

No Tomorrows

Jean Graham

2000

Prologue:

Only one man stood at the graveside. Only one man had attended the simple service in the chapel and he alone mourned the loss of this human life. The man had been standing and looking at the grave marker now for almost twenty minutes, a solitary figure alone and lonely, immaculately dressed in Armani; Carl Zeiss mirrored sunglasses shielding his eyes. A headstone, the one he had chosen just yesterday, would eventually identify the place where she had been put to rest but for now a plain, unadorned marker stated her life and death in the starkest terms. Two words - a name; twelve numbers: Andrea Prentice 06.10.81 - 10.05.00. One life. With a sigh he threw the single rose he had been holding into the open grave.

"Bye Andie." A whisper.

He walked away and didn't look back.

The man barely noticed as someone fell into step beside him, he had almost forgotten that he had not come to this place alone, but he did feel the touch of an affectionate hand on his shoulder and took comfort from it.

"What do you want to do now, pard?"

"I have every intention of getting very, very, drunk."

The man squeezed his shoulder again, understanding, and ushered him into the waiting car.

"Let's go then."

ooOOoo

Chris Larabee, breath crystallising in the pre-dawn chill, raked the house with the infra-red binoculars for the sixth time in as many minutes, noting the seven motorcycles parked in front. *Correction - seven Harleys*. The black FXSTB Night Train soft-tail was there, a couple of choppers and even a 1980 Electra-Glide. He moved the lenses back to the house. No lights. No movement.

The house was unprepossessing, the fifth in a street of twenty; quiet, domesticated suburbia but set apart firstly by the fact that it was the property of the Coffin Cheaters biker gang and secondly by the fact that the double garage housed a thriving methamphetamine factory. Not ATF jurisdiction, which is why Larabee was taking orders from the DEA. This was their bust. Chris and the rest of his team were there because the factory had financed more arms deals than he cared to think about and because one of his men was in that house, and the house was about to be raided. Closed out. Shut down. Just one in a series of simultaneous busts across the city, but the others didn't concern him. He was there to make sure his man was

looked after, extracted painlessly and spirited away. Larabee looked again at the raid co-ordinator. Special Agent Peter Miller, DEA, up from Phoenix and a prize asshole in the ATF agent's humble estimation.

"Don't forget, Miller. One of my boys is in there. Don't want any mistakes if there's a dust up. I want to get him out clean."

The co-ordinator spared him a glance. "Oh, yeah. Deep cover right? Been on the inside for what? Eight or nine months? Heard your guy doesn't know which side of the line he's on any more."

Larabee controlled his inclination to rip the man's head off and spit down his neck. "I'll forget you said that, Miller." *For now.*

The agent heard the warning in Larabee's voice and wisely heeding it looked away. Chris returned to watching the house. Confirmed asshole! He knew too well, even if Miller didn't, the high price exacted from the undercover agents who ran with these operations. He raked his hand through his hair and breathed what might have been a sigh of relief. Thank God it was almost over. Sometimes he wished that it had never begun.

Nine months earlier

The conference table held the assorted paraphernalia of the seven agents interspersed with discarded coffee cups, powdered sugar, candy wrappers and left over food. The briefing had already been underway for three hours and was in the process of winding up but the room was in an uproar as five of the agents erupted almost simultaneously into uncontrollable laughter and catcalls. Larabee exchanged a weary look with the man on his immediate right and finally slammed the table with his open hand.

"Okay, boys. Joke's over!"

Silence descended almost in an instant but as usual Wilmington persisted long after the others had correctly read Larabee's mood and decided not to pursue the matter any further. "Chris, you can't be serious! Ezra? What about Vin, he's more the biker type."

Tanner raised an eyebrow not entirely sure if he was being complimented or criticised. Standish sat patiently folding a piece of paper into a complex shape, an island in the stream, while the tide of conflicting opinion ebbed and flowed around him.

"Vin doesn't have the undercover experience. This is not just playing bodyguard for a day, it's in deep for maybe months on end."

Wilmington still had no intention of letting it drop. “No, but at least he can ride a Harley and looks the part. Ezra looks like a goddamn banker not a biker.”

“That’s enough, Buck! Ezra goes in. Vin will be his contact.” He looked around the table at each man. “His *only* contact. The rest of you had better get used to forgetting that Ezra Standish ever existed. Okay, questions?”

He shot a warning glance at the mustached agent. There were none. The brief was locked up and locked in.

“Fine. That’s it then. Get.” The six agents started to pack up. “Ezra you stay.”

The undercover agent slipped his notes into his briefcase and snapped the locks shut, waiting for the other agents to leave, his expression unreadable. As the door closed behind the last man, Chris sat down again and picked up his pen, rolling it between his fingers.

“You cool with this one, Ezra? It’s not going to be easy, even with your experience.”

“It’s never easy, Mr. Larabee,” drawled the Southerner, “Do you have any doubt’s concerning my ability? Perhaps Mr. Wilmington has a point.”

“Shit, Ezra. If anyone can do it, it’ll be you. Hell, if I asked you to go in as a lap dancer you’d probably manage it somehow.”

Standish laughed in genuine amusement. “There are limits, Mr. Larabee, some things are beyond even my considerable talents.”

Chris’ smile faded. “This has nothing to do with your ability.”

“Then what?”

“It’s only two months since you came out from deep cover, now I’m sending you back in again and this time you’re going in so deep you’re gonna need scuba gear to breathe.”

Standish smiled. “Assuming I can get in.”

Chris looked evenly at the enigmatic agent. Designer suits and ten dollar words but the best undercover operative he had ever worked with, a consummate actor who could assume and discard a persona at will.

“Why do I think that’s not going to be a problem?” He smiled back. “Whatever Buck thinks, I know you can pull this off.”

Ezra stood up and drew his sunglasses out of his pocket.

“Just watch me.”

“You going to get tats, Ezra? You know, embrace the biker culture and all.”

Standish peered at Buck over his coffee and sighed. "Mr. Wilmington, I do not intend to be permanently disfigured by the application of a tattoo anywhere upon my person."

Buck laughed. The team were still getting used to the sight of an unshaven Standish, whom none of them had ever seen with as much as a five o'clock shadow let alone designer stubble.

"The most pristine biker you ever did see," he joked.

The Southerner sighed. "Oh, how little you know."

The moment he had opened his mouth he knew he should never have spoken. The comment was like a red rag to a bull, Buck latching on to the offhanded comment like a cruise missile, sensing some development that he could milk for as much mileage as possible. He moved to sit on the corner of Ezra's desk and put a heavy hand on his shoulder.

"Ezra. What are you not telling us?"

The undercover agent moved his chair back giving himself some room to manoeuvre, realising he had placed himself in an untenable situation. "Mr. Wilmington, I don't believe I am required to inform you of every detail of my cover for this operation."

The exchange had not gone unnoticed by the others and Ezra found himself suddenly surrounded by a speculative and very interested audience.

"If not tats," mused Buck, "then what?"

Vin moved in, knowing just how over the top Wilmington was likely to go if he was frustrated in his investigations for too long.

"For pity's sake Ezra tell him before he busts his britches tryin' to figure it out."

To the Texan's amusement the Southerner actually looked uncomfortable, but on the other hand Buck was poised like a hound on a blood trail.

"If you must know Mr. Wilmington, I allowed myself to be persuaded by Mr. Tanner that body piercing might be a suitable alternative to tattooing while still remaining part of the biker culture."

At the mention of body piercing Buck whooped and leaped from the desk, almost dancing with excitement. "Show and tell time, Ezra! Show and tell!"

Standish looked momentarily horrified. "Certainly not!"

The bigger man physically dragged Ezra from his chair and forced him across the desk while unceremoniously ripping open his shirt. To anyone who was unfamiliar with the seven it might have appeared as if Wilmington was about to engage in some nefarious sexual activity with the unfortunate Southerner but the bullpen was accustomed to such displays from Agent Wilmington and merely looked on in amusement. Ezra, resigned to his fate, immediately gave up the struggle as Buck

triumphantly exposed his chest and the silver ring, which had been inserted through the left nipple.

