.

“So, you feeling a little better now?” JD nodded against his chest.

“What is this place anyway, partner? Oh, I remember what Blair explained about spirit planes an’ all that, but I don’t recognize anything I see here, so it must be something out of your head.”

“When I was a kid, I used to ride my bike down these trails. This is how I remember Wompatuck State Park. Mom and me or my friends and I would come here to get out of Boston to spend the day.”

“What’s the story about this here thing our asses are sitting on?” Buck shifted a little but hung tight to JD when he tried to scoot off Buck’s lap.

“Un-uh. You stay put. You need to stay warm.”

“I think since we’re on the spirit plane my being cold is more about what I’m feeling emotionally. I was kind of flashing back to being in that damned root cellar. But, okay. I suppose you can baby me a little longer.”

“You’re no baby, even if you are the kid of our team. But I’m kinda glad you’re no bigger than you are, because I like the way you fit on my lap.” Buck dropped a kiss onto the top of JD’s black mop of hair.

“You know… I haven’t been alone at night – in the dark -- since you and Nathan got me out of that… place. But they separated us today and they’re not going to let us be with each other tomorrow, for the final tests. I guess I got to feeling lonely and… maybe a little scared. I guess I was feeling that way when I went to sleep. When I was in that root cellar, I kept trying to figure out what in the hell it was, and it reminded me of the old bunkers that were in the park. Me and a friend snuck into one once, one that homeless people sometimes took over, before the park rangers would toss them out. It was dark and scary in there. ‘Course, I was only a kid, and I hadn’t thought about the old bunkers for years, but when I was in another dark and scary place… well. I guess when we met here before it was because I could picture this park and I was trying to give you some idea of the kind of place I was being held in.”

Buck asked, because he was still mystified, “What were bunkers doing in a park?”

“Think the army had built them, a long time ago, for some kind of a base and then gave up using the area and donated the land to the state to make a park. The woods grew up around those old concrete bunkers.” JD became silent then and Buck looked around at the park. It was pretty, but didn’t have the same feel of wilderness that going up into the Rockies impressed upon a person.

“Blair says that you go to the spirit plane to accomplish a task, to learn something about yourself,” Buck mused.

“Yeah. I think… I think I should go down into the bunker and get over being scared of it. It’s kind of a proxy for the root cellar.” JD gave a tiny shudder, but Buck could feel it.

“I’ll go with you.”

“No… I don’t think you should. You can’t be with me in the morning, when I’ve got to face those final tests and maybe this is like practice for doing that tomorrow.” JD sounded tentative at first, but his voice had firmed up by the time he’d finished talking.
“Well, then. Maybe you’re right about that, but I’m going to be up here waiting for you and … can we do that golden cord thing again? I might not be right there with you but I can be your anchor. No matter where you are, you can always find your way back to me.” Buck liked that idea a lot.

“We can try the cord trick, but... it uses up some energy to do it. I could feel it drain me the last time we met in the spirit plane. But it was a good gamble, wasn’t it? It let you find me.” JD tried to get up again, but Buck tightened his arms around him, keeping him plastered up against Buck’s chest.

Buck thought a moment before he spoke.

“I should be the one to toss the cord to you, then. You’re going to be jumping through hoops tomorrow; I’m going to just be sitting on my ass. I’ll do a lot of meditation tomorrow and concentrate on keeping that cord strong between us. Let’s try it out, JD.” He opened his arms so JD could get up.

They moved apart from each other, but still standing on top of the old bunker. Buck faced JD and willed his love and concern for JD to swell, to rise up and then he touched his heart; pulling his hand away he saw the golden cord trailing from his body. He threw it to JD, who tied it around his waist.

JD smiled at him, well, more like a gritted grimace, and then he walked over to the edge of the bunker and clambered down. He looked up again at Buck, gave a small wave and then walked around the side of the building and disappeared.

It was hard to wait, to not be with his partner as he faced down his bad memories. But Buck trusted JD’s intuition, and if he thought he needed to do this by himself, then Buck wouldn’t fight him on it. Instead, he sat down and concentrated on sending good vibes – Blair had talked a lot about good vibes -- down that cord.

Time became meaningless, as he stilled his body’s desire to fidget and move. He concentrated on the cord and the feel to it – much like he’d done to locate JD when he’d been so lost to them all. His partner was a weight on the end, and Buck could feel every move JD made as he explored the interior of the underground building. Of course, JD could see in the dark now. But when he’d first been put into the root cellar he’d been unconscious and he’d woken up to pitch-black darkness. The sentinel sight hadn’t evolved until he’d been down there for a while. The kid must have felt so desolate in that black hole.

A tug on the cord signified that JD was through, and a few moments later he climbed back up to the top of the bunker. He pulled Buck up to stand next to him and pointed to the East.

“Sun’s coming up. Here and there.”

“There? You mean Fort Carson?”

“Yep. It’s time to leave. But I feel good about this last day of testing. I felt you with me every time I touched the cord, when I was below. It’ll be like that when I prove that I’m stable, that I don’t have to have you close to me to do my job.” He reached up and kissed Buck, a sweet simple farewell.

“I love you, Buck. I’ll see you when this is all over and we can go back home.” JD turned away from him and then leapt over the side of the bunker… and the hawk rose into the air, and flew away, but still tethered to Buck by the cord of gold.

Buck waved his hand in farewell, and then climbed down and started walking slowly down the path he’d traveled earlier. He could see the first faint lightening of the sky and as he walked the darkness shifted to gray and then to a pale, clear light. He felt tired now, and stopped to sit down on a bench by the trail. He closed his eyes… When he opened them again, he was in his bed. Alone. He looked
down at his chest and no longer could see the thin rope that he’d spun from his heart. But he could feel it. Sweet suffering sassafras, he could feel JD through it, and he concentrated on sending love and confidence to his sentinel.

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Federal Building, ATF headquarters
Thursday, middle of the afternoon, August 16, 2001

“I don’t like it.” Blair crossed his arms as he slouched in JD’s desk chair.

“C’mon, Chief. I’ll be fine. I can do this.” Jim tried not to sound annoyed with his guide, but honestly, the guy could be such a worrywart sometimes. Driving a twenty-six foot truck couldn’t be much harder than maneuvering his pick-up, anyway.

“Need I remind you of the last time you thought you could handle a big truck?”

Jesus. Blair could be such a grump sometimes.

“Look, Sandburg. That was different, and you know it. That semi had what, fifteen gears? This baby has an automatic transmission. No gears, get it? It’ll be –”

Jackson broke in, sounding amused. “A piece of cake, Jim?”

Standish rolled his eyes. “My dear man, you’ve jinxed them now. You never tell someone that something is a ‘piece of cake.’”

“Actually, Jim, that semi had eighteen gears, and you managed to grind each and every one when you shifted. But it’s not just gears – and okay, it will be easier since this truck is an automatic – but that’s going to be a lot of weight, between all the guns in their shipping containers and the machine parts you guys are throwing in for camouflage. Man, if you even try to whip this bad boy around corners like you do your truck, you’re going to go over.” Blair got out of his chair and walked over to where Jim perched on the edge of Buck’s desk.

“Let me drive it. You know I’ve got the experience and you need to concentrate on the bust.” Crap. Here came the pleading eyes.

“Sandburg.” Jim could feel Blair’s arguments wearing against his resolve to keep Blair out of the set-up to take Greer and his backer down.

“Jim.” Blair laid a hand on Jim's thigh. “I have a CDL, and I’m not afraid to use it. You’ve got the highest vehicle insurance rates in the state of Washington. C’mon. This is a no-brainer. It’s safer if I drive. And you need to focus on the bust.” Great. Now he’d thrown in the power of the cajoling voice.

Larabee – no, Chris, since he told Jim to call him by his first name -- Chris’ voice came through the open doorway from his office. “You know he’s making a lot of sense, Jim. But it’s your call.”

Jim tried one last argument.
“What if he recognizes you from hanging out at Mickey’s, Chief? We don’t want him getting suspicious that you were there with me.”

