

AT NIGHT

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Thanks to MOG for creating the ATF universe

By Freyan

Golden Gate Canyon State Park

Vin Tanner shook out his sleeping bag and pulled off his shoes. The night air was crisp, but not cold, and he knew he wouldn't have any trouble keeping warm. He lay down on his back, hands behind his head as he looked up at the clear night sky. Brightly illuminated stars winked down at him, the full moon showing off right above him.

The tranquillity and calmness of the forest soothed him, calling out to him in a way the hustle and bustle of the city never would. It gave him a chance to become grounded once more. Tanner was not a man who put a lot of faith in mankind. He was too jaded for that. But he prided himself at being good at reading people. It was a skill he had honed almost to perfection through the years, at his various foster homes and later on at his job as a bounty hunter. It was a skill he not only put to use everyday at work, but in his private life as well. It guided his decision of whether or not to trust people, to include them in his very small circle of friends. Very few made it through the needle's eye, but those who did were guaranteed a friend for life. Someone who would watch their back and give up his life for them if requested. That was just the kind of man Tanner was.

In the last six months he had let more people into his small circle than he had for almost all of his life combined. Six people, six comrades in arms had earned his trust because his instinct told him they were honourable people. For one of them there had been no doubt. From the moment they met they had just clicked, for five others it had taken a little while longer, but they had made it. Once they were inside, nothing short of betrayal against himself or his friends, would ever exclude them again.

Three days ago the last of their number to join their ranks had finally proven to Tanner that he had made the right choice in letting this, seemingly untrustworthy, man into his circle. Three nights ago Ezra Standish had taken three bullets in his back and arm, while saving the life of Chris Larabee, Tanner's team leader and best friend.

The last two days Tanner had spent at the hospital, watching over the comatose man along with the rest of the team. Until the medical personal finally had enough and sent them home, letting only one of them stay overnight. Tanner had fled the bright lights and sought the empty spaces, where he could find his peace. Now he closed his eyes, letting the night sounds of the forest lull him to sleep, as he contemplated how to wake a man from a coma.

The CDC, Denver downtown

The room was almost dark, the only light illuminating the young man was the faint glow from the computer monitor. Headphones covered his ears as a means to block out the moaning and creaking from the other side of the wall. Fingers flew in a frantic pace across the keyboard, calling up pages, circumventing passwords and erasing trails, as the computer technician continued his illicit search.

Three days ago JD Dunne had learned the shocking truth that the members of the now fabled team 7 were all mere mortals. That their life's flame could be snuffed out faster than the eye could follow. A bullet could just as easily rip through the skin and bones of a member of the Magnificent Seven as it could any other man, woman or child. Instead of letting this startling fact destroy him, Dunne had turned the adrenalin and the energy he had gained from the shootout into an unstoppable search for the perpetrators.

Someone had given Larabee away. Standish had reacted, saving his team leader's life. Chaos had ensued. In the following confusion three of the key players had gotten away with a suitcase containing more than 3 million of the government's dollars, all in traceable numbers. JD Dunne would not rest until he found those who had sold out Larabee. As the screen changed, Dunne let out a small smile for the first time in three days. It looked like he had just hit the jackpot.

The CDC, Denver downtown, other side of the wall

Buck Wilmington was known across town among the female population as a comforter. If you had a problem with your boyfriend, your husband or just life in general, Wilmington was the man to see. He never turned you down and you were ensured an understanding and sympathetic ear. He knew exactly what to say to make you feel good about yourself again. To give you that extra boost you needed to go back to your husband or boyfriend and fix things up. He also knew when it was time for you to lay down the towel and accept a break-up or a divorce. Wilmington was always on the woman's side, of that you could be certain. No one ever complained about the fact that there was a new woman in his life almost every week either. That all just came as a part of the deal with Wilmington the Comforter.

What most of the female population in Denver didn't know was that Buck Wilmington had a few comforters himself. It wasn't often he needed them, preferring to handle his problems by himself without burdening anyone else. But on special occasions one of a select few would get a call, and without complaint, make their way over to the residence of Wilmington and Dunne. There they would see a part of Wilmington that few had ever witnessed. There they would help soothe his fears and guilt. Tonight Amelia Hawkins, Psy.D. had undertaken the mission with understanding and compassion.

She listened patiently as Wilmington described the fear he had felt when, from his surveillance van, he heard that Larabee had been made. Then the sudden panic he felt as the gunshots filled the air. The guilt as he realised his relief upon finding Standish the victim, instead of Larabee. She ensured him his feelings were perfectly natural, that he had nothing to be feeling guilty about, and that his shame proved that he had not meant Standish any harm. It was okay to be relieved that his oldest friend had not been a casualty that night. He could indeed still consider himself a friend of the Southerner. If

Dunne had taken off his earphones, he would have been surprised at the lack of creaking and moaning coming from the other side of the wall.

Denver suburbs, northwest of the CDC

Meanwhile, the bed creaked as Nathan Jackson sunk, moaning, into the hot depths of his girlfriend, Rain. Even as he did what he had not been able to do for over a week now, he couldn't get his mind off what had happened three days ago. Being the medic for the team, it was his responsibility to take care of the others when they got hurt, to distribute the first-aid when needed. When the unthinkable happened, he was the first line of defence against death. Three days ago his skills had been sorely tested.