“Holy shit!” exclaimed the mustached agent, admiringly, ‘You really did it, Ez!”

J.D’s eyes were wide, amazed that the generally conservative agent had actually undergone something as radical as body piercing. Nathan merely shook his head.

Vin suddenly grinned mischievously. “And that’s not all...”

Ezra shot him an accusatory glare, a combination of malevolence and despair and struggled to stand up, pulling his shirt together and making an attempt to button it. As expected, Buck pounced like a dog on a rabbit.

“What? Belly button?”

“Please, Mr. Wilmington.” Ezra was still trying to gather the tattered shreds of his dignity together.

“Ain’t nowhere...” Buck’s eyes dropped, his mouth suddenly falling open as he made the right connections.

“Jesus, Ezra. You didn’t?”

Standish looked mortified as Wilmington howled with laughter. “Ow, that smarts!”

He took a threatening step forward and the Southerner reflexively clutched his belt. “No, Mr. Wilmington. The answer is, no!”

“Come on, Ezra. Let’s see.”

The commotion finally brought Chris Larabee out of his office. “What the hell is going on here?” He looked in confusion at Standish’s unkempt appearance, shirt only partially buttoned and tails hanging out untidily. “Ezra, why the hell are you half-undressed?”

Crowing triumphantly, Buck jumped up on the desk and threw his arms wide, drawing the attention of the entire office before he yelled. “Hey, listen up, folks! Ezra got his dick pierced!”

The Southerner sighed at the resultant round of applause and wolf-whistles and finished fastening his shirt.

“Thank you, Mr. Wilmington, but I do believe there were some residents of Maine who didn’t quite hear that announcement.”

ooOOoo

Ezra leaned against the window, arms above his head as his fingers hooked over the top edge of the frame, staring out into the darkness. The sky was just beginning to fade to grey on the eastern horizon and he knew that somewhere out there were dozens of agents ready to participate in a multi-agency raid on this very house; he also knew that somewhere out there were his friends and that shortly it would all be

over, and it would be as if the last nine months of his life had never been. Nine months of being someone else; living a lie so well that it almost became the truth. He heard a movement behind him but did not turn. Soft arms slid around his chest from behind and he felt the whisper of breath on his shoulder.

“Come back to bed, Eric. It’s too cold to be standing here.”

Questing fingers teased his nipple, toying with the silver ring that pierced the sensitive flesh. In spite of the fact, or maybe because of the fact, that he knew he was being watched he turned sideways and took the girl in his arms, kissing her deeply, tasting her, touching her before finally drawing her away from the window. He could see nothing but he would not take a chance that the teams might be compromised before the bust.

Eric. He had been Eric Sinclair for almost a year. He was no longer sure who Ezra Standish was. The girl pulled him down beside her and he responded, quickly covering her body with his own, suddenly eager to make love before it all ended. As he slowly moved his hands over the slim hips and small, firm breasts he wondered at the man he had become. The Ezra Standish he remembered would not have been screwing a nineteen-year-old girl in the last moments before his world came tumbling down around him. Then again maybe Eric knew something that he didn’t.

Miller had his own binoculars trained on the window that Larabee had been focusing on. “Lucky bastard,” he breathed, “Think he’ll get some before we rain on his parade?”

Larabee chose not to take the bait, after all Miller had no idea who he was looking at, but decided that the agent would have been surprised if he had said that he sincerely hoped so. “Wouldn’t surprise me. It’s more than I got today.”

Miller actually smiled.

“Me too. Good luck to him. Might be his last chance for a while. Pretty boy like that won’t last too long in jail before some hard-nosed gangbanger is reaming his ass.”

She was nineteen. Her name was Andie.

She had been a test. An offering. A temptation. For ten weeks he had been able to isolate himself from the rampant promiscuity that reigned in the gang, something that was as essentially a part of the culture he had entered as the ubiquitous Harley-Davidson. At first they had respected his choice, if only because he was too valuable to them for anyone to start messing with him. A prized asset. He was the Banker, and they needed the money he seemed to so effortlessly be able to procure for them. Initially his reluctance to help himself to anything on offer had been a source of

amusement, he had even been approached by several of the brotherhood who operated on AC/DC. Finally Bandit, the leader, had sent him Andie. A joke. A challenge. She had come to his room and with an intriguing combination of shyness and pragmatism, and without invitation had started to undress. He had been sitting on the edge of the bed, cleaning his gun and had watched half-amused as first the girl's t-shirt had been peeled off then her bra and both dropped to the floor. He had kept on cleaning the gun.

"You don't have to do this."

"Yes I do. Bandit said I had to."

He sighed, almost sadly, and put down the gun. "But I didn't."

For a moment she looked confused, then dropped to her knees in front of him genuinely frightened of the repercussions. She was young, she was new to the gang – fresh meat -- and she not expected to fail. Bandit said so.

"Please. I can't go back out there."

He shrugged. "Then stay."

She sat back on her heels, surprised, and looked at him as if he was a strange new breed of animal. "You really don't want to? How 'bout I just give you a bl..."

"No!" Even to his own ears his voice sounded strained. God he was tired of all this!

He remembered thinking how small her breasts were, how slim and childlike her body, but she was definitely not a child. She had reached out then and touched the silver ring on his bared chest, tracing around his nipple with a long fingernail, an innocent gesture which sent unexpected ripples of desire coursing through him. He had pulled away, suddenly afraid of his own reaction and she had laughed, quickly sliding into the V of his legs and leaning her forearms on his thighs.

"If I said I really wanted to be here would it make any difference?"

He had held onto her shoulders searching her face for any hint of deceit. "Andie. I am almost twice your age," he said gently, "You don't want to do this..." but his body wasn't paying attention and apparently neither was hers.

He had used her that first time, justifying what he did with his need to maintain his cover but knowing deep down that he was really answering a more basic need of his own. It had been a hasty coupling, urgent and loveless, but for a short time she filled a void. She had stayed, they had sought comfort in each other, driving back the aching loneliness and for one night at least, he had felt close to someone again.

ooOOoo

Vin had almost missed him. There had been no contact from Ezra in nearly three months and Tanner was beginning to think he had yet again been unable to make the drop. During his wait at the bar he had managed to avoid a fight, tactfully rebuff a proposition from a gay trucker and turn away two streetwalkers looking for a threesome. Next time, he swore, Chris could be the goddamn contact. An hour and several beers later he had gone to the men's room, wondering how long he could stretch the wait without drawing unwelcome attention to himself. He might look the part of a biker but he was affiliated with no gang and walked a fine line of tolerance from the others in the bar.

"Greetings Mr. Tanner."

Unnoticed, Ezra had followed him in and Vin managed to avoid peeing down his leg by the narrowest of margins.

"Jesus, Ezra," he whispered, "What in hell happened to you?"

The undercover agent made a quick but thorough check of the stalls and waited for Vin to finish and wash his hands. "Occupational hazard I'm afraid."

Ezra's beard and moustache were longer, still trimmed into a goatee style, but his hair was the longest Vin had ever seen it and it looked unwashed, something he had never seen on the Southerner. There were deep shadows under his eyes, he had dropped at least ten pounds and he looked unwell.

"Got time for a beer? Or is this it?" he gestured to the seedy washroom.

The undercover agent pulled a pack of cigarettes from his pocket and lit one with a disposable lighter, sucking the smoke deep into his lungs. "I can give you ten minutes." He suddenly smiled and stuck out his hand. "It's good to see you, Vin."

They found a booth near the window in the corner and Ezra slid into the rear seat facing the room, his eyes wary. Vin bought him a whiskey, thinking that from a distance he would never have recognised him. He noticed that the Southerner's hand trembled and that he was uncharacteristically fidgety. Warning bells were beginning to sound in his head and finally he reached out and covered Ezra's hand with his own, looking into the too bright green eyes in which the iris had almost disappeared.