“Got it covered. We just explain that we got to talking and you found out I was a truck driver in need of some serious cash – my mother-in-law’s gall bladder operation was expensive – and I need some way to earn my way back into my wife’s good graces, since I keep escaping out of the house to waste my time down at the bar. I don’t know what the cargo is, beside machine parts, and if I suspect there may be some drug money involved, well, I’m not asking what else is in the cargo, am I?”

Blair grinned at Jim, and Jim felt his resolve flowing away like a mudslide on a Malibu hillside.

“All right, all right. You can drive. But you’d better be careful and not make me regret letting you come along.” Jim tried to give in graciously, but he knew he sounded a little peeved still. Then he caught a sound down the hallway and smiled, his crankiness forgotten.

A few moments later the door opened and JD’s voice preceded his and Buck’s entry.

“Jim, I thought Blair said that the guide voice couldn’t make a sentinel do something he didn’t want to do.”

Jim answered him ruefully, “It’s not a guide thing; it’s a Sandburg thing. And welcome the hell back, you two.”

Buck and JD were through the doorway and heading for their teammates and a raucous round of back slaps and loud babbling commenced.

Blair dispensed with the manly gestures of affection when he joined the group. He hugged JD and Buck, then let out a squawk when Buck picked him up under the arms, raised him till he was eye-level with the taller man, and kissed him on the forehead. Jim reached him in time for Buck to thrust his guide into his arms, and he held him off the ground for a moment, scenting the back of Blair’s neck, before an indignant shimmy of Blair’s body conveyed that he wanted down.

“Hey! There will be no Sandburg tossing going on. And I want details. I want to know everything they tested you on and… and it’s so great that you didn’t get drafted.” Blair’s hands tried to convey his emotions but Jim’s arms hampered them. He wriggled again and Jim reluctantly practiced his catch and release technique.

Before he could tow Buck and JD over to a private corner and get out his notebook, Chris intercepted them and they completed another round of backslapping and handshakes.

“You can have them in a bit, Blair. I need to see them first.” Chris ushered his prodigal teammates into his office and shut the door.

The pouting look on Blair’s face made Standish laugh and remark, “Be careful there, Blair. Aunt Molly would tell you a bird might sit on that lower lip.”

“I’m not pouting.”

Silence reigned.

“Well, I’m not.” Blair grinned suddenly, “Well, not much. And not any more. Hey, where are Vin and Josiah? Should we call them or let Buck and JD surprise them?”
Nathan held up his phone. “I’ve left messages for them both on their cell phones. I just told them Chris wanted them to stop by the office.”

“Oh, okay, that’s good. Man, we should all go back to that bar, the one where we celebrated JD and Buck getting married. What was the name? Watson’s, right?”

Nathan answered, “Watsons is the name of Inez’s place, but mostly we just call it the Saloon. Sort of a joke.”

“Gentlemen, I agree with Blair. A fine meal, some decent whiskey, and perhaps a game of five-card stud to welcome back home our friends.” Jim thought to himself that a poker game sounded great to him – if Ezra didn’t make it too high stakes – he’d missed playing poker with the Major Crime guys.

Nathan said, “Ez, I’m still broke from the last time I played poker with you, so I’ll pass on the game but, yeah, sounds good. I’ll see if Rain can meet us there.”

“Sandburg, before I lose you to grilling the rookies, let’s finish working out the details about the truck and a time-table. Greer gave me a date of August 19th, for the transfer and pay off.” Jim motioned towards the desks they’d been borrowing from JD and Buck and Blair followed him to finish planning the take-down on Greer and his backer.

I-225, East side of Denver
Sunday, late evening, August 19, 2001

“Sandburg, this isn’t music; it’s auditory torture.” Beside him, Blair rolled his eyes as he shifted the large, stuffed-with-machinery-parts-and-guns truck into the next lane to allow a car to enter the Interstate.

“It’s jazz.”

“The DJ said that they used broken crap found in garbage cans as instruments, for Christ’s sake!”

“Uh-huh. Pretty creative, don’t you think? Jim, it’s called free jazz, although Voice Crack is on the extreme end of the genre. But…” Sandburg gave out a suffering sigh. “Try 96.01. They play some decent rock, maybe you’ll hear some Santana.”

Jim changed the station from NPR in relief.

The plaintive notes of “Angie” by the Stones filled the cab of the rental truck. Jim glanced at the fuel gauge; if Greer didn’t contact them soon they were going to have to stop at a gas station. They’d been going in circles around the city, hopping from one major Interstate to another, waiting for the cell phone to ring and Greer to give them instructions about where to meet him.

He checked the mirror and saw that JD and Buck were three cars behind them, and several cars behind those two were the rest of Team Seven. It was unlikely Greer had any clue that the other guys were taking turns tailing Jim and Blair to throw off any of Greer’s men who might be watching the truck. It was a good feeling, knowing the other guys had their backs.

“Wonder if Simon will let us take some time off, once we’re done here. I’d love to go fishing before
the end of summer. And I need to finish analyzing my data, so I can write my diss. I’ve just got a few more sentinels and guides to interview, and then it’s just me and my laptop.”

“Nope, not just you and your laptop. We’ve got some unfinished business, remember?”

Blair tightened his hands on the steering wheel and shot a look at Jim. The musk of arousal started to waft away from his body, and Jim ran his palm over Blair’s thigh.

“I remember, all right. I’m counting down the days, hell, the hours and minutes until you and I finish what we started all those years ago.” He grinned suddenly. “And a fishing trip would make a fine honeymoon, after we crawl out of bed. Mmmmm. Bonding under the stars, letting loose our primal feelings in the midst of nature, being sky clad—”

“Sky clad? Sandburg, do you mean running around stark—”

“Naked? Why, yes, oh sentinel of mine, I do. You’ll know if anybody intrudes on us so why not enjoy the feel of the sun on our bodies, and the breeze tantalizing our—”

“Feel the mosquitoes biting us on our butts, feel the sparks from the campfire landing on our balls.” But he only said it to tease Blair, and judging from the grin that became even wider, the grumpy act wasn’t fooling his guide. Hell, if Blair wanted to be naked, that just meant Jim didn’t need to waste any time stripping his guide’s clothes off him before making love.

But all thoughts of how he would enjoy going “primal” with his naked guide in the privacy of the wilderness were hastily shelved when the cell phone finally rang.

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Rest stop, Exit 173 to Larkspur, I-25, South of Denver

Sunday, late evening, August 19, 2001

“Buck, they’re coming,” JD announced in a low tone. They were in Nathan’s Ford Explorer, to avoid Buck’s distinctive Lady in Red being recognized by Greer, who’d seen it before when Buck was undercover. Once Jim had reported they were to meet their contact at this rest stop, which was halfway between Denver and Colorado Springs, he and JD had passed them to go ahead and set up the stake out.

Buck slouched down further in his seat and dialed Chris, who was waiting one exit back towards Denver with Vin. Josiah was waiting at the next exit past this one towards Colorado Springs. Ezra and Nathan were following Jim and Blair into the rest stop and would tail them out. If Greer or his men gave Blair the directions to the transfer site, JD would be able to hear it and they’d relay that information to Chris, so that surveillance could be set up before the transfer, but Chris was taking no chances on losing Jim and Blair, if they weren’t given any directions and instead told to follow their contact back to the transfer site.

Chris answered the call and Buck began updating him. “Okay, Jim and Blair have pulled into the rest stop and are driving around to the far end where a black SUV is parked. Uh… JD says it’s a Lincoln Navigator, looks fairly new, license plate… Partner, what’s the number?”

JD told him and he repeated it to Chris. “There’s four of them waiting in that car. JD and I are playing possum, so anybody who looks in will think we’re just taking a nap, and I’ve got my piece
ready under the blanket if we’re checked out. So far, the only thing the guys in the Navigator have talked about is how the Rockies beat the Marlins this evening by one run. One of ‘em’s been bitching about missing the game since he had to work tonight, and he won’t let the others get a word in edgewise.” He listened to Chris reminding him to stay well back from Greer’s men, in case anybody there had met him as Buck Wilson.

