

*Someewhere
Along the Road*

Jean Graham

2000

*“Somewhere along the road someone waits for me,
Beyond these present storms that blow, waiting patiently,
No secrets held in an open heart, a spirit that soars over mountains,
Somewhere along the road someone waits for me.*

*Somewhere a guiding light always shows the way,
To those who lose their way by night, searching for the day,
A day away from happiness, tomorrow will bring the new sunrise,
Somewhere along the road someone waits for me.”*

Rick Kemp (Steeleye Span)

The spectral green light emanating from the digital clock at the bedside mocked him. Three o'clock. He turned restlessly and pulled his pillow into what he hoped would be a more comfortable position, but he knew already that there would be no more sleep for him. Lying in the dark he stared sightlessly at the ceiling, feeling the pounding of his heart against his ribs and wondering when it would all end.

The sheets stuck uncomfortably to his sweating body and, irritated, he threw back the covers, swinging his legs out of bed and sitting for a moment on the edge of the divan, running his fingers through his hair and feeling once again the familiar weight of despair settle around him. Nights were the worst; even when he could sleep the dreams plagued him and when he was awake, often in the small hours of the morning, he could only relive the nightmare. Reaching for his watch he tried and failed to control the fine tremor in his hand. Angrily, he snatched the Rolex from the night stand and secured it on his wrist with almost vicious intensity before getting to his feet and padding out of the bedroom, barefoot and wearing nothing but his boxers in spite of the chill.

Coffee. Strong and black. Not quite the mood-elevating junk he had become used to over the last months -- hell, not even close -- but he needed something. As the coffee brewed, he paced impatiently up and down the kitchen. Recognising just what he was doing, he stopped and leaned against the counter, making a conscious effort to relax but every nerve and muscle seemed to be thrumming with suppressed energy. The familiar aroma of the best Colombian beans filled his senses, and for a moment he felt reassuringly normal. Whatever had happened, it was over now; he could concentrate on getting his life back in order. Go back to the good food, the fine wine, the designer clothes; go back to driving the imported car, playing the stock market; go back to being everything that was Ezra Standish. Opening the cupboard he reached in for a cup, the telltale musical clinking of china on china as his hand started to shake triggering a surge

of anger. Slamming the cup down onto the counter he watched in surprise as it shattered, watched as the blood started to flow and finally, felt the sharp sting of the deep lacerations in his palm. Almost in a trance, he slowly picked up the broken shards and dropped them in the trash, rinsed his hand under the cold water faucet and wrapped his hand in a towel. Coffee forgotten he walked across to the wall phone and picked up the receiver, hesitating a moment -- almost changing his mind -- before he finally dialled.

The call was answered on the fifth ring, an abrupt, roused from sleep, "Yeah?"

"Chris."

"Ezra? Do you know...?"

"It's three o'clock," he supplied helpfully, anticipating Larabee's question. He paused, then bit the bullet. "Can you come over?"

If there was as much as a fraction of a second's hesitation, Ezra did not detect it.

"Be right there. Put the coffee on."

Ezra smiled tightly.

"Deal."

The line went dead and he slowly replaced the receiver on hook, closing his eyes and resting his head against the wall, feeling lost and alone. How was he ever going to find his way back?

Chris drove with controlled urgency towards Ezra's townhouse. The Southerner did not ask for help -- not ever -- for him to have called at three in the morning was not something to be lightly dismissed. Of one thing he was sure, Ezra was in crisis and had been since coming off that last undercover job. Chris glanced in the rear view mirror and studied his own reflection for a moment. His face still bore the traces of the beating he had taken at the hands of a very pissed Standish only a week before, an incident that had forced him to revise his opinion of the Southerner's fighting abilities. Yet another layer of the undercover agent's personality that had, until now, remained well concealed, to be brought out at will and used as necessary. He still found the sheer ferocity of Ezra's street-fighting tactics difficult to come to terms with; a facet of the man that he found almost impossible to reconcile with the traditionally urbane and ultra-civilised Southern gentleman. It had taken three men to restrain him and a sedative to subdue him. The man was an enigma and no mistake, and if he had learned one lesson from the incident it was to never underestimate Ezra Standish.

He yawned as he drew into the driveway of the townhouse, pulling in behind the familiar shape of the Jaguar. At least Ezra always had good coffee and he could not help

thinking he was going to be needing an injection of caffeine before the night was through. The front door was ajar and that in itself made him uneasy. Chris wanted to believe that it had been left open in anticipation of his arrival but at the back of his mind he wondered if it had ever been locked at all. Ezra had changed. After nine months in deep cover with no support network save an infrequent meeting to pass on information, Chris was not surprised that the rapid adjustment to normal life was proving difficult for Standish. Losing Andie had just made it so much harder. He understood grief; he understood the loneliness of the long nights and more than anything he understood the hurt.