"Fuck it, Ezra! You're amped?" His voice rose in alarm.

Ezra shrugged indifferently. "Like I said before. Occupational hazard. Mostly I either palm 'em or puke 'em but sometimes..." He shrugged his shoulders again.

Vin knew he was talking about being expected to take the drug he helped manufacture. Skitz, gak, crank, redneck heroin, meth -- amp by any other name was just as dangerous. No wonder Ezra looked wasted. In an instant his unease had turned to raw fear for his friend.

"Jesus, Ezra. Be careful."

Standish's face softened and he blew a jet of cigarette smoke into the air.
"Thanks, Vin."

"For what?"

"For giving a damn."

Tanner was finding it hard to come to terms with this person he thought he knew. Ezra was the cocky Southerner with a line of bullshit that could sell refrigerators to Eskimos, who thought nothing of wearing five thousand dollar suits and who had a penchant for fine wine and fast cars, not to mention money. This man was struggling to get a sentence together and was so strung out that Vin wondered if he shouldn't tell Chris to pull him out before they lost him altogether.

"Are you okay, Ezra? I mean, really okay?"

Ezra rubbed a hand through his hair then and took a drink, and in that moment the alter ego he had adopted seemed to fall away, shed like a skin he had suddenly grown out of.

"Certainly, Mr. Tanner. Might I enquire as to the welfare of my illustrious comrades?"

"Same as ever. We've been able to move in fast on the arms traders. Your info is spot on. Intell are loving it."

The wry smile again. "I'm gratified to know that my sacrifice is not in vain."

"Never thought I'd say this but we miss you, Ez. It's like drivin' in a car with only three wheels."

"Nice to know I wasn't just the fifth wheel then! Six months is along time in anyone's language, Vin, and I sincerely believe I am currently serving my penance in purgatory. I just hope the good Lord sees fit to take it off my sentence come Judgement Day."

Vin laughed at that, then became serious. They didn't have a lot of time for social pleasantries. "Got anything for me?"

Ezra flipped the pack of cigarettes on the table and jerked his head. "Names, dates and places. Should keep you busy for a while."

He crushed out his own cigarette and Vin noticed that the Southerner's hands and nails were still immaculate and for some reason that heartened him. He looked ruefully at his own which were currently rimmed with engine oil after doing battle with the Harley's spark plugs that morning. He nodded and pocketed the pack.

"See you in a month then."

Ezra gave him a mocking two fingered salute and leaned back into the corner of the booth as the Texan made his exit.

ooOOoo

Larabee watched the approaching daylight with increasing anxiety. The brighter it got, the greater chance of them being rumbled and he wondered how much longer Miller was going to wait. Stupid bastard was going to end up with a firefight on his hands if they were compromised and all the tear gas and stun grenades in the world weren't going to stop a few heads getting busted in the process. God, but he hoped it didn't come to that. He looked across to where Vin and Buck waited. Both studies in controlled agitation. He scrambled crab-wise over to them.

"By the time this cheese-dick moves in we'll have the whole freaking neighbourhood looking on," he complained bitterly and was surprised when Buck laughed.

"Another Waco, huh?"

Larabee frowned. "Jesus! Don't even joke about it, Buck. I don't really care if the whole fucking DEA crew gets wasted and takes half the goddamn Coffin Cheaters with them as long as the lead doesn't start flying in the wrong direction. Ezra didn't spend nine months gettin' sweet with this bunch to give them the information to bring this thing down, just for them to fuck it up!"

Wilmington put a hand on Chris' shoulder. "Why don't you tell him that." He gestured at Miller with a thumb.

Larabee looked as if he was just about to when the signal went up and the first wave moved in. "Here we go."

The three men moved into position hoping this was going to go by the numbers. A quick in and out job, bulk arrests and no one dead. Larabee almost groaned aloud when he heard the first gunshot.

"Hear that, boys. It's the sound of nine months of hard work going down the tubes."

Ezra knew there wasn't much time. That he should get up, leave the girl and get ready to get the hell out of there. Wasn't this what he had been waiting for? He wasn't particularly worried if he got rounded up with the others, he could tolerate being cuffed, getting roughed up a little, even spending a night in jail if necessary; he was more concerned about some overly-enthusiastic glory-seeker who might just get a little trigger-happy. He did not intend to get wasted at this stage of the game.

Andie moved slightly under him and he realised he had been woolgathering, his thoughts momentarily drifting from what he was supposed to be doing. He relaxed his arms and leaned down to kiss her -- an apology -- then gently disengaged and started to roll away to grab his jeans, not relishing the idea of being sprung on the job

when the balloon went up. He felt her hand on his back as he reached for his watch and slid it onto his wrist.

“Eric? What’s wrong?”

He froze for a moment, then swung his legs over the edge of the bed and in a quick movement pulled on his pants. “Nothing.” What was one more lie in a lifetime of lies? “Just gotta take a piss that’s all.”

She scooted across the bed and kneeled behind him resting her hands on his shoulders, kissing behind his ear, flicking his earlobe with her tongue.

“Don’t be long,” she breathed, “Got a surprise for you.”

Ezra finally pulled away and stood up, his smile a promise, before he padded across to the bathroom.

“Love you, babe.”

He closed the door behind him, feeling sick. Fuck! He had committed the cardinal sin of undercover work and become involved. Now it was all caving in around him and he would have to live with the consequences; the consequences of his own weakness. He had allowed someone to get too close and somewhere along the way the lines had blurred -- no, merged -- and not only had his own impartiality flown out of the window but worse, had been unfair and permitted Andie to think that there was something more than a physical attraction between them. More than an alternative to jacking off in the shower. To believe that he loved her. *But you do don’t you?* He had used her in the worst possible way and now the time had come, he felt sick for having allowed the charade to go on for so long. He was a government agent and she was just a tool in his work, a means to an end. He looked at himself in the mirror; a face he barely recognised and wondered if she would hate him when she realised just what he had done; how truly mercenary he was. In less than an hour Eric Sinclair would be a memory and Ezra Standish would make his return. Jesus, he wouldn’t even get a chance to say good-bye. Or explain. He leaned over the washbasin and splashed his face with cold water. Hell, how could he explain something that he didn’t understand himself?

Gunfire. A single shot.

His head snapped up, adrenaline suddenly pumping through his system and he burst out into the bedroom. Andie still kneeled, wide-eyed, on the bed the sheets pulled up over her breasts. She turned as the man she knew as Eric dashed to the side table and picked up his gun.

“Eric? What’s happening?” The fear was there.

He grabbed her arm and roughly pulled her onto the floor. “Andie, listen to me. Stay down and don’t move, okay? You’ll be okay.” She nodded and he planted a quick kiss on her lips. “Don’t worry I’ll be back.”

He ran out into the hallway, his heart hammering in his chest, and wondered if he was even telling her the truth.

ooOOoo

Tanner recognised the bike before he recognised the rider; after all he had picked out the Night Train soft tail for Ezra himself. It had thrown him at first that someone was riding pillion behind the undercover agent. Shit! What was he thinking bringing a chick to a meeting? Vin walked away from his own bike and hoped Ezra would take the hint and follow. They were in a picnic area just off the interstate and the Texan headed to towards the rest rooms. Jesus, but he was sick of meeting in public toilets with their all-pervading stink of stale piss! Standish arrived not too long after but long enough for Tanner to have checked the two stalls.

“Vin.” A greeting.

The Texan nodded his own quick reply and launched straight into a protest. “You crazy or somethin’, Ezra? You want this to blow up in your face?”

The undercover agent’s smile was maddening. “My dear, Vin. Calm yourself. A mere decoration I assure you and a necessity for any self-respecting Coffin Cheater.”