“We’ll be careful, and Chris, I’ll call you back. All four of them just got out of that car and they’ve walked around to talk to Jim and Blair. JD needs to concentrate on what they’re saying, and I need to guide him.” He ended the call and laid the phone down on seat, and under the cover of the blanket grasped his sentinel’s hand. JD took several deep breaths and centered himself, like Blair had taught him to do.

The far end of the parking lot was pretty dim. Buck couldn’t make out details of the men’s features, but one of them gestured for Jim and Blair to get out. They did, and moved to the far side of the truck, and that cut him off from any further observations.

All was silent for some time in the Explorer, with only the sound of their breathing. Finally, he saw Blair climb up into the cab of the truck, but Jim got into the SUV. Vehicle lights came on and the black SUV slowly drove towards the rest stop exit, the truck trailing behind it. JD squeezed Buck’s hand and then let go.

“Give Nathan and an Ezra a heads up; they need to be ready to leave right now. Blair wasn’t given an exact address, just told to drive back to Denver. One of their guys is riding with him and will tell him how to get to where Greer’s holed up.”

Buck grabbed the phone and alerted their friends, who promptly pulled out of the parking lot to get ahead of the vehicles heading for the transfer. They would then let the truck and SUV pass them, and drop behind them to tail them.

JD scrubbed his face with both hands. “Ezra won the bet. These guys did search Jim and Blair for wires and swept them and the truck for any tracking or listening devices. And Jim’s cell phone is history. They smashed it. Good thing Chris decided against bugging the truck. That’s what meeting them here was all about, just a way to make sure they weren’t going to lead the cops straight to their doorstep.”

Buck said, “Greer’s always been cautious, but being questioned about JD’s kidnapping probably made him ten times more careful about who he’s dealing with. He doesn’t keep things in stock; he passes them onto buyers right away and takes his cut. He’s been one tough son of a bitch to pin down. They out of sight, JD?” His partner nodded, and Buck balled up the blanket they’d been sharing and tossed it in the back. He started the engine and headed over to the exit.

“JD, call Chris and Josiah, catch them up with the plan. I’m going to try to get close enough so you can track the truck.”

** ** ** ** ** ** ** **
Jim stood next to Greer on the loading dock of the run down old warehouse with its cracked and potholed parking lot and watched as Blair expertly backed up their rented truck into the left docking bay. A semi occupied the right bay, and Jim knew that Blair’s cargo would be transferred to the larger truck. Greer, by paying Jim in cash for the illegal guns, was only the first in line to take the bait. The rest of Team Seven was in place to follow the semi to the bigger shark that Greer was supplying with guns. This was going to be a major bust and Jim was more than ready to give up his identity as Jim Anderson, right-wing gunrunner, and go with Blair back home to Cascade.

Jim knew all of Team Seven’s positions, and he trusted them to pull his and Blair’s nuts out of the fire, if the deal soured. But so far, everything had gone like clockwork. Greer touched his arm, as Blair turned off the ignition.

“As soon as the cargo is counted and loaded, then you can leave, Anderson. I’ll call you when I need to place an order again.” Greer motioned for Jim to open the back of the truck, and then the two of them settled to the business of opening crates, counting guns, and repacking them. When they’d finished, Greer’s men used hand trucks to load the semi, and Jim settled with Greer, counting the money carefully.

Almost done. He and Blair would drive away and meet up with Chris, the money logged as evidence and the semi followed to the meeting with Greer and the bigger shark. The deal would almost certainly be concluded tonight, Greer quickly passing on the arms for cash or drugs, to decrease his chances of being caught holding the goods.

He waited for Greer to indicate that he was free to go, but a blond man with a worried expression on
his face had sidelined Greer. Jim listened to the two men speak and decided he and Blair needed to haul ass out of there immediately. Greer’s driver was sick, probably with food poisoning, and couldn’t hardly stand up, let alone drive an eighteen-wheel tractor-trailer. Of the three other drivers Greer’s men had tried to contact, one’s cell phone was disconnected, one was drunk and in no shape to drive, and the third driver’s wife said he had taken a load down to Houston this afternoon and wouldn’t be available to drive till Tuesday.

Jim had just opened the truck passenger door when Greer called out for him to wait.

He turned around, hiding his dismay; he knew where this was heading.

Greer strode over. “Anderson, I’ll have one of my men drop you off where you can get a cab or if you prefer he can take you back to your vehicle. I need your driver.”

Jim said mildly, “Don’t think he’s got time to help you out, Greer. He’s got family waiting up for him.”

Greer’s expression darkened. “Not your business anymore, Anderson. I need a driver, and he’ll do.”

Crap. Jim knew it would look suspicious if he kept objecting, but having his partner witness the second transaction would put him at risk. Blair would be alone, without immediate backup, and Greer or the other buyer could decide he was expendable.

Greer pulled the door open and appraised Blair. Apparently Blair passed his inspection because Greer said, “My driver’s sick. Do you have a CDL?” Jim willed his partner to say no, but instead Blair nodded. Greer said, “Let me see it.” Blair pulled his fake license out his wallet and passed it over. Greer studied it a moment, then gave it back. “Okay, Jacobs. You’re going to drive the semi and I’ll make it worth your while. I need this shipment delivered tonight, and we’re loaded and ready to go.”

“How long will this take? My wife thinks I’m just out at a bar, but she’ll give me holy hell if I come back to her mother’s house really late. And can I get out of this truck, now? I’d like to stretch my legs and use the john, before I have to drive again.”

“You understand that this is private business, Jacobs? You don’t need to know what’s in the truck; it’s in your best interest not to be curious. And your wife is your problem. There’s a bathroom through that door.” Greer pointed to the far corner of the loading dock. He didn’t answer Blair’s question about how long he could expect to be tied up tonight.

Blair hopped out of the truck and walked around to Jim. “How about you pay me now, Anderson? If you have any more work for me, you can get in touch with me at Mickey’s. I’ll come back here later tonight or in the morning…” Blair glanced over at Greer for confirmation, and Greer nodded, “And I’ll drive the rental truck back to where you rented it. I’ll just park it; you can come by and do the return paperwork.” Blair turned his attention to Greer. “Just how much are you going to pay me? I’m trying to knock off some of my mother-in-law’s medical expenses for her surgery, and a nice chunk of change would sure help to smooth things over with the wife.”

Greer named a figure, and Blair made agreeing noises while Jim pulled out four hundred dollars and passed them to Blair, making sure that his fingers touched his partner’s. It was just a fleeting caress, but he knew Blair would take it as a promise that they would be together again soon. Blair smelled nervous, but he was putting on a good front. His partner had guts, and Jim reminded himself that Blair was smart and thought fast on his feet. But Jim felt his own stomach tighten knowing that his guide would be in danger and he wouldn’t be there beside him.
Jim hated leaving Blair in such a precarious position, but it would be worse to make Greer wonder why he didn’t want “Jacobs” to earn some extra cash. Blair shoved Jim’s money in his jeans pocket and told Greer he’d be ready to go in five minutes. He gave a sketchy wave to Jim and walked off towards the bathroom. Greer motioned for one of his men, a hulk with tattoos covering his forearms, to come over and gave him orders to take Jim where he wanted to go. He was careful not to give Jim’s name away to his man, and Jim could see why it’d been difficult to really get any solid evidence on Greer, the way he kept things on a need to know basis with his men.

Greer reminded him that he’d be in touch soon, and Jim heard the dismissal in Greer’s tone. He followed the tattooed driver to a dark blue truck parked outside the warehouse and left his partner alone in the lion’s den.

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Corner of Lincoln St. and E. 8th Ave, Denver, Colorado
Monday, two-thirty am, August 20, 2001

Chris blew down the mostly deserted city streets, anxious to get on Interstate 70 and wrap up this bust. Giving up a night’s sleep was a small price to pay to nail their quarry, but he didn’t like it that Blair was on his own, without immediate backup. He figured Jim Ellison was not a happy camper.