“Ezra!” He announced his arrival, quietly closing the door behind him.

A solid bar of light shone across the living room carpet from the kitchen and Chris followed the inviting aroma of freshly brewed coffee to its source. The Southerner was standing at the counter struggling with an array of first aid materials trying, and failing, to dress a nasty laceration across his palm, his frustration evident as he swore and slammed the counter with his good hand. Larabee moved forward and smoothly took over.

“Shit, Ezra. What did the hell did you do?” He held the younger man’s hand open and inspected the deep cuts scored across the base of his thumb and his fingers.

“I broke a cup,” he said simply, as if that explained everything.

Chris slowly shook his head and sprinkled the lacerations with sulfa powder.

“Forgot to let go, huh?” He shot a quick glance at the Southerner, who was shifting restlessly from foot to foot, his whole body tense.

“Something like that.”

Larabee could not decide if Ezra was being a smart ass or was just stating a fact. That was one thing that had not changed -- he still gave nothing away unless he chose to. Whatever, he was as jittery as hell and Chris could tell he was having great difficulty just keeping still. He finished securing the bandage and Ezra quickly pulled his hand away, turning his back and walking out to the living room. Chris packed away the first aid kit and poured two cups of coffee before following, giving the Southerner time to get himself together.

Ezra sat on the couch, arms defensively across his chest and his hands tucked under his arms; bloodshot eyes staring from darkly shadowed sockets. Even being charitable, Chris could not help but think how wasted the man looked. Chris set the coffee down on the side table and moved to sit on the opposite couch.

“How long is it since you last got some real sleep, Ezra?”

Chris could see the mental calculation taking place behind the too-bright green eyes and that in itself answered his question. Too long.

"Hell, I can't even remember," he sighed finally, "A week, maybe two. I don't know."

Chris did. It was exactly eleven days. Since the bust that had ended the undercover operation. Since the bust that had gone so terribly wrong and robbed Ezra of more than just someone he loved. The senior agent looked keenly at Standish, alarmed at his gaunt physical appearance and concerned for his mental state. He had dropped ten or fifteen pounds while undercover and the loss had given him a lean, hard, almost feral look.

"Listen, Ezra. I want you to take some leave. You need a break -- some time to..."

"Get over it? Get myself together?" He gave a hard laugh. "I should live that long."

"Ezra..."

"Are you going to order me to take leave?" he interrupted, sounding suddenly panicked.

"No, but I'm saying you should put some serious thought into it. For God's sake, Ezra, you can't go on like this. Just take a look at yourself."

"You think taking time out is going to make a difference?" His voice dropped to almost a whisper, "The last thing I need is more time to think about just how fucking miserable I am! Look!" He sat forward on the couch and held out his hands, unable to control the tremor that shook them. Snatching them back he pressed his palms between his knees obviously distraught. "You know Chris," he continued quietly, his voice full of self-loathing, "You probably don't want to hear this but right now getting jacked looks pretty damned good."

Larabee had thought himself prepared for anything but to hear Ezra openly confess his craving for a drug he had spent months undercover trying to avoid sent him into a tailspin. He heard the Southerner laugh softly.

"Shocked, Mr. Larabee? Well, let me tell you something. If you offered me a hit right now, you know, I'd take it -- just to be able to feel good again."

Chris felt his stomach take a dive as if he was on a roller coaster. *Jesus Christ! This was Ezra. What the fuck was he thinking of?* What was he supposed to say when the best undercover agent in the agency admitted that he was contemplating a fix? "So what's stopping you?" It was out before he could control his thoughts or his tongue and as soon as he had spoken, he wished the words unsaid.

Ezra raised his head and Chris was stunned by the desperation mirrored in their green depths. "Nothing." The Southerner smiled sadly and Chris felt a knife twist in his heart -- such utter despair. "Absolutely nothing."

"Ezra," he prompted gently, "Why did you call me?"

"I called you..." He paused, a catch in his voice, and rubbed a hand across his eyes, "I called you because...because I'm going out of my fucking head, Chris. Can't sleep; spend the day either wanting to throw up or lie down and never get up again...Jesus! I'm even jumping at my own shadow and...I don't know what to do anymore."