Tanner moved to the door and looked out. “So, who is she?”

“No-one,” remarked Ezra dismissively, “Just part of the cover.”

Vin shook his head and then smiled. “Jesus, Ezra. Is she even legal? Looks like jail bait to me.”

“Never fear, Mr. Tanner, I shall not be adding statutory rape to my catalogue of misdeeds.”

“Glad to hear it. How’s it going? Chris had a fit when he found out you were using.”

“You told him?” Quiet censure.

Vin looked guilty. “I told him I thought we should bring you out.”

“Your concern is touching, Mr. Tanner, but misplaced I assure you. Quite obviously Mr. Larabee saw fit to ignore your suggestion.”

“You want to know what he said?” He laughed. “That I wasn’t your mother and that you were capable of looking after yourself but that if you kept it up he’d personally whip your ass the next time he saw you.”

“You may inform Mr. Larabee that I consider myself duly chastised.”

Vin looked appraisingly at his colleague. “You look a lot better, Ez. Still need to gain a few pounds though.”

Standish dug into his pocket and tossed a key in Tanner's direction. "Address is on the tag. You might be interested in what some people are putting into storage these days."

Vin peered at the faded tag. "Ezy-Stor?"

"That's all I've got this time but I'm sure Mr. Larabee will be extremely happy." He lit a cigarette. "I trust the Jaguar is still in one piece?"

Vin had been charged with taking care of Ezra's pride and joy while he was on assignment. "Think I'd tell you if it wasn't," the lean Texan joked, then seeing the fleeting anxiety in the Southerner's eyes took pity. "It's fine. I take it for a spin once a week, run it through the Wash and Go and put it back to bed."

Standish almost moaned. "A car wash, Mr. Tanner, surely...?" The objection died on his lips and he dropped his gaze. "Thank you."

Ezra jumped as he heard the horn on the Harley start in short, insistent bursts and Vin patted his arm. "Better go. She's gettin' suspicious."

"It's okay, she thinks I'm dealing." He threw a baggie of crystal at the Texan. "Here, better take this."

"Thanks. Just make sure you don't."

Ezra flashed a wide smile showing his gold tooth. "Yes, mother." And he was gone.

Vin spent a long time looking at the plastic bag in his hand and didn't leave until he heard the other bike start up and roar out of the picnic area.

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Chris swore as he got near the house. Bikers, some armed, were boiling out of the house and he could hear shrill screams from inside. Someone had lobbed a stun grenade into the living room increasing the panic and confusion, and the yard was alive with DEA, ATF and SWAT teams. He swept around the back with Vin and Buck close behind muttering under his breath but loud enough for them both to hear: "What a fucking circus!"

Shots were being exchanged in earnest and Larabee was glad he was wearing a vest but he had seen one of the bikers carrying an AK-40 and the kevlar he had around him sure as hell wasn't going to stop that kind of shit. All he wanted out of this whole deal was to find his man and avoid being shot in the process.

He knew where Ezra had been, he just couldn't be sure that he'd still be there although if he had any sense he would have just kept his head and his ass down and waited it out. He kicked open the back door and a naked girl crashed into his chest trying to escape the madness. He let her go, let someone else deal with it, and heard

Buck whisper to Vin: "Think I should go after her and search her for concealed weapons?" Trust Buck. He pushed through the kitchen surprised that there had not been more resistance, but the DEA and SWAT guys were sewing things up in short order. Maybe Miller hadn't been such a bad guy after all. He checked in the rooms along the hall, heard rights being read, lots of abuse from the bikers, cuffs closing on unrepentant and vociferous perps, saw lots of skin both male and female but no Ezra. Vin and Buck paused to talk to one of the DEA guys, Chris pressed on to the last room and hoped to God that Standish was there. The chilling alternative was to start checking the body bags. He stopped in the doorway. Miller was there trying to subdue a stray biker -- and losing. Why did that not surprise him? The DEA agent was struggling and although the guy was already cuffed Miller delivered a couple of short, sharp, vicious blows to the kidneys before slamming the biker's head against the wall. Chris' breath caught in his throat as the biker turned suddenly towards him and he found himself looking into familiar emerald green eyes. Ezra.

Ezra out of control, fighting for all he was worth, his breath forced out in ragged sobs as he tried to throw the bigger man off. Chris had no idea what was going on but whatever it was, he knew Miller was well and truly out of line, even if his target hadn't been Ezra. He moved in.

"I'll take him."

Miller looked up, sweating, furious and with no intention of giving up his prize although he could barely keep a hold on him.

"I said, he's mine."

The agent stepped back, understanding the don't-fuck-with-me tone, truth dawning. "This is your guy?" He grabbed Ezra by the shoulder in disgust and almost threw him at Chris. "Jesus! Told you he didn't know which side of the line he was on! Fucking maniac drew a gun on me!"

Ezra lunged forward, his eyes filled with murderous rage and Chris hauled him back surprised at his behaviour. If he was keeping in character he was doing a damned good job of it. Larabee jerked his head at Miller, an indication that he should leave and the sooner the better.

"Ezra! Stop it! It's Chris. It's okay."

But it was obviously not okay because Chris found trying to keep a grip on the Southerner was like trying to wrestle an enraged bull. Standish was over the edge and he doubted that anything he said was getting through. Chris already had his arms around the undercover agent's upper body from behind and he was obliged to increase the power of his grip as Ezra continued to fight like a man possessed. Fuck! But he was strong. Like trying to hold onto a greased pig.

“Ezra! Ease up!” His voice was sharp. A command. “It’s over. For Christ’s sake, ease up!”

“Chris?” Buck ran in with Tanner hot on his heels both pumped but still controlled. “Miller said...”

“Jesus, Buck. Can you give me a hand here?”

Wilmington holstered his gun and joined Larabee, grabbing Standish’s shoulders and turning him around as Chris stepped back. There was madness in his eyes and for a moment Chris wondered if he was amped. He finally sighed and drew back his fist. “Sorry, Ez.”

The blow landed squarely on the smaller man’s jaw with a crack, rocking his head back and if Buck had not been there to catch him he would have collapsed and hit the floor. The light went out of his eyes and he sagged bonelessly, at last subdued. Larabee breathing hard, sucked briefly on skinned knuckles and grabbed Ezra by the chin lifting his head up. “Fuck it, Ezra! Why’d you make me do that?”

Vin’s voice, soft and sad, penetrated Chris’s anger. “Aw, hell. I think this might have something to do with it.”

He gestured to the floor on the other side of the bed. Larabee strode across, leaving Buck to support the groggy Southerner. He stopped abruptly in his tracks. A girl. Nice looker. Nude, partly covered by a bed sheet. Centre shot. Very dead. He looked up at the window and remembered with startling clarity the earlier scene. Ezra and the girl.

“Shit!” He raked his hand through his hair and looked across at the undercover agent. “Shit!”

Dredging a sigh that seemed to come from the soles of his feet Larabee walked back to where Buck still supported the now compliant agent. Swallowing past the constriction in his throat he released the cuffs and took up position on the opposite side to Buck, lending his own strength to keep the Southerner on his feet.

“Come on, Ezra. Let’s go home.”

oooOOOooo

She was dead. However many times he replayed the scene in his head she was still dead. And the void that she had filled so briefly was back, a hole in his soul so deep and so wide that he thought it would consume him.

He had little recollection of what had happened after seeing Andie stand up when he came back into the room, and seeing the shock on her face as the bullet had ripped into her chest. He had said he would be back and he had lived up to his promise. If he had stayed away she would probably still be alive to at least hate him.