Buck had called to pass along where Ellison had told his driver to drop him off; he and JD would keep tailing the semi, sentinel style.

“I see him.”

Vin pointed to the far side of the Seven-Eleven on the corner of Lincoln, its bright lights beckoning late night wanderers to find refuge, and Chris pulled his truck up to the gas pump and hopped out. JD had suspected from what he was overhearing from Greer’s men that it might be a couple of hours before Blair reached his destination. The last thing they needed was to run out of gas just when the buy was going down. Ellison squeezed into the back seat of the truck cab, a large sports bag in his hand. Chris finished pumping, paid, climbed back into his truck, and headed for I-70.

“That the money, Jim?” Vin asked.

Jim looked tense and unhappy at the turn of events. “Yeah. Damn it, everything was on track until Greer’s driver got sick. Blair… well, if he’d turned down the job it would have looked suspicious. JD and Buck are still on his tail, aren’t they?” Vin nodded and relayed the latest report.

Chris said, “Blair knows to keep his head down, and as soon as Greer completes the buy, we’ll move in.”

Chris remembered the stories Ezra and Jim had told about Blair outwitting some of Kincaid’s Sunshine Patriot boys, armed only with a bathroom stall door and a vending machine. Blair was clever and quick-witted; he’d be fine.

Jim listened, but made no comment. Chris filled the silence by going over the surveillance plan once again. Hours passed as they followed the breadcrumb trail that JD and Buck left for them, traveling east on Interstate 70 and exiting onto a lonely highway in Lincoln County.
“You two should try to get some sleep while you can,” Chris suggested.

Ellison gave a curt shake of his head. Well, Chris guessed that if it was his partner in this sticky situation, that he wouldn’t be nodding off either.

Vin interrupted his thoughts by saying quietly, “Reckon I’d rather sit a spell with you, Chris. You might need me to talk to you, to keep you awake,” and damn if that wasn’t exactly like Vin to make sure you knew he had your back.

They left Lincoln County, the high plateau prairie lands continuing into Cheyenne County, darkness still covering the land. Chris calculated that it would be sunrise in about forty-five minutes; they’d driven a good three hours since leaving Denver.

He’d been in contact with all of his team during the long drive, and speculation was running as to where Greer intended to transfer the weapons to his buyer. There sure as hell wasn’t much in the way of towns out in this part of Colorado. They’d just passed through Kit Carson, population a proud 253, according to the sign on the outskirts of the small town, before turning onto Highway 59.

Shortly after heading south, Chris’ cell phone rang, its shrill tones invading the silence. Chris listened to Buck’s newest report and a predatory grin broke over his face. He supposed Ellison had listened in to what Buck had said, but for Vin’s sake, he repeated the news after disconnecting from his old friend.

“We know where the transfer is taking place. It's in Kiowa County. Blair’s been getting friendly with the man riding shotgun in the semi, getting him to talk about the area, and the guy told him about Brandon, a ghost town a few miles past the airstrip they’re headed for. He’s promised Blair that after they stop and move the cargo to the plane, he and Blair will pass through the ghost town on their way to Garden City, Kansas, where the remaining legit goods will be transferred. He said they could take a break, since the boss will head back to Denver, and he’ll show Blair the old buildings that were built in the 1800’s and abandoned some eighty years ago. There’s also a site of an Indian battle nearby, but he told Blair that it wasn’t open to the public. Blair’s trying to get him to show it to him anyway.”

Jim grinned, pride in his partner written over his face. Hearing that Sandburg was working to gain them intelligence, that he was okay and using his head, seemed to have relaxed him.

Chris said thoughtfully, “I’d like to know where that airstrip is at, but I’m a little leery of calling the Kiowa County Sheriff’s department. What if they’ve been paid to turn a blind eye to what’s going on in their county? We’ll bring the locals in after the bust.”

Vin rubbed his chin and said, “Call Mary. That lady’s got the resources to track down the airstrip’s location.”

“Good idea.” He tossed the phone to Vin. “Check with Mary. Tell her she can have an exclusive on the story, afterwards.”

He glanced up at the mirror to meet Ellison’s eyes. He sent a wordless message that Blair would come out of this all right and in one piece. Ellison nodded slightly, and returned to watching the flat landscape of the grasslands as the truck sped south into Kiowa County.

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Keller Private Airstrip, Kiowa County, Colorado
Blair’s contemplation of the beauty of the Colorado sunrise ended when Masters, his truck driving buddy for the last four hours, yanked open the driver’s door of the semi and grinned up at him.

“Bobby, ol’ pal, get your ass down here. Boss man said for you to help load the plane. And the sooner that baby’s up in the air, the sooner we can take off to Brandon to check out the ghost town.”

Crap. Jim was going to love that. Blair had planned on staying right there in the semi, nicely tucked out-of-the-way, so that when the bust happened he wouldn’t be exposed to possible gunfire or grabbed as a hostage. But he could hardly refuse an order from his employer. He’d repeat Master’s words, hoping that either JD or Jim was listening. He had to take it on faith that they had successfully followed him to this small, private airstrip. No wonder Greer had picked this place; it was so out in the hind end of nowhere that a fucking UFO could land here and nobody would notice.

“Man, I’m getting paid to drive the truck, not to load and unload. So, I’m supposed to help transfer cargo from the truck to that plane out there?” Blair didn’t have to work to put a grumbling edge to his comment. After being up all night he felt tired.

Masters lost his grin. “There ain’t no union for this kind of work, and you don’t want to piss off the boss. You listen to me, Bobby. If Greer tells you to move you say, ‘Yessir, how high should I jump?’ He pays good money, but you don’t want to get fired by him. You understand what I’m saying to you? He won’t need you once we deliver the rest of the load to Garden City. You want the chance to make up with your wife, don’t you? Well, you can’t do that if you’re six feet under the sod.”

Blair’s eyes widened. “Are you saying he’s liable to shoot me if I give him trouble?”

Masters said quietly, forcefully, “You wouldn’t be the first guy he decided was expendable and who disappeared. So don’t give him any lip and c’mon down here and help. You’re lucky I’m the one who came to get you out of your nice warm cab; I won’t say anything to him.”

Blair followed Masters to the rear of the truck; Greer handed several heavy closed crates to him and he stacked them on a hand dolly and wheeled it over to the plane. Greer must have taken out the guns from their hiding places among the other cargo and repackaged them. Made sense he supposed; that plane could only hold so much weight. He handed the first crate up to the young man with Asian features standing in the plane’s doorway and had to work hard to keep from reacting.

Shit! Shit! Shit! He recognized Greer’s buyer. He was a member of a crime gang Jim dealt with years ago in Cascade. Jim and the ATF had arrested this man’s brother, a prominent member of the Yakuza, the Japanese Mafia, for buying arms from Maya Carasco’s father. One of Carasco’s men had rolled over when arrested and implicated Furukawa Akio. There was enough illegal armaments found in Furukawa’s possession from previous deals with Carasco that he’d received a prison sentence. This guy had come to the trial and had sent menacing looks towards Jim for testifying against his older brother.

If Blair recognized the younger Furukawa, did he recognize Blair? He had spent plenty of time with Jim during that trial. Furukawa’s little brother might make him and then his cover would be blown, and he could be killed before Team Seven and Jim could break this party up.

Blair handed a second crate up to him and avoided making eye contact. But after he had lifted up the last box, Furukawa nudged him with his foot and stopped him from turning away.
“You. Have we met before?”

“Ah, I don’t believe we’ve been introduced.” That was true, and the best lies were misdirections. “Bobby Jacobs. Say, that’s a nice plane you’ve got here. What kind is it? It’s good that it can use a runway on a little airstrip like this. Me, I’m much more comfortable staying on the ground. I’d rather drive a truck than fly any day. But it’s cool that folks can enjoy flying. Do you enjoy flying? Or maybe you just tolerate it for work purposes?”

Masters calling his name interrupted Blair’s attempt at drowning the man in a sea of babble.