Larabee slowly put down his cup and leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees as he studied the younger man, at once blown away by the man's absolute confidence in him and overwhelmed by the responsibility that went with that trust. He was just not equipped to deal with a problem of this magnitude. Ezra had spent the best part of a year essentially being someone else; and the task of maintaining that alter ego had taken its toll, extracting payment in the harshest possible manner -- for somewhere in the process Ezra Standish had lost himself. The ongoing strain of pretence had cost him physically, mentally and emotionally and the result was the person he now saw sitting across from him. That he had been exposed on a daily basis to readily available illegal drugs, indeed had been expected to indulge, had created a paradox for the Southerner that may well prove to be the undoing of the ATF agent.

"Just what are we talking about here, Ezra? How far into that shit did you get?"

A half-remembered conversation with Tanner sprang to mind. The Texan had been worried about Standish and had asked Chris to bring the Southerner out. *You can't leave him out there, Chris. He was wired today. How far are you going to let him go, for fuck's sake?* But they had been so close. All that work. He could not afford to sacrifice what the undercover agent had gained for them. *No, he thought bitterly, you sacrificed Ezra instead you mercenary bastard! You wanted that bust so bad you didn't care what it cost.* He watched Ezra as he stretched out on the leather Chesterfield, his ribs clearly defined under the taut skin of his chest. The silver ring that had pierced his left nipple was gone, but the smooth pectoral was marred by the scars of where it had been. Another sacrifice.

Ezra distractedly ran his hand through his hair, keeping his eyes fixed on the ceiling.

"Maybe too far, wouldn't you agree, Mr. Larabee?"

"I'm serious, Ezra."

"Oh, believe me, so am I." He settled back into the cushions a slight smile on his face. "Not quite as bad as Crazy Dave. He used to do a run for a week at a time. Stupid

bastard never came down. Ever. Didn't, eat, sleep, fuck, talk -- just kept trying for that rush. When he did come down, he just wanted to get back up there again. Like Pavlov's fucking dog!"

Chris noticed he had slipped once again into the patois of his adopted character and found himself fascinated by the Southerner's ability to switch so easily between the two distinct personas; a seamless transference of personality.

"So you're telling me you've got a habit." A simple statement of fact. Ezra had already admitted to craving the drug; the insomnia, the nausea, the shaking all suggested that he may now be going through withdrawal.

He still avoided looking in Larabee's direction and covered his eyes with his forearm. "I don't know, Chris, but that's what scares me. I think maybe I do."

Ezra had finally exhausted himself, repeatedly dashing his already battered psyche against the unyielding rocks of self-recrimination, and had drifted into an uneasy sleep. The sun was rising as Chris, his own emotions stretched to the limits of tolerance, fetched a blanket from the linen closet and covered the younger man. Sighing, he moved away and tried to come to terms with the situation that now faced him. Ezra was crying out for help but he did not know if he was the one to be able to give it. That this was a problem for which he was, in part, to blame only compounded his own confusion about what he should do.

Outside, the air was crisp and cold after the artificially regulated temperature of the townhouse. Chris shivered and pulled out his cell phone, hesitating momentarily before punching in a number. He was not surprised that it was answered on only the second ring.

"Vin. Cover for me today. I'm not going to make it in...No, no, I'm fine. I'm with Ezra." He paused to listen to the familiar Texan voice on the other end of the phone for a moment, thankful that Tanner did not ask too many questions. He spoke again before terminating the call, verbalising his guilt to the one man who would pronounce no judgement. "And Vin? You were right, I should have brought him out sooner."

Tired, he yawned and stretched, knowing that all the coffee in the world was not going to keep him awake now and, drawn by the thought of a couple of hours sleep, he turned back into the house. Unwilling to leave the undercover agent alone, he grabbed another blanket and walked slowly to the living room. Not yet knowing what he was going to do, but knowing he had to stay, he paused to look down at the sleeping man.

What have we done to you, Ezra? What have I done to you?

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Josiah looked critically at the senior ATF agent and sat on the corner of Larabee's desk, shaking his head almost sadly. "What do you want me to say, Chris? Right now Ezra is like a drowning man and, like it or not, you're the one he's reaching out to. The way I see it, you can do two things. You can turn away and leave him floundering, hoping he'll make his way to the shore on his own, or you can dive in, get wet, and help him to make his way back."

Larabee pushed himself back in his chair and threw the pen he had been doodling with down onto the blotter in frustration. "Hell, Josiah. I'm no good at this stuff. I don't have the patience."

The profiler, himself a clinical psychologist, smiled aware that Larabee's objections were token protests. Knowing that Chris had no intention of abandoning the Southerner but needing the reassurance that he was doing the right thing.