His throat tightened again and he swallowed with difficulty, determined not to give in again. The agent that had tried to arrest him had also tried to kill him. For some reason he had fixated on him and was about to shoot him in the back when Andie had stood up and screamed a warning. Ezra's quick reflexes had saved him – but they had killed her. She had made no sound. He had seen her stagger back, seen the red bloom of heart blood on the sheet she still held in front of her, and had watched her die. Ten seconds. End of story. He already had his gun in his hand so he had turned and taken aim. He could have killed or he could have been killed. Neither had seemed very important but something had stopped him before he completed the pull on the trigger and he had thrown his gun down. Looking back he thought that in that instant, he had wanted the agent to fire again. To get it over with. But instead he had been cuffed like a felon and had his rights read to him by the bastard who had just killed a nineteen year old girl whose only crime had been to be there. The next he remembered was seeing Chris Larabee loom in front of him and a fist exploding in his face.

He had finally come to again in his own house -- a house that felt as if it belonged to someone else -- sprawled on a lounge which felt altogether too good to have a scruffy biker like Eric Sinclair lying on it. For a split second he had wondered if his boots had marked the leather before the horror of what had happened flooded back in full force and he had lain back, too shocked to move, his eyes pricking with unshed tears.

Larabee had stayed. He had made him shower although everything he did was in a numbed haze of such terrible aching sorrow that he found it hard to put one foot in front of the other and to speak was a feat too difficult to even contemplate. There were no words left to say. Chris had even shaved him and he had not objected. At the time he wondered if Chris did not trust him with the straight-edge razor, but when he had then carefully taken out the nipple ring he believed he was just trying to resurrect the man he knew as Ezra Standish.

It was Chris Larabee's fault. They had drunk what seemed to be endless cups of coffee and Chris had started talking. So it had been Chris' fault that he had given in, that he had given up on trying to uphold the already crumbling facade and allowed himself to give vent to the emotions that were steadily choking him.

“What was her name, Ezra?” Quietly probing.

It was so hard to say but he forced it out. “Andie.”

“Vin said he saw her once. You brought her to a meet.”

He nodded. One of the few days they'd had alone together. Good times. "Said she was jail bait." A sound that was part way between a laugh and a hiccupping sob escaped.

"I saw you with her. At the window this morning."

This morning? Christ, was it only that long ago. He rubbed a hand across his eyes.

"Knew you were watching. Just flippin' you the bird." Eric. That was Eric talking.

There was silence for a moment.

"You want me to shut the fuck up? Would you rather I go? For Christ's sake, Ezra, say something." Not angry, just frustrated.

He brought his head up and swallowed hard before finally forcing out the words. "What am I supposed to say, Chris? That I broke my own rules? Got involved with a mark. That I fell in love with a nineteen year old girl, who's dead because of me? How's that for a conversation opener, Mr. Larabee."

Chris leaned forward.

"It's a start. You want to blame yourself? Hey, go ahead I won't stop you. If there's not a big enough hole inside you already, guilt will sure as hell finish the job 'till you got nothin' left at all." He stopped and his voice took on a soft, almost melancholy timbre. "I know all about it, Ezra. I've been there. But I'll tell you somethin' for nothing - it won't bring her back. Ever." He moved from his seat to sit beside Ezra on the sofa. "And no matter how much it hurts now to think about it, ain't nothin' going to change that." Chris hesitated for just a moment then put his arm around Ezra's shoulders his grip almost painful. "Hell, Ezra. If you want to yell, break something, take a swing at me, get drunk, trash the place, I don't care. Just don't keep it all inside."

He didn't.

He didn't ever remember crying before either. At least not since he was a very young child. He had spent an entire lifetime schooling his emotions, controlling every nuance of expression until he could sometimes fool even himself. Only this time his control had forsaken him completely. His carefully constructed shell that had always protected him turned out to be as fragile as crystal and had shattered into a million pieces finally pierced by an emotion he had never before truly experienced - sorrow. First the anger, then the incredible sense of loss and finally the tears. Ezra Standish had cried. And once he had started, he couldn't stop. Hot, blinding tears, an outpouring of his grief that he thought would never end.

Chris knew what it was like. He also knew that Ezra had to work his way through the conflicting emotions that were currently tearing him apart, in his own way and in his own time. When his wife and son had died his own reaction had been violent in

the extreme but eventually he too, faced with the huge emptiness in his heart and the painful reality of their loss, had cried. Then he had gotten drunk and for three days he had existed in an alcoholic haze, the only way he knew to anaesthetise his feelings. If Buck hadn't been there he guessed he would have killed himself one way or another before he came out of the other side and learned to go on -- alone. But it was no good telling Ezra that now; that life would go on and he would go on with it. Now he just needed someone to be there, to pick up the pieces and help put them back together.

Chris did not relax his hold on the younger man until the Southerner's shoulders had stopped heaving and he felt the tension slowly drain out of him. He gave the man an affectionate pat on the back and stood up, knowing from experience that he would be embarrassed to have had someone witness his grief. He busied himself at the wet bar and heard Ezra get up and go into the bathroom. Pouring a shot of whiskey he tossed it down without it touching the sides and felt the burning warmth of the fiery alcohol hit his stomach. Jesus, this was hard!

Ezra came back some fifteen minutes later, composure regained, defences hastily reconstructed, dignity patched and resurrected. He coughed apologetically and took his place on the sofa again. "Sorry."

Chris handed over a generous measure of scotch in a cut glass tumbler and dropped with a heavy sigh next to his colleague and friend, a glass in his own hand. "Ezra, you can believe me when I say I really do know just how you feel."

The Southerner rolled the glass between his palms for a moment then turned his still reddened eyes on the older man. "Then you, Mr. Larabee, have my deepest sympathy. I don't think I ever before completely understood the true nature of your loss."

Chris quickly took a drink and swallowed the lump rising in his throat along with the whiskey. Shit, he didn't need those memories now. "It's a hard lesson, Ezra. One I wouldn't wish on anyone."

Standish drank the scotch in one draught, grimacing at the raw taste of the alcohol but accepting a refill nonetheless. He leaned back and allowed his head to drop against the back of the chesterfield staring up at the ceiling. "You know, I've asked myself a hundred times, why?" He rubbed one hand along the seam of his jeans, unable to keep still. "Do you believe in fate, Chris?"

Chris refilled his own glass. "If you mean do I think that everything is pre-ordained, that Andie was supposed to die, that her time was up, no. I think that some stupid trigger-happy fuck made a mistake and that she paid for it."

"If I hadn't moved when she..." his voice became thick again and he stopped, afraid to continue.

“Ezra, don’t do it. Don’t second guess. Don’t try the trade-off. You can’t change things.”

“Six months. I only knew her for six months, Chris. So why...why does it....?” His voice dropped to a whisper and his eyes filled again.

Larabee set his drink down and leaned forward, gripping the Southerner’s arm and completing for him what he couldn’t say for himself. “Hurt so damned much? Hell, six days, six month, six years -- makes no difference. It’s what you feel in here.” He struck his chest. “And sometimes it’s gonna hurt so much you’ll want to curl up and die.”

“That’s how you felt?”

“Fuck, Ezra! That’s how I still feel when the mood comes on me. But mostly you learn to live with it.” He squeezed his arm again before letting go. “You live with it or you give up, and if you give up you might as well take your gun right now and blow your fucking brains out.”

He stopped suddenly, appalled at what he’d just said, but Ezra merely smiled. A tight, self-deprecating smile but nonetheless a smile. “Never fear, taking my own life is not something I am likely to contemplate but I take it that was an option you considered?”

“I’m sorry, Ezra. I shouldn’t have said that.” He laughed bitterly. “Great friend, huh?”

Ezra raised his head again, green eyes focusing intently on the man beside him. “Yes indeed, Mr. Larabee. You are.”

oooOOOooo

Chris Larabee picked the report that had arrived on his desk that morning and stared again at the close printed lines of text before throwing it back down and pushing himself away from the desk.

“Jesus wept.”

He felt crappy. No two ways about it. He was tired and angry and hung-over, and now this. With difficulty he suppressed the overwhelming urge to smash his fist through the very window that he was looking out of and instead turned made an agitated circuit of the desk digging his hands deep into his pockets. His eyes wandered back to the report, printed on the letterhead of the Coroner’s office, but no matter how many times he looked at it he knew it didn’t change anything.