Blair smiled brightly at Furukawa. “Ah, hi–ho and all that. Back to the salt mines for me.” He turned his back and hustled back to the truck. Oh, man. As best as he could recall, he’d worn his hair tied back during the trial; his hair was down this morning and blowing around his face. Maybe that would keep Furukawa from remembering just why Blair had seemed familiar to him.

Crap. When were Jim and the other guys going to make their move? They’d surely witnessed enough of the transaction to bag both Greer and Furukawa.

Maybe they were having a hard time getting close enough without being noticed. There wasn’t a lot of cover around here. Shit, they would probably have to sneak up on foot. Maybe they needed him to come up with a diversion. He could do that; he could come up with something that would draw attention away from the perimeter of the airstrip. But would they be ready to move yet?

He’d made about twenty more trips back and forth from truck to plane along with the rest of Greer’s men, Furukawa staring perplexedly at him whenever he handed more guns up to the man, when he decided that he’d try to contact Chris. They were almost done loading up, and if they didn’t make their move soon, it would fly off to who knows where.

“Hey, I need a bathroom break.”

Masters gave a snort. “Can’t you wait till we’re done and the plane’s out of here?”

“Sorry, but I’m regular like clockwork and my alarm is ringing. I’ll --” and he tilted his head towards the small building next to the hanger.

Masters waved him on and returned to his work. Blair hustled over to the building and went inside and located the office. Locked, damn it. He felt over the doorway for a key but came up with nothing.

C’mon, c’mon. Tell me there’s a key hidden around here. He looked around and noticed a large fake plant at the end of the hallway, next to a rickety bench. This place was rundown and pared to only essentials; there were no pictures on the wall or anything else decorative. That plant was out-of-place. He walked over to it and lifted it. Sure enough, there was a key just waiting for him. He picked it up and after a quick look to make sure he was alone, he went inside and grabbed the cordless phone. He left the office with it and went into the bathroom, used the facilities – he hadn’t entirely been faking about the clockwork thing – and keeping an eye on the outside door, he dialed Chris’ cell phone.

"Larabee," Chris answered quietly.

“Chris, it’s Blair. Look, when are you planning on starting this shindig? Do you need a diversion?”

“Jim saw you enter that building. Stay there, okay. Hide. Nobody wants you in the line of fire.”

“Yeah, I don’t want me in the line of fire, either. But man, it’s pretty flat out there, how are you
going to get close enough to get the drop on these guys?”

*We’re moving in now, low to the ground.*

“Look, you need a diversion. I’ll think of something and when everybody notices whatever I’m going to come up with, then you can make your move. It’ll be a lot safer for you guys.”

Blair shut the phone off before Chris could respond and actually order him to stay in the building. Now to come up with something spectacular. He considered an explosion, but there was fuel stored on this property and he didn’t want a fire getting out of hand. Man, that plane would be getting ready to leave soon. He needed to come up with something right the hell now.

Think, Blair, think.

And then he had an idea.

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Chris made sure his cell phone was still on vibrate and thrust it back in his pocket. He whispered to JD, “Ask Ellison if he thinks Sandburg will stay put in that building.”

JD and Buck and Josiah were with him, and Ellison, Ezra, Vin and Nathan were together further away. Having a sentinel in each group made quiet communication possible. JD tilted his head and whispered that Ellison had heard what Blair had said and that there wasn’t a snowball’s chance in hell that he’d stay safely put.

They planned on converging on the airstrip in two parallel directions, and hopefully not shoot each other.

Okay. Guess they’d wait for the diversion that Blair promised them before their final move, but they could lessen the distance some. They’d parked the vehicles a good half-mile away, behind a barn, and had moved up as close as they could before the darkness faded from the sky. There were a few Cottonwood trees near a dry creek bed that could give them some cover as they crept in nearer to the airstrip, but that was about it. There was a house on the property, probably belonged to the owner of the airstrip, but it was too far away to be of any use.

They were in their new positions, using the scant trees as cover and they watched as the rest of the guns were all transferred to the plane -- Josiah recognized it as a Short 360, built to haul a heft amount of cargo -- and Chris realized that they might not be able to wait for Blair’s diversion, when JD nudged him.

“Blair’s left the building. He’s heading towards the plane,” he said softly.

The team watched Blair arrive at the cargo door of the aircraft. “He’s telling the guy in there and the pilot that his boss asked if they would meet him in the office.”

Blair ducked around to the other side of the plane, where he would be hidden from casual observation. Two men climbed out, suitcases in hand, and headed toward the building Blair had come from.

JD frowned, and whispered, “He just said, ‘Here goes nothing.’”

Silence. The gun buyer and pilot reached the building and went inside. JD quietly reported that
Greer, still in the back of the truck, wondered aloud what Furukawa thought he was doing and followed the two men.

The loud sound of an engine starting up broke the silence.

Chris’ group exchanged glances, as they realized just what Blair was planning for this diversion.

“Get ready,” Chris told the others quietly, and drew his weapon.

Startled men dropped what they were doing and started converging on the plane. Greer, Furukawa, and the pilot ran out of the building, chasing after the plane that was slowly taxiing down the runway. Then the plane did a 360-degree turn, and headed straight for the group of men who were screaming and yelling and pulling guns out of jackets.

“Sweet Jesus, here he comes,” Buck breathed out in awe.

The plane gathered speed, and did some zigzagging as it careened down the runway back to where the truck was parked, scattering men as it headed straight for them.

Greer’s and Furukawa’s men fired at the tires, apparently trying to blow out them out, but they missed.

Blair kept the plane right on going towards the end of the runway right towards the team. He wasn’t going fast enough to take to the air and Chris didn’t think Blair knew how to fly. He’d had the distinct impression that Blair didn’t really like heights. So he’d have to either stop or turn onto the driveway, which would take him right past the trees they were using for cover and out to Highway 96.

Chris held his breath and cursed as a bullet hit the tire, causing the plane to wobble on its turn. Blair continued moving, the plane bouncing and swaying as it sped past the ATF agents and Ellison.

The sound of men running after the plane, guns in hands, came closer and as they came within target distance, Chris bellowed out, “ATF. Stop and place your guns on the ground, and lie down with your hands spread.”

Panting, the men stopped in confusion, including Greer, and when Chris repeated his instructions, several complied, curses practically turning the air blue.

Not everybody obeyed. Furukawa and one of Greer’s men aimed shots towards Chris’ covering stand of trees. A volley of gunfire rang out, and Furukawa jerked back as he was hit, falling to the ground. The other man dropped his gun and imitated the other men already lying stretched out on the ground.

Both groups moved out then, securing weapons and handcuffing prisoners. Nathan attended to the wounded man. The sound of the aircraft engine had died shortly after passing them, and Ellison looked over at him and smiled.

“He’s okay. Kind of pumped up and he was talking to himself the entire time he was shanghaiing that plane. He’s gonna be up and down like a pogo stick for a while till he calms enough to center himself. I’m heading over there, all right?”

Chris waved him off, and while Josiah read the Miranda rights to the arrested men, he proceeded to give an early morning call to the Kiowa County Sheriff’s department and requested back up and an ambulance. There was gonna be a shit load of mopping up to do – paperwork to complete and they would have to inventory the guns
on site -- and he sure was curious about what was in the suitcases Furukawa and the pilot had carried into the building. Money or drugs, he was betting.

Except for the court hearings, this would wrap up the investigation. Maybe they could wring some more intelligence out of these perps, somebody might take a deal so they could follow the pipeline of drugs and guns to another source.

But all he wanted for today was to secure the evidence, lock up his prisoners, and take his team home, including the Cascade contingent. Eat barbeque on his patio, offer some well-earned beers to his teammates, and afterwards, sit back and listen to the teasing that overlay the care they felt for each other.

Yep. Sounded like a plan to him.

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Ezra stood by the exit for Flight 114, Cascade, Washington to Denver, Colorado and watched for his childhood friend, accompanied by his sentinel, to appear.