Even before the echoes of the gunshots had fallen silent, Nathan Jackson had gripped his med kit and hurried into the now chaotic warehouse. All the while his team-mates, along with their back-up team, had honed in on the criminals. A bloody sight met him, as he crouched down next to the two downed men. Larabee had slowly pushed himself out from underneath Standish's unresponsive body, his face white with shock and his eyes seething with rage. Jackson had ignored him and concentrated on the fallen Southerner. The undercover agent hadn't been wearing a vest, something he hadn't had a chance to do, since he had been ensconced within the criminals' domicile for more than a week.

A bullet had nicked the left arm, but Jackson had concentrated on the two holes that had pierced the undercover agent's back; one on the lower left side, and one on the upper right, close to the heart. The lower one had come out on the other side, but the upper one had stayed in the agent's body. As Nathan Jackson had sat there on the cold concrete floor, trying to staunch the blood flow of a man he believed he would never understand, he felt more inadequate than he had ever felt in his life. It hadn't been a good feeling. He had had his fights and arguments with the contrary agent, but as the man's breath suddenly became shallow and his heart stopped beating, Jackson knew without a doubt that this man was a friend and he would not let him die. Even if that meant Nathan had to fight Lucifer himself.

He felt he had done just that, as the ambulance crew finally arrived. But Standish's heart was beating again, and Nathan Jackson would make damn sure it stayed that way.

No longer able to resist his girlfriend's wiles, he gave up this line of thinking, knowing deep down that he had done everything humanly possible in the situation. The Southerner would come out of his coma sooner or later, even if he personally had to go drag him out of it.

Mercy General Hospital, room 228

The room was dark, but not quiet. Beeping sounds filled the air. Once in a while a nurse would enter, quietly check the comatose man in the bed, then leave, not paying any attention to the silent shadow in the corner.

Josiah Sanchez moved his tired body again, as he tried to find a comfortable position on the uncomfortable chair. An extra bed had been moved into the room, giving him a place to sleep. But the land of Nod had had its borders closed by the former preacher. He had been a shepherd all of his life and right now one of his sheep needed him. He would not

leave it in this state, alone and vulnerable. Not until it had been reunited with the rest of the flock, and that was still hours away. So Sanchez had given up the comfortable bed for the uncomfortable chair. In a way he felt it was his penance. He had been acting as Larabee's bodyguard at the bust, while Standish had been on the inside of the operation, watching everything from the other side of the floor. It should have been Sanchez who had taken the bullets aimed at their leader. But he had been behind Larabee when the gunshots had been fired, not in front. Standish, on the other hand, had thrown himself across the floor, into the line of fire, bringing Larabee down with him. Sanchez had taken out the shooter, but by then it was too late.

Sanchez mused that it was indeed the truth that no good deed went unpunished. Maybe that was why, up until now, Standish had adamantly refused to be a "good" person. He skirted the line of right and wrong all the time, always up for a scheme or two, professing that he had no need of so-called friends. But in one single moment, Standish had destroyed everything he had worked so hard to get the others to believe. He had proven himself to be unselfish and a genuine hero. Sanchez chuckled quietly in his chair as he watched the still person in the bed. Ezra would be abhorred to know they all now considered him a good person. His reputation was completely destroyed.

The Larabee ranch, on the outskirts of Denver

Chris Larabee tossed and turned in his bed, as the sweat streamed down his body and slicked his hair. His dreams were haunted, nothing new, but the last two days the dreams had been different. They had been visions of him being tackled to the floor, of Ezra Standish slamming into him, the young agent's face contorted in agony as his body registered the pain of his wounds. They were visions of blood.

It hadn't taken Larabee long to move Standish' deadweight off his body, but by then blood had already seeped into his trousers. His hands had been covered in the warm liquid, the sight of it making him queasy. It wasn't the first time he had seen someone get shot, not even the first time seeing it this close. It hadn't been the first time someone had done it saving his life either, but it had been the first time someone he barely trusted had done it. For the last two days, his mind had tried to come to grips with that fact. That Ezra Standish, the wildcard, the loner of the team and the man he had the worst relationship with, had unselfishly offered up his life for his own, expecting nothing in return. Larabee didn't understand it, and apparently his sub consciousness had realised the same thing. Tonight the nightmare was back to the old one that had been haunting him for more than three years.

It was the image of fire, the sound of screaming, the loud explosion of a bomb and the smell of charred bodies. It was the vision of his wife and son, smiling, happy, only to be engulfed in a sea of flames. A couple of years ago he would have muted them with the haze of alcohol. But six months ago, he met an old friend, gained a new best one, and found three others. Their friendship had been enough to mute the nightmares to an acceptable level. They drove the demons away, only to have them come out when he was down or hurt. Tonight was one of those times. The fire was once again licking at his loved ones, taunting him, showing him what he had failed to prevent, showing him his own mortality and inadequacy. But as had happened the last six months, images of his five friends emerged, dousing the fire and battling the demons. However, like always they were

not enough. The demons were getting the upper hand and the fire was rekindling. That is until a sixth stepped out from the shadows. Ezra Standish finally made himself known in his leader's dreams and together the six men conquered the demons and put out the fire.

Chris Larabee hugged his pillow tighter, as he fell into a completely dreamless sleep for the first time in more than three years.

Mercy General Hospital, room 228

The beeping never changed as the young man in the bed took over his own breathing, going from a deep coma into a deep sleep, energizing his body for the new dawn to come. He would need his sleep. For that dawn would herald the invasion of six men, six teammates and six friends. They would reunite in this small hospital room, to threaten, cajole, and coax, their seventh back into their ranks. Back into their circle of friendship.

The End
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