“FUCK!” An expression of frustration and rage that he vented in a shout.

“Chris?”

Larabee's head jerked up at the voice. Tanner, head poked round the door to his office.

"Is everything okay?"

Chris ran a hand through his hair and silently waved the Texan in with a deep, troubled sigh.

"Not okay, then," observed the marksman, carefully closing the door behind him. "Something I can do?"

"Sit down, Vin."

Larabee dropped into his own chair and slid the offending sheets of paper, the source of his agitation, across to Tanner. Vin doubtfully picked them up.

"What's this?" He scanned the heading.

"Autopsy report on Andrea Prentice."

"Ezra's girl?"

"Read it."

The Texan skimmed over the report wondering what he was looking for. Larabee prompted him.

"Second last paragraph, page two."

Vin flipped the page, scanned. Stopped. Blue eyes wide as they looked back to the man behind the desk.

"Goddamn." It was a breathed rather than spoken. "She was..."

"Ten weeks pregnant."

Chris watched him flip the page again. He had done the same. Making sure there hadn't been some error that would make the reality go away.

"You know, he doesn't need this right now, Chris."

Larabee threw the pen he had been holding across his desk, more forcefully than he had intended. "Tell me about it."

"So what're you going to do?"

Chris was silent for a moment, then looked straight at the Texan, a challenge in his flinty blue-grey eyes.

"I'm not going to do anything. I'm going to lose this report. I don't want Ezra to ever see it, to ever know, to ever have to deal with it, okay?"

Vin put the report back on Larabee's desk. "Who else knows about it?"

"So far? Me, the Coroner and whoever typed the report."

"And now me." He crossed his legs, right ankle resting on left knee. "Thanks a lot for sharing." His sarcasm was not lost on Chris. "Don't you think Ezra might want to know? Has a right to know?"

“What do you take me for? I’ve been wrestling with that all morning, Vin. But what purpose would it serve? I just don’t think he can handle it; handle knowing he was going to be a father to a baby girl.”

“I’m not sure that it’s your call to make, Chris.”

“I’m making it my call! This report is going to disappear. I don’t want Ezra to ever find out. To have to know that kind of pain.”

Vin rubbed his face. “Jesus, Chris. I don’t know.”

“Vin, I’ve just spent a day and a night with a man who’s already had his heart ripped out of him. You want to try for his soul as well?” His voice dropped. “You want to see him totally destroyed?”

Tanner stood up. “Alright if that’s what you want. He’ll not hear it from me but all the same I wish you hadn’t told me. That’s one secret I could’ve lived without knowing.” He put his hand on the door knob but turned back. “You know Chris, sometimes you just gotta let ‘em roll with the punches, you can’t take on board everyone else’s pain.”

“You’re wrong this time, Vin. ‘Cos that’s just what I’m going to do.”

oooOOOooo

The fingers started at his shoulder and traced a path down his back, his flank, his thigh, the touch bringing him out of sleep as it crossed his belly and moved up his body to his chest, seeking out the sensitive spots that would force a response and bring him to arousal. He turned lazily and her mouth hungrily captured his lips.

“You sleep too much,” she accused, then mocking: “Are you getting too old for this?”

“Much too old,” he murmured, sighing as her mouth moved lower and her tongue flicked the silver ring that pierced his chest before continuing its exploratory journey down the length of his body.

She laughed and moved to straddle his hips having tormented him to the point of distraction with her tongue and lips. “See, you’re awake now.”

She squealed as he bucked and flipped her over, pinning her with his body to the bed.

“You know what they say about waking the sleeping giant.”

She moved beneath him grinding her hips against his. “No, what do they say?”

He paused to kiss her, exploring her, tasting her. “I don’t remember, but let’s see what happens now you’ve wakened this one...”

“Ezra!”

No.

“Ezra. Come on. Wake up. It’s eight o’clock.”

Noooo!

He lifted his head from the pillow, his hand still clutching the empty space next to him and the sense of loss which sleep had temporarily kept at bay came flooding back, waves of despair crashing against the already battered rock of his psyche.

“Chris.”

Rubbing his face he sighed. Nothing had changed and Andie was just a memory but, God! it had been so real. He rolled out of bed and staggered to the bathroom. This was going to be a long day. The worst day of his life. No, not the worst -- that had been three days ago. The second worst then.

“I’ve rustled up some breakfast, don’t be long.”

He almost laughed aloud. Chris Larabee: mother hen! It would have been amusing if it hadn’t been so touching. Jesus, he would have fallen apart if Larabee had not been there to prop him up. Hell, he’d fallen apart anyway but at least Chris had been standing by with the duct tape and superglue to patch him back up again. The last few days had been a colourless blur and he knew that not only Chris, but also the rest of the team had gone out of their way to smooth the way for him. They had understood.

Today he went through all the motions like an automaton: showered, shaved, ate breakfast, drank coffee, made conversation, marked time until he had to make that last, most painful excursion and say his last goodbye. He dressed carefully. The charcoal grey Armani, hand-stitched shirt from his supplier in New Orleans, Tim Little shoes, Sumina tie. With a sigh he slipped on the designer sunglasses completing the picture and studied his reflection in the mirror for a long moment. Andie would not have recognised him. He wondered if she would have still loved him. He would never know.

oooOOOoo

Chris handled the Jaguar well, cutting through the city traffic with practiced ease. In the passenger seat Ezra sat quietly, sunglasses still in place, a defensive shield, wrapped in his own grief. Ezra wanted to get drunk -- Chris knew just the place and the way he was feeling he just might get drunk with him. The Coroner’s report still weighed heavily with him and the more he thought about it the more he wondered if he was being fair to Ezra. God damn Vin! Where did he come off being everybody’s fucking conscience! He glanced at the subdued Southerner and decided that getting smashed seemed like a very good idea indeed. If he was going to tell him, and it was as yet by no means certain that he would, he was going to need all the courage he

could muster - Dutch or otherwise. Larabee swung the big car into the parking area and killed the engine. Only then did Ezra raise his head and take stock of their surroundings. He looked questioningly at Chris.

“Inez’s?”

Chris smiled. “Might as well be among friends, Ezra. Unless you’d like to go to the Snake Pit.”

The undercover agent inclined his head and a wan smile appeared on his face at Chris’s reference to one of the Coffin Cheater’s haunts, one of his -- no Eric’s -- old haunts. “Not quite the same calibre of friends drink at that particular establishment I fear.”

Chris slapped a heavy down on his shoulder and offered a smile in return. “Let’s get down to business then.”

Chris Larabee thought he knew the inside of a bottle pretty well, he’d seen enough of them in his time, but Ezra was certainly no slouch when it came to putting the drinks away. The Southerner, it turned out, had a prodigious capacity for liquor, which would have seen other men in an alcoholic stupor in half the time. Chris finally stopped trying to match Ezra once the mellow mood he had slipped comfortably into threatened to become something much darker. At that point he settled on nursing the one drink, occasionally accepting a top up but content to sit it out until Ezra either decided he’d had enough or, as was more likely, got falling down drunk and had to be carried out.

They talked -- idle chatter -- nothing of great import; two guys shooting the breeze. Chris knew the rules well enough not to break them; Ezra would get round to serious talking when he was ready. Chris was chewing over his own dilemma, trying to wrestle it into submission when the Southerner finally looked up.

“You know what’s really stupid? It was our last day anyway. I would have gone back to being me and she would have stayed being her, hating me for being someone she thought she knew and found she didn’t.” He paused. “Does that even make sense?”

“Not really, but I know where you’re coming from.”

“I would have been extracted, spirited away and Eric Sinclair would have been history. And you know I could have done it. Would have done it because it was necessary. I would have followed procedure and walked away.”

“That’s your job, Ezra.”