They had an appointment to meet with the DA’s office later this morning, to go over Ellison’s and Sandburg’s testimony for the preliminary hearing tomorrow afternoon. Greer, Furukawa, Masters, and the other men arrested last month would have their cases heard to determine if there was enough evidence to bring them to trial on charges related to selling and possessing illegal arms and drugs, plus attempted murder for the two who had fired on Chris.

Ezra glanced around the waiting area, a habit that had always stood him in good stead. It paid to stay alert, even on an innocuous errand such as this one. Satisfied that the people slouching in chairs or standing watching the airport television were at the moment harmless, he returned to thinking about the case.

Their evidence was meticulous and the law-breakers would be serving time in prison. There was a separate investigation, based on what Masters had told Blair, into Greer being responsible for some missing persons’ deaths, people who had “worked” for him and who he'd judged to be a liability. The Denver PD was handling that line of inquiry.
A stream of travelers flowed out the door, some swept into arms of loved ones and hugged and kissed, others making their solitary way down the corridor of the DIA. He saw his friends, and waved a hand. Blair was chatting with an older woman, extolling the virtues of various establishments in and around Denver. Jim walked behind Blair, a tolerant expression on his face.

Ezra raised his hand and caught their attention. Blair beamed at him and then said goodbye to his acquaintance. As he knew his old friend would, Blair barged into his personal space and hugged him – not that he minded -- and Jim extended a hand in a hearty grip. Ezra made the expected disparaging remarks about Blair’s well-used backpack as they made their way to Chris’ Dodge Ram truck.

They caught up on events as they drove to the DA’s office on Colfax. Buck and JD’s kidnappers had pled guilty at their arraignment and would be returning to court only for sentencing. The DA had dropped the attempted murder charge in the plea bargain arrangements, which suited JD and Buck, because they wouldn’t have to testify about the forced copulations their captors had made them perform. The ATF and FBI were still waiting on the owners of that wretched cigarette warehouse to engage in fraud, and the team was heartily sick of the operation.

Ezra didn’t ask if Blair had bonded physically with his sentinel, but then he didn’t have to ask. The two men seemed relaxed with each other, in-tune in a way that he could recognize after watching JD and Buck these last few weeks. His old friend was happy, a smile dancing in his eyes, and joy radiating from him. In which case, he decided it was time to remind Blair about something they had agreed upon a long time ago.

They pulled into a parking lot downtown and when they rode up in the elevator to the District Attorney’s office, Ezra casually remarked, “I’ll take that fifty dollars you owe me, Mr. Sandburg, anytime now.”

Blair looked puzzled. “What fifty bucks are you talking about?”

Ezra tried to keep a poker face but a grin wanted to break out instead. “Well, since I suspect you’ve been ‘busy’ with other things and it’s slipped your mind, allow me to refresh your memory. Aunt Molly’s back porch. A pitcher of lemonade. A discussion on the folly of marriage. A wager, that the first one of us to lose our minds and become sealed into nuptials would pay the other one the grand sum of fifty dollars. I believe the arrangement between yourself and Mr. Ellison qualifies you as married. I win the bet.”

Ezra chuckled at the look on his guide’s face. “Sounds like he’s got you there, Chief. But I like to think that I’m the real winner. Allow me.” As the elevator started slowing to a stop at the fourth floor, he pulled out his wallet and with a flourish handed over two twenties and a ten.

“Standish, I’m glad he lost that bet. And yes, we have a civil union, which to my way of thinking is just another way to say we’re married.”

“Well, I’m sure that the rest of the team will want to offer their congratulations tonight, at the cookout at our Mr. Larabee’s ranch.” Ezra shot Blair a smug grin and waved the money. “I’ll buy the beer. Organic, correct?”

Blair started to laugh, and right before the elevator dinged to disgorge the inhabitants, he reached up and kissed Ellison.

“Thanks, Jim. Say, would you also cover any bets I lose on the horses?”

“Not a chance, Chief. C’mon, let’s get this meeting over while Standish here goes shopping. See you in about two hours, Ezra.”
Ezra waited until they’d disappeared down the hall towards the office of the assistant DA before calling Chris on his cell phone to let him and the rest of the team know that the cookout tonight was going to double as a celebration for their Cascade friends.

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Larabee Ranch, Denver County, Colorado
Monday, late evening, September 10th, 2001

Jim was feeling mellow. Good food, good beer, good company. He and Blair had even been the recipients of some gifts from the others, to celebrate their bonding and marriage. They’d had a private ceremony during their camping trip where they had exchanged vows, and a hell of a party when they had returned to Cascade afterwards with the bunch from Major Crime.

He looked around Larabee’s back patio at the sprawled out members of Team Seven. Most had beers in hand, but Vin was drinking coffee, and JD was sipping at a hot chocolate. Those two were the designated drivers for the rest of them. Buck was laughing so hard tears were springing up in his eyes. Blair had been entertaining them all, spinning the yarn about his stealing the airplane under the noses of Greer and Furukawa the Younger.

“So, I did an Internet search in the airstrip’s office for how to fly a plane, while I was supposed to be relieving myself in the bathroom…”

Jim tuned him out for a few minutes and drank more of his beer. He’d already heard Blair recount this latest adventure to the guys at Major Crime a few times. Instead, he reflected on how well his life was going now.

Blair had finished his research and was scheduled to defend his dissertation in a week. His partner had worked on it pretty much nonstop since they had come back from their week-long camping trip up in the Cascade Mountains. He grinned at the memory of Blair making good on all of his promises for a week of primal experiences, and yeah, there’d been a few bug bites in tender places, but it was a small price to pay to be naked with his guide. They’d bonded and had enjoyed various forms of sex, and it had been as sensuous and fulfilling as he had hoped it would be.

Of course, before there was the camping trip, which solidified their bond, there had been their homecoming to the loft. He licked his lips as he spun out the sweet remembrance, a dreamy and languorous feeling infusing his mind and muscles.

They’d begun as soon as Jim had locked their front door and secured the brass chain door lock. While they’d been gone to Colorado, Simon had been given a key, to check on things and water Blair’s plants on the balcony, but Jim would not have been pleased to see his boss and friend walk in on them tonight.

Jim had fantasized about pushing Blair up against a wall and holding him as a willing captive – not even in his daydreams could he do anything against Blair’s wishes – and seducing him with demanding kisses until his eyes looked drugged from arousal, then laying him out on a table or lowering him down to the floor and fucking him.

But that wasn’t how their first time happened.

Instead, after they'd locked the door, Blair had taken his hand and brought it to his lips. He’d kissed
Jim’s palm, and Jim had taken his free hand touched Blair’s face and stroked his hair. Blair had stepped closer to him and lifted his face and Jim had accepted the invitation. Their kisses expressed affection, love, and acceptance, but before they had segued to passion Blair had deftly moved away from him.

And then Blair asked him to dance.

While he watched, his guide turned the lights down low, and lit candles around the room. Sensuous music filled the air and he and Blair held each other, swaying and feeling their bodies mold to each other. Blair, never one to be silent for long, began murmuring loving words to him. “Sweet nothings,” an older generation might have called the words he whispered to Jim, but they weren’t “nothings.” They were little gems of love Blair was showering him with, and he wanted to give the words back to Blair. He did, and although they weren’t shot through with poetry like Blair’s offerings, they were heartfelt and Blair soaked them up like a desert after a rainfall.

Later, when they were naked and hard and touching each other in Jim’s big bed, Jim made each touch of his lips, his tongue, his hands and his dick express the love and tenderness he felt for Blair, and Blair’s caresses branded him as Blair’s. He’d wanted this for such a long time and he was grateful and ecstatic and awed that Blair had chosen him. Loved him. Accepted him. Would stay with him till the end of their time.

The exquisite pleasure of their orgasms that night was magnified by the tenderness and love they showed to each other.

He came back to the present very much aware that he’d become hard while thinking about his lover. His mate. Domestic partner. His consultant at the PD. His guide. He knew that JD would have noticed the changes in his body that made it clear to a sentinel that he was aroused, but JD would keep the knowledge secret, like a priest in a confessional. He casually shifted his jacket to lie over his lap and paid attention to Blair. He was gesturing with his hands, reenacting how he had taxied the plane down the runway.

