

Happy Birthday to Me

Jean Graham

The silence was almost absolute after the noise of screeching tyres and tortured, buckling metal had filled his senses for what had seemed to be an inordinately long time but which logic dictated, was probably only a few seconds. Now there was no sound but the soft sigh of a radiator steaming quietly in the cold night air as coolant seeped from the ruptured core, the ticking of hot metal starting to cool and the sound of his own ragged breathing in his ears.

He remembered the deer then. Damned animal had just appeared in front of him and the laws of nature which dictated that two objects could not occupy the same space at the same time held true even for a Jaguar XJS and a deer. It was no real contest as to which would ultimately prevail but the impact had sent the big car careening off the road where it had again sought to prove that same universal law, but this time the tree won.

Slowly he lifted his head, and stared at the starred windscreen in front of him for a few seconds through not-quite-focused eyes. Almost without thinking he freed the seat belt buckle but still did not move although he didn't think he was hurt; at least no part of him was giving out urgent signals for him to pay attention. He considered that to be a good sign. As his vision started to clear, he interpreted the crimson splashes across the laminated glass with some distaste, refusing to even contemplate what the other unidentifiable matter decorating the demolished front of his car might be. He tried the door, suddenly worried about the risk of fire, and while his professional persona insisted that cars exploding after a crash was more Hollywood myth than any real possibility, his innate fear of being burned suggested a hasty exit might not be such a bad idea. The door opened reluctantly and under protest, twisted metal squealing, after some firm persuasion from his shoulder and he was thankful that he was spared the indignity of having to scramble out of a window. Not that there was anyone to see him. He was miles from anywhere.

A little unsteadily, he made his way to the front of the car and inspected the damage. What the deer had started, the tree had well and truly finished. The Jag was going nowhere under its own steam, that much was obvious to even his untrained and slightly unfocused eyes. Hell, if it ever went again it would be a miracle. He stood back with a sigh rubbing his temples, feeling the start of a dull headache behind his eyes and the stiffness in his neck that he suspected might be the forerunner of pain yet to come, before looking up and down the length of visible road. Nothing but shiny, wet blacktop and endless trees. Alone. Utterly and completely.

Leaning against the car fender, he realised that he was shaking, and he quickly thrust his hands into his pockets as the shock of the accident finally hit him. He shuddered once and wondered how many people had ever actually died on the anniversary of their birth. A cruel trick of fate indeed and not the kind of birthday present he would wish on anyone. Siddharta Gautama -- Buddha -- he seemed to remember had been born and died on the same date but no one else came immediately to mind. Still that alone would have placed him in good company he supposed.

His birthday. That was why he was on this road, at this time, alone and trying to get back to

Denver before the day ended. He hunched his shoulders and stared down at the ground between his feet.

He should have stayed in Fort Collins but for the first time in his thirty-five years he was looking forward to spending this day -- his day -- with the rest of the team, even though nothing more lavish than a few drinks at Inez's Place had been planned, and he was at a loss as to explain why it had become important to him.

Three hundred and sixty five days of the year to choose from and he had been subpoenaed to appear in court in distant Jackson County on this day of all days. Not that it should have surprised him; he had a long history of non-events to look back on and one more should not have worried him in the least -- but it did. He did not want to be standing at the side of the road with night falling, still far from home with no company but that of a very dead deer. He shivered again, not entirely sure if the reaction was due to the falling temperature or a physical response to the fact that he had just slammed into a tree at fifty miles an hour. Whatever the reason he had to admit he was feeling a little shaky.

He glanced at his watch. Eight-thirty. They would be gathering at Inez's by now. He wondered briefly if they would start without him then chastised himself for having let the thought enter his mind. A year ago, yes, that might well have been the case but a year ago things had been different. For one, he would have avoided becoming involved with anything so inane as a birthday celebration but in the space of twelve months things had certainly turned around for him. Six unique individuals had seen to that. He had not made it easy for them but these six men had systematically worn down his natural defences and before long, without even being aware of it, he had become a part of the camaraderie, a part of the team and by default part of a family the like of which he had never known before. *Had he ever known a family before?*

He remembered with sadness his twenty-first birthday, slowing drawing his right hand out of his pocket to stare at the heavy gold signet ring on his finger - a gift from his mother. Maude was by then on husband number four and they had all been in France for the summer, Ezra on semester break from Cambridge, and Jules had thought it appropriate that for his coming of age Ezra deserved only the best. He smiled bitterly at the memory. The best call girl in Paris that Jules' money could buy and that was, indeed, very best. Ezra had spent the loneliest night of his life with a most beautiful and talented creature who could never have understood, even if he could have put it into words himself, why he had been so unutterably miserable. His mother and stepfather had flown to St. Moritz that night and he had spent the night in the arms of a stranger.

He sighed, suddenly realising how long he had been standing in silent meditation, and tried the passenger door. He had already wasted more than enough time wallowing in the past instead of taking action in the present to safeguard his future. His cell phone was still connected to the hands-free console. He hoped it was still in one piece and picking up a signal; he had no great wish to spend any longer than necessary stranded at the roadside and it certainly didn't appear as if a Good Samaritan was about to appear out of the deepening night to render any assistance.

The Southerner reached inside the drunkenly tilted vehicle and freed the phone from its cradle, relieved when it responded with a beep and the reassuring glow of the backlit LED screen.

His thumb moved across the keypad, dialling, and he closed his eyes, rubbing them with his free hand as he waited for a response. This was the one number he knew he could rely on for help. No questions asked. His own personal rescue service. Hell, at times his lifeline. A smile creased his lips as he heard the pick up on the other end and the familiar voice of Chris Larabee asking where the hell he was.

His voice held a slight tremor as he answered and he knew that it was more than the reaction to the crash. It was the overwhelming realisation that in accepting his place among these men he had found a true sense of family and one which had nothing to do with ties of blood. In the background he could hear the voices of Buck and JD, raised as usual in typical fashion as they argued good naturedly about something or other, Nathan and Josiah talking in low tones but their voices nonetheless soothingly familiar, and louder -- nearer -- Vin asking who the hell was on the phone. Chris' voice brought him back to the present with a jolt.

"Ezra?"

"I'm going to be late," he said softly, "I've had a slight accident....."

He surprised himself that he had not smoothly slipped into a long-winded and glib explanation but he was still too shocked to pretend he was anything other than just that. He answered Chris' questions, fired at him in a terse staccato over the airwaves, in monosyllables, then smiled as a few moments later Nathan's voice sounded in his ear. No, he wasn't hurt. Just a headache and a stiff neck. More probing questions until the medic was satisfied that he was telling the truth and the assurance that they would be there within the hour. He knew they would be. Every last one of them. He leaned against the car again and ended the call, letting his hand fall to his side.

No, he thought, this was by no means his worst birthday. It didn't even come close. This time he might be alone -- for now at least -- but loneliness didn't even enter into the equation. Before the night was through he could be sure that he would be back in Denver. With people he cared about and who, he had finally accepted, cared about him. Home. He sighed, staring up into the clear night sky and the millions of brilliant diamond-specks of light that hung overhead, and gave silent thanks that he was there to see it.