“And it’s what I’m really good at, isn’t it? Charades. Being someone I’m not. Fucking people over. Suckering the marks until I’ve used them up and then just walking away.”

“It’s necessary.”

Standish swallowed another shot of twelve year old bourbon. “You know, it never bothered me before. Move in, do the job, move out, move on. Easy. Except sometimes I don’t know who the hell I am anymore!”

Chris knew what he was talking about. The stress of assuming another persona, living someone else’s life for weeks or months on end, always at risk of discovery, walking a fine line where one misstep could mean a bullet in the brain. Ezra was one of the best, but the cracks were beginning to show and he wondered if this might not be the end for the Southerner as an undercover operative.

“Ezra. You need some down time. It’s been a long year.”

“You know in the last twelve months I’ve been Ezra Standish for just six weeks.” He laughed. “Kind of easy to forget who you are. And you know what? Sometimes I think I’d like to forget who I am because I don’t always like the man I’ve become.”

Chris poured another whiskey for each of them, slightly shocked at the Southerner’s degree of self-loathing and making a mental note to make sure Ezra was assigned no more deep cover for the next twelve months. The guy was starting to lose it in a big way.

“You did good, Ezra. Because of you we were able to stitch up a half a dozen meth labs across the city, close off some of the arms trade and make a shit-load of arrests.”

Standish sighed and buried his head in his hands. “And I’d be happy to let the whole fucking lot go if I could just get that ten seconds back.” He looked up again. “Ten seconds, Chris. That’s all it took.”

Chris had no answer. There was nothing he could say. For several minutes there was silence and Ezra knocked back a couple more shots in rapid succession.

“I wouldn’t have said goodbye. No, sir. Not in the plan.” Chris noticed he was starting to slur his words and that his mood was becoming dark and dangerous. Again the unpleasant laugh. “Just screw the ass off her and go.”

The older man closed his eyes. Jesus, Ezra was going the whole hog tonight, self-destructive and bitter, he was deliberately opening up wounds just to feel the pain of them bleeding afresh.

“That’s crap, Ezra. I know that’s not you talking.”

The Southerner stood up, knocking the bottle over and leaning menacing over the table. “Then who the fucking hell is it, Mr. Larabee! Tell me that. Who am I?”

Other patrons turned as Ezra’s raised voice cut through the conversation and Chris stood up, signing quickly to Inez. He knew she would call Vin and the others at his signal and he had a feeling he was going to need all the backup he could get tonight. He grabbed Ezra’s shoulder and pushed him back into his seat, keeping the

pressure on and thankful they were in a booth. He didn't want to have to pop the Southerner again; he still sported a faint bruise on his chin from the last time.

"Come on, man. Ease up. Ease up." Ezra sat slowly down, his chest heaving but in control and Chris breathed again, picking up the bottle and setting it upright ignoring the pooling bourbon on the table. "You didn't do anything wrong, Ezra. You just fell in love." He looked keenly at the younger man, and when he spoke again his voice was filled with compassion. "You did love her didn't you?"

Ezra folded, seeming to collapse in on himself, and covered his face with his hands, his voice a hoarse whisper, a confession dredged from the depths of his soul. "Dear God, yes!"

Larabee's own expression took on one of infinite sadness, not knowing how the distraught Southerner would take what he was going to say but now knowing he had to say it anyway. Vin was right. Ezra had a right to know.

"Ezra. There's something I have to tell you. Something I should have told you before."

The green eyes speared him, waiting, expectant.

"Hell, I wasn't going to say anything but," he paused to drink the last of his whiskey, a momentary reprieve, "I got the autopsy report yesterday on Andie."

The eyes dropped a moment and Chris knew without a doubt that Ezra was imagining the savage cuts that had exposed Andie to the medical examiner's scrutiny, then he was faced with the steady stare again.

"And?"

Of course there was the 'and' otherwise why would he be mentioning it.

"I wish there was an easy way to say this but she was pregnant, Ezra. Ten weeks." He looked away as the words made the thing real, not wanting to meet the younger man's eyes but equally afraid not to.

Ezra's face had drained of all colour and his hands were gripping the edge of the table with such force that Chris could see the tremor in them, then the Southerner slowly stood up and Larabee knew without a shadow of a doubt that Ezra was going to hit him -- and that he didn't blame him one bit.

Chris was stunned by the ferocity of the attack. His head snapped back as Ezra's fist connected solidly with his chin and he tasted coppery blood filling his mouth from where he had bitten his tongue. When a second punch closed his left eye before he could react and the heel of Ezra's hand striking his chest almost stopped his heart he knew he was in trouble. He had a good two, maybe three inches on the younger man but the Southerner was solidly built and Chris had forgotten how good he was in a fight. He was learning the hard way. He didn't remember getting out of the booth but

the next thing he knew was that the two of them were crashing through tables and slugging it out in earnest -- and that he was losing. He doubled over as a straight-fingered jab caught him low in the abdomen and waited for Ezra to finish him off but he suddenly found himself in clear air, his blood thundering in his ears as he staggered unsteadily to a chair, retching and drooling blood and saliva onto the floor.

Someone had hold of him, forcing him to sit down and he looked up into a familiar face. Vin, down on one knee in front of him, holding a wad of napkins to his bleeding mouth. The Texan looked sympathetic but shook his head slowly. "Guess you told him, huh?"

Chris squinted through his one good eye past Tanner. "Ezra?" He could barely get the word out.

Vin patted his shoulder. "It's okay. Nathan's just given him a shot; knocked him out in five seconds flat. Took Josiah and Buck to get him off you though."

Chris stood up still guarding his tender stomach and not quite steady on his feet. "Take him home." He wiped blood from his chin with the already saturated napkins and leaned on the Texan. "Hell, take me home."

Vin dipped his shoulder under Chris's arm and hooked his fingers under his belt.

"Sure thing, Cowboy."

oooOOOooo

An insistent, vaguely annoying voice penetrated his consciousness and he wanted whoever it was to go away and shut up. The drone continued, words forming at last to make sense. He groaned. He wasn't interested in the weather and didn't much care that he was listening to KBPI FM. Goddamn alarm clock! His hand reached out, blindly fumbling for the off switch and killed the intrusive noise while wondering when exactly he had been driven over by a train. No, not a train -- a juggernaut by the name of Ezra Standish. Shit! He sat up, cursing as new areas of pain revealed themselves. No doubt about it he had been well and truly creamed.

Larabee studied himself in the bathroom mirror and decided that in spite of how he felt, he was fit to go out in public without frightening small children. His left eye was puffy and bruised -- Ezra certainly had a killer left hook -- and his mouth was still throbbing. He pulled down his bottom lip to inspect the damage; two neat punctures where his teeth had gone through the sensitive mucosa. Son of a bitch.

"Pretty as a picture.'

Chris glanced up in the mirror and addressed Tanner's reflection. "Very funny. What are you doing here?"

The Texan leaned casually on the door jamb. "Couldn't just dump you and run, Cowboy. Just in case you don't remember it was me that put you to bed. Me and Nathan stayed over just to keep an eye on things."

Chris leaned on the washbasin and sighed heavily. "How's Ezra?"

"Looks a sight better than you. Though you musta landed a few of good ones 'cos he's sporting a coupla decent bruises himself." He grinned. "You boys sure know how to fight dirty."

Chris straightened and crossed to the shower, turning on the faucet as he dropped his boxers to the floor. "Is that was I was doin'? Shit, and I thought I was just getting my ass whipped." Stepping under the jets of hot water he let the warmth soothe away some of his aches, then found more as he soaped himself. "Is he okay?"

"Still sleeping. Nathan reckons that's what he needs most."

Chris rinsed the soap out of his hair. "It's what happens when he wakes up that I'm worried about."

Vin moved further into the room and sat down on the edge of the bathtub. "What did he say when you told him?"