“Oh and I’m putting more pressure on the throttle and the plane’s going to the right too much, and then I’m trying to straighten it out and then it’s going too much to the left.”

He had his arms extended now, imitating the zigzagging plane. “And the guys on the ground realize I’m running off with the plane, and hell, for all they know I’m going to really fly it away. Anyway, I’m telling them to get out of the way, cause I don’t really know what I’m doing. Of course, they can’t hear me, and it’s all a little surreal, you know? Then when they shot the tire things got really wobbly. It felt like I was sliding sideways. And those bozos follow me, right past the trees where Jim and the rest of our guys are waiting and while the rest of the team is taking them down, I’m trying to figure out how to stop the plane. Man, for a minute or two, I thought I might end up driving the damn thing all the way to Kansas.”

There was laughter and smiles as Blair wrapped up his tale, then Nathan cocked his head. “Blair, did you know we were hiding under those trees?”

“Yeah, I sure did. And I don’t know if that was just because it was logical for you guys to be there since it was the best cover around, or if the bond Jim and I have made it possible.” He smiled at Jim and Jim knew he probably looked like a sap, as he grinned happily back at his lover, but he didn’t care.

The get-together started winding down, with Nathan giving the highlights of his vacation with Raine, and Chris and Vin recounting going camping. Finally, Chris declared it a night.
“It’s closing time. We’ll meet tomorrow at District Court, at seven in the morning. Uh, Ellison do you know where the Denver City and County building is located? If you stay here for the night we’ll go in together.” He smirked at them. “I invested in a good set of earplugs for when JD and Buck stay over, so I won’t hear any goings-on.

Buck started to snicker. “Blair, you’re one for rituals and such. I’ve got one in mind that’s a time-honored western way of acknowledging a couple getting hitched.”

JD stood up, and grabbed at Buck’s hand, pulling him up. “Time for us to go before Buck inflicts a shiveree on Jim and Blair. C’mon, partner, let’s go home.” Buck protested mildly as his half-formed plan to serenade Jim and Blair with off-key singing and banging pots and pans outside their window was derailed, but he went out to his truck with JD peacefully enough. It looked like that sentinel had his guide under control.

Jim glanced over at his own guide, who probably would never be under anybody’s control, let alone his sentinel’s and beckoned him to come over from where he was looking again at the book on old western ghost towns that had been one of their wedding presents.

Blair obliged him, and -- apparently reading his mind -- said, “I vote that we stay here for the night, but if you want to go into Denver and get a motel, we need to get moving.”

Jim pulled Blair down next to him and whispered in his ear. “We’ll sleep here. But I’d like to go for a walk with you, before we head to bed. I’ll flip you to see who bends over the hay bales in the barn.”

“Umm… okay, Cowpoke. I guess Chris won’t need his earplugs then.”

Jim licked the edge of Blair’s ear, making his guide start to pump out pheromones. He purred, “I didn’t say he wouldn’t need them, Chief. You make our goodbyes to the rest of the guys and I’ll go and get some supplies and meet you on the path to the barn. Want me to pounce on you in the dark?” Blair loved to play hide and seek, adult style. It really pushed his libido into overdrive.

Blair swallowed, his eyes starting to dilate. Then he wiggled away from Jim and stood up. “Get moving, Ellison. I’ve got some folks to say goodnight to for you and me.” He shot Jim a seductive, mischievous grin. “And you can try to jump me. But I’ve been working on feeling you through our bond and if I catch you before you catch me, then I get to choose which of us is the pitcher tonight, agreed?”

Jim felt a wave of contentment swell up within him. “You bet, Chief.”

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**Conference room, Denver City and County Building, Denver, Colorado**

**Tuesday, early morning, September 11th, 2001**

Chris decided he’d have to award Ezra a gold star this morning. The assistant DA had requested that Team Seven, and Ellison and Sandburg, meet with her before District Court started at eight, so that she could make sure their testimony was going to go off without a hitch. As a return favor, she’d managed to get the preliminary hearings for all the men arrested during Greer’s case listed first on the docket for court.
Ezra had been right on time, here before seven am, even if he was half asleep.

Of course, Assistant District Attorney Shelly Peterson was a strikingly beautiful brunette. Sandburg had taken the opportunity to tease Ezra about that as soon as the woman had left them to get a forgotten file from her office.

Jim was agreeing with Josiah that the woman was thorough, since he and Blair had already had one meeting with her yesterday.

Vin had stopped at a Dunkin’ Donuts shop, and Buck and JD had practically swarmed him when he came in carrying the pastries.

Shelly came running back into the conference room, face pale. “Oh my God, there’s been a terrible accident in New York. A plane has flown into the World Trade Center. It’s on TV right this minute.” She left hurriedly and the group of men followed her to an office where a few people were watching live coverage of the tragedy.

They watched, mesmerized by the smoke billowing out from the tall building and the replay of the film coverage. Then the unthinkable happened a few moments later. A second plane flew into the other tall tower. His team exchanged glances, as they realized that this couldn’t be an accident. Not with two planes crashing into New York buildings like that. This was a terrorist attack, and the ATF would be involved in the investigation. One of their National Response Teams would be dispatched to examine the evidence and provide forensic assistance for the investigation. They had done it for earlier terrorist attacks.

Chris felt anger rising up in him like magma rising rapidly to the earth’s surface. All those people trapped in those two buildings. All those lives lost because some terrorist group had hi-jacked those two planes. All those families, who had now lost loved ones. His grief about Sarah and Adam, the anger that he had never really resolved, burned hot and bright in him again, re-lit by the agony he knew those families would suffer.

He glanced at the shocked faces of his team, some struggling to hide their emotions, others letting their own grief and pain at this attack on their homeland be visible.

JD and Buck were holding hands. Ellison’s face had hardened into granite and he was gripping Blair’s arm.

Josiah was saying a prayer for the souls of those lost to this attack and for their families. Nathan added his own for the first responders to the devastation, firemen and policemen and volunteers who would try to save those in peril, regardless of the danger to themselves.

Chris was their team leader. They needed him calm and thinking.

“Shelly – get hold of the judge and see if court can be postponed. We may be at war, and all of us need to be ready to move.”

Ellison had moved to an office phone and was punching numbers. Blair spoke for him. “He’s calling Simon Banks, our captain in Major Crime.”

“I’m going to check in with Orrin Travis.” Vin placed a phone in his hand and he dialed Orrin’s number, wondering if he would be the first to break the news of the attacks to the Assistant Director.

So quickly can things change. One day he was a man with a family, the next day a man bereft. Earlier this morning their country was at peace; this afternoon, they might be at war. And all a man could do was hold tight to those he loved and do his best to protect them.
Ellison and Sandburg apartment. Cascade, Washington
Tuesday, late afternoon, October 2nd, 2001

Blair stirred the ostrich chili and turned the burner off. No sense in scorching their dinner while he meditated. He could sorely use some contemplation; the weeks after the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon had been hectic and stressful. They had been stuck in Denver after the attacks for several days until the airlines were allowed to resume air service. But they had finally been able to testify at the preliminary hearings for the men the team had arrested in the Greer case.

Because of the ATF’s bust of Greer and Furakawa, his buyer, there was now a joint investigation with the RCMP because Furakawa and the Yakuza had made their new home in Canada, the Yakuza being one of the growing number of Asian crime gangs shuttling drugs south of the border. Greer had swapped the arms shipment for cash, Ecstasy, and cocaine that had been flown in from the Saskatchewan border. He’d already had a buyer lined up to meet with him after leaving the airstrip, intending to smuggle the drugs in the two cars outfitted with false compartments that had accompanied the semi Blair had driven to Kiowa county.

Blair took Sandalwood candles out of the kitchen drawer and arranged them in a circle on the floor. He started lighting them, their pleasing scent wafting around the room.