"Say?" He laughed bitterly at the recollection. "He didn't say anything. Looked like I'd driven a stake through his heart then...well, you know the rest."

"It was the right thing to do, Chris."

Larabee savagely turned off the water, abruptly ending his shower, and wrapped a towel around his waist. "Yeah? I'm beginning to wonder."

"These things have a way of coming back to bite you in the ass, Chris. Say you didn't tell him, then he finds out somehow in a week, a month or even a year what then?"

Chris towelled his hair more vigorously than necessary. "I don't know, Vin! Right now, any option looks better than this."

Tanner shook his head, "No, pard. You're wrong. This was your only option. The right one and you know it. Besides I reckon you'll find Ezra's stronger than you think."

Chris raised his eyebrows still unconvinced and rubbed his abdomen, still tender from Ezra's vicious attack. "Damn right!"

Ezra did not want to be awake. Being awake meant thinking, feeling, remembering -- none of which he wanted to do, but none of which he could avoid. His last memory was of being wrestled to the floor, still fighting. He remembered swinging at Buck and then Nathan sticking him with a hypodermic. Probably a good thing. Jesus! He had hit Chris. He looked at his bruised and skinned knuckles feeling ashamed for having shot the messenger. He rolled to sit up on the edge of the bed

and cradled his head in his hands, the why of it coming back to him in a rush. He felt suddenly sick. A baby? His baby. Fragments of memory came flooding back, clues finally making sense. *I've got a surprise for you.* He had missed the all signs, the subtle changes in her body that now seemed so obvious. He closed his eyes. Obvious to someone who gave a damn. And now -- nothing. He got up and let the covers fall to the floor, inadvertently trailing the sheet after him as he stumbled to the bathroom to throw up. No tears this time. Just a bigger emptiness than ever before.

The clothes were still in his wardrobe. He dressed with the same care and attention he had the day before but this time the designer labels were gone. Instead he pulled on the faded and worn jeans, the sleeveless t-shirt, the well-worn leather vest and the scuffed boots - clothes that fit him like a second skin. He hefted the solid key chain in his hand and walked out of the bedroom, circumventing the living room from which the murmur of familiar voices drifted and silently leaving the house by the back door.

The bike stood forlornly at the foot of the driveway, a tenuous connection to another life; a painful reminder of what had been. He rocked the Harley off its kickstand and straddled the seat, pausing in sad reflection and allowing the memories to wash over him -- the good times -- then hit the starter. He opened up the throttle, not only hearing but feeling the engine rumble into life beneath him, feeling the surge of power through every nerve and muscle. With a sigh he kicked it into gear, eased off the clutch and roared out into the street. He would take just one last ride.

Vin was out of his seat and into the yard before either of the other two men had computed and analysed the sound of the Harley firing up, but for Tanner the sound was as recognisable as a fanfare. Eschewing the more traditional method of taking the steps, Vin vaulted the porch rail but the bike was already out of the driveway and the Texan felt a sinking sense of dismay as he watched the booted and jeaned undercover man accelerate the big machine down the street. "Shit!" He skidded to a halt, as the bike vanished. "Sh-it."

Nathan jogged over to join him. "Hell, I thought he was good for another couple of hours at least. Where the hell's he goin'?"

"I don't rightly know, Nathan. But I'm goin' after him before he does somethin' really stupid." Tanner strode over to his Jeep. "You comin', Chris."

Larabee had followed at a slower pace and now shook his head putting out a restraining arm before the younger man could make another movement towards his vehicle. "Let him go."

Vin frowned, part annoyance, part puzzlement and shook off Larabee's grip. "What?"

"I said let him go. I know where he's headed." He sighed. "I'll go."

The Texan hesitated for a moment torn between concern for Ezra and belief in Chris. The two men held each other's eyes for another few seconds before Vin conceded. "You'd better be right about this one, Cowboy."

Larabee did not miss the subtle warning in the words or the implication that he had been wrong before.

"Don't worry. I am."

oooOOOooo

Larabee had not hurried; knew there was no need and the familiar black liveried Night Train standing in the parking lot confirmed his certainty that this is where he would find the Southerner. He parked the Ram and sat for a moment looking at the machine and thinking of the enigma that was Ezra Standish.

He remembered Buck's scepticism that the urbane undercover agent best known for his expensive tastes and extensive vocabulary would be able to carry off the pretence that he was a down and dirty hard-nosed biker. That he had changed colours so convincingly, slipping into a role that he was forced to live day and night for months on end, was a tribute to his skills but the cost of success had been astronomical. Now even he wondered if it was worth it, worth the price that Ezra had been forced to pay. *Sometimes I don't know who the fuck I am anymore.* Sighing deeply, he pushed open the door of the Dodge and climbed out. It was sunny but cold and the place was deserted: midday, midweek and not exactly a stop on the tourist map, the fact did not surprise him. Resolutely, Chris walked up the sweeping uphill path that led into the gardens and the cemetery knowing exactly where he was going.

The Southerner sat on a park bench within sight of the newly turned grave, leaning forward with his forearms resting on his denim-covered knees, head down staring at the gravel between his scuffed and dusty boots. Chris sat down next to him without speaking. The not uncomfortable silence continued for many minutes, each man lost in solitary reflection before finally Ezra swung his head up, wincing as he looked on Chris's battered face.

"Sorry."

"What, this?" Larabee fingered his swollen eye. "Reckon I had it coming." He smiled crookedly. "Although I could have done without the kick in the balls."

Ezra leaned back, and stared out across the acres of lawn set at regular intervals with headstones. "You knew I'd be here?"

"Ezra, looking at you I'm looking at myself five years ago. I had a pretty good idea the way you might be thinking."

The Southerner nodded, appreciating his insight and went back to looking into the distance. "Yesterday I came here as someone Andie would never have recognised - someone she probably wouldn't even have looked twice at had things been different. I had to come back as the person she knew, to finally say goodbye. To put things straight and get things straight in my head."

"And are you a different person? Do you feel any different?"

Standish laughed, a little embarrassed. "No. Eric Sinclair got lost somewhere along the road."

Chris leaned forward and put a hand on the Southerner's arm. "Ezra, that's because he never existed. Whatever front you put on it, whatever mask you wear, underneath it's always you and no one can change that."

The undercover agent squeezed his eyes shut and raked his hands through his hair then stood up as if he would walk away. "Goddamn it! I'm so sick of pretending, Chris. It's like being in a game of make-believe that I can't get out of and I don't know if I can do it anymore."

Chris waited a moment before standing up and tentatively putting a hand on the younger man's shoulder. "I'm sorry, Ezra. I'm sorry about Andie and I'm sorry about the baby. And more than anything I'm sorry for putting you through this."

For a moment he could see the Southerner struggling with his emotions, then he straightened and was back in control again. The old Ezra.

"They were my choices, Chris. No one forced me. I take risks and I live with the consequences. It's just this time the consequences are a little harder to walk away from." His voice shook slightly. "I did love Andie -- at least I think I did -- but for a very short time and there was never going to be any future for us. If she had lived I would still have lost her, and the baby."

"Don't try and bullshit me Ezra," he threatened softly, "It doesn't make it any easier whichever way you choose to put it."

Ezra ducked his head. "Hell, I know, but I'm just trying to get my head around it all and stay sane. How do I do that, Chris?"

Chris grabbed Ezra's shoulder and impulsively pulled him into a rough embrace.

"You'll do it, Ezra. And you'll do it because you don't have to do it on your own." He slapped the Southerner on the back then released him, slightly embarrassed not only by the uncharacteristic show of affection but by the strength of his own

emotions. “Come on. There’s people worried about you. Don’t let’s keep them waiting.”

Ezra closed his eyes for a brief moment then with a deep sigh started walking. Chris fell into step beside him knowing that the grieving wasn’t over, in fact it had only just begun, but so had the healing.

“Chris?”

“Mmm?”

“Sorry about the kick in the balls.”

“Yeah, so am I.”