At least not all of the recent stress was for negative reasons. He was now Dr. Sandburg, having successfully defended his dissertation two weeks ago. Now he had some decisions to make regarding his work, and he hoped that meditating would allow his path to become clear. He could work full-time at the PD or continue his part-time position there and teach a few classes. Or perhaps there was a new direction his life should take.

He turned off the lights and arranged himself in the center of the candles, relaxing upon a small rug.

He wasn’t looking forward to tomorrow. He and Jim had to report to the recruiting station down on Waterfront Lane and do medical tests, since it had been thirty days since the Army had been notified of their bond. He had known it was inevitable, but he didn’t relish jumping through the Army’s hoops.

The medical tests would confirm that they had a physical bond, and later tomorrow, he and Jim would be taken to Fort Lewis, south of Seattle, to undergo the mandatory two weeks of testing. He had no real qualms about going. He knew that their bond was rock-solid and they could pass anything that was thrown at them.

Jim had been quiet, though, ever since they’d witnessed the terrorist attacks on the television, and that did worry Blair. That was the main reason he wanted to meditate tonight, before Jim returned. He had the feeling that Jim was not fully sharing his emotions lately. Jim denied that, of course. He was attentive and Blair had no doubts about his love. But something was off about his sentinel, and as a guide, it was his job to figure out what it was and help his sentinel to re-achieve the balance he had to have to function to his full potential. Besides, he wanted Jim to be happy.

He started to breathe deeply and center himself. Maybe Jim’s problem was more work related. The whole country was under severe stress, and as one of the men charged with protecting the public, maybe Jim was feeling that pressure.
He’d do anything to help his lover be okay.

Anything.

He took a deep breath of the Sandalwood and visualized Jim. Then he visualized Jim naked and smiled; Sandalwood was also supposed to have an aphrodisiac quality. He worked a little harder at gaining his center and felt himself slipping into the calm, out-of-body state induced by his brain producing Theta waves.

Floating, mind and body relaxing, compassion and empathy for his bonded mate suffused his spirit. Effortlessly he allowed his observations of Jim’s behavior and body language to gather; he explored his sense of their bond for the last month.

He was pulled out his meditation by his awareness that Jim had opened the loft door and come into the living room. He felt his brain resuming alpha waves and beta waves and decided he needed to meditate more this week since he’d come to no particular conclusion about what was bothering Jim.

Jim, who was watching him with a hungry look on his face. For him, he knew.

But… also probably for the chili.

He rose gracefully from the floor and stepped over the candles and went to his lover’s arms. He tightened his hug into a hard embrace, telling Jim non-verbally that he was there to stick with him, through thick or thin.

They kissed, and he released Jim and went to blow out his candles.

Maybe he’d take a few upstairs later, when they went to bed. He was a scientist; maybe he should set up some experiments that would test the Sandalwood as Viagra theory.

“What are you chuckling about, Chief?” Jim had re-lit the stove and was stirring the chili around with a big wooden spoon.

“Oh, just another one of my little tests I thought I’d get you to help me with.” Blair returned to the kitchen and leaned against the counter, smiling innocently at his lover.

“Sandburg, I know you’re up to something. Just promise me I’ll enjoy it, okay? There isn’t the equivalent of drinking spoiled milk in whatever scheme you’re hatching, is there?”

“Nope, just trust me, Jim.”

Jim answered him lightly, but Blair could tell he was serious under the teasing note of his words. “I may not know why you do the things you do, but I trust you, Chief. I know you’re only looking out for me.” He turned off the chili and Blair got out crackers and bowls and grated cheese.

He gave Jim a quick peck on the lips, and handed him his bowl. This would be their last night at home for a while, and he intended to make it a good night for them both.

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

Federal Building, Denver, Colorado

Tuesday, mid morning, October 23, 2001
Ezra had been late again for the weekly staff meeting, which surprised Chris not at all. As a penalty for his misdemeanor, he’d been sent to get the mail from the main office downstairs and until he returned everybody was just shooting the breeze.

JD and Buck were talking about when they would be eligible to give blood again, as they had donated the day after the Twin Towers had collapsed.

Chris, Vin, and Josiah were discussing some of the rumors they’d heard that the ATF might be transferred from the Treasury Department to the Justice Department, as part of suggested changes to tighten up the country’s security.

Nathan was taking advantage of the lull by talking to Rain on the phone.

Nobody was really paying attention when Ezra returned, except Chris. Ezra dumped the mail on the desk Chris was using, but retained one letter. As Chris grabbed Buck’s chicken and held it up, to signal that it was time to get rolling on their meeting, Ezra strolled back to his desk and made himself comfortable, slitting the envelope with his elegant letter opener.

Chris began to read an official memo on tightening up their inspections of warehouses that stored materials that could be used by terrorists to make bombs, but a shocked sound from Ezra caught everyone’s attention.

Chris looked pointedly at his team member who had interrupted the meeting. Ezra held up the letter. “Mr. Larabee. Sir. This letter is from Blair and it’s addressed to our whole team. It’s… it’s important.”

Chris walked over behind Ezra and dumped the chicken on his desk, and laid his hands on Ezra’s shoulders. “What’s it say?”

Ezra looked around at the rest of the team. “The Army tested Blair and Jim recently at Fort Lewis, in Washington. Blair wrote to let us know… they didn’t pass the tests for having a stable sentinel and guide bond. They’ve been drafted.”

Pandemonium broke out. Ezra passed the short note over to Nathan, and it made the rounds, team members reading Blair’s words for themselves.

As he picked up the envelope the letter had come in, Chris overheard snatches of conversation regarding this news. Buck and JD were adamant that there was some mistake, because Blair wouldn’t have let Jim fail any tests. This was Blair, who had told them when they were last together that his and Jim’s bond was firm.

Chris noticed, though, that there was another, smaller piece of paper still in the envelope. He plucked it out and read it, then he closed his eyes and sighed.

His action wasn’t lost on Ezra. “What else did you learn, Chris?” he asked softly.

For an answer, Chris asked everybody to pipe down.

“There was a second note in that envelope. I’ll just read it out loud. Jim says, ‘Guys. I know Blair wrote and told you we didn’t pass the tests. I’m sticking this note in with his letter before I mail it for him. He hasn’t admitted it to me, but I’m pretty sure he threw the tests on purpose. I don’t know why he would do that. It goes against everything he believes in. The only good news is that we have five years to serve, instead of ten. The Army is cutting us a break because of my previous service. Write
to Blair, would you? This is going to be tough on him. Jim.”

JD spoke up, breaking the silence that had fallen after Chris had dropped Jim’s note on the desk. “I think I know why Blair messed up the tests. I know that I’ve been feeling a strong pull to protect my ‘tribe’ since the attacks happened. But I know that working here, with our team is the best way for me to contribute. Maybe Jim was having similar feelings. Maybe Blair picked up on them. Maybe he thought Jim wanted to go back into the service, but wouldn’t because of him.”

“So he blew the tests for Jim’s sake?” Nathan asked.

Buck spoke slowly. “It’s just a guess, but I do believe JD is right. We spent a lot of time with Blair. He loves Jim something fierce and if he thought this was something Jim needed to do, well then, he’d sacrifice what he wanted in a heartbeat.”

Five years, thought Chris. Five war-time years. As a sentinel and guide pair, they’d be deployed to the front lines.

Josiah said, “I’d like us all to take a moment of silence for Jim and Blair. Pray, if you feel so moved. Ask a higher power for their guidance or send good karma thoughts out to them.”

Seven heads bowed for several long moments, each man responding according to his own beliefs, but united in their concern for the two men who had become their friends.

Chris raised his head, took a deep breath and said, “I have a memo to read to you from Assistant Director Travis regarding some changes in the inspection of materials that could be used by terrorists to make bombs.”

Later, he would encourage his team to be with someone they loved tonight – as friends, if not lovers. Maybe he would see if anybody wanted to come out to his place and have a cookout. Play a little poker. Tell tall tales.

And toast absent friends.

The End.

Laurie

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