"I don't think you have any choice, Chris. Ezra not only trusts you, he respects you -- he's already shown that by telling you as much as he has -- and if anyone can get him through this and bring him out the other side still in one piece, I have a feeling it's you."

"That's a distinction I can do without," he muttered, sullenly, "But I have to take some responsibility for him being in this mess, so I guess this can be my penance."

Sanchez looked keenly at the blond man. "This is not your fault, Chris. Any more than it's Ezra's fault. You both did what you had to do to get the job done and no one is going to think any less of you because of it."

"Not of me, but if it becomes common knowledge that Ezra's been using, even under these circumstances, the mud is likely to stick. He might as well hand in his badge right now."

Josiah frowned. "You're going to cover it up?"

Larabee launched himself away from the desk and started to pace, chewing the inside of his lip. "As much as this goes against the grain...yes, I am. But not a cover up, I just don't intend to make it public knowledge." He looked up anxiously. "You're with me?"

"Do you really have to ask?"

Ezra had always had a reputation for being the last to arrive. His idea of a civilised time to start work was around ten, certainly any time before that he considered barbaric and to get him through the door any earlier took a concerted effort, often in the form of

dire threats from Chris about getting his ass to work on time or being docked an hour's pay a day. This time he was sitting at his desk before anyone else had even arrived. His first day back on deck since coming out of deep cover -- *say it, Ezra: Since she died* -- and he felt incredibly disorientated, the familiar surroundings suddenly alien and uncomfortable. Even his suit, one of his favourites, seemed to have been made for someone else. He sighed and held his head in his hands; it had certainly been made for someone almost fifteen pounds heavier. A familiar electronic 'ping' announced the arrival of the elevator and the Southerner straightened, moving away from his desk. *Time to play your part, Ezra. You're on.*

He could tell Vin was surprised to see him, but his pleasure seemed genuine. Tanner was not normally a demonstrative person, so Ezra was unprepared for the Texan's fierce embrace.

"Good to have you back, Ezra." He broke contact and held him at arm's length, blue eyes reflecting his concern. "You could use a few extra pounds though, pard."

Standish nodded, momentarily lost for words as he realised how much he'd missed not only Vin but also the easy camaraderie, the friendship and above all, the support. He noticed Tanner refrained from asking if he was all right. At least he would not have to lie to him.

"I'm working on it." That was the honest truth. For the last few days he had been ravenous, never seeming to be able to satisfy his hunger. "One of the disadvantages of working undercover is the appalling array of what passes for food that I'm forced to consume."

Vin nodded, still smiling and finally released the Southerner. "Been worried about you." His face became serious, his eyes clouding briefly. "Haven't had much of a chance to say it, Ezra, but I really *am* sorry about Andie. We all are."

"I know that," he turned away and busied himself with the coffee machine, afraid for a moment that his feelings would betray him. *Dammit, how long before someone could mention her name without him choking up?*

He felt Tanner's hand on his shoulder. "Just remember, pard, if the ride gets a little hairy, you know where I am."

The Texan moved away to his own desk, respecting the Southerner's need for some space, and started shuffling papers in an effort to get some reports done before the office filled and the interruptions started.

Standish forced himself to complete the routine actions of measuring out the coffee and turning on the machine, traditionally the job of the first man into the office,

concentrating on keeping his hands steady and his fickle emotions in check. He had known it would be rough to get back into the system, to try and resume where he had left off, but he had not anticipated that he would feel quite so out of place. He was a different man now -- a square peg trying to fit into around hole. Turning to face the room, the memory flooded back of a day so many months ago when Buck had almost stripped him in front of the entire office just to expose his nipple ring. He half-smiled at the recollection, remembering his profound sense of indignity coupled with the relief that he had at least managed to keep the other -- the Prince Albert -- under wraps. Trust Buck. He should have expected no less.

Soon after, he had become Eric Sinclair. He had shed his designer outfits and had spent his time undercover with a scant dozen items of clothing -- hell, he'd spent six months in the same pair of jeans -- he had grown his hair which in the end had gone unwashed more times than not, grown a goatee and generally adapted seamlessly to the biker culture. A chameleon blending in with his environment. How could he ever have known that somewhere along the road he would lose his way so completely?

"Hey, Ezra!"

Buck's voice booming across the bull pen pulled the Southerner from his moment of sad reflection and he pasted on a smile as the moustached agent launched himself across the room and almost smothered him in a crushing bear hug.

"Geez, Ezra, there's nothin' of you. Skinnier than a sewer rat."

Ezra was not quite certain what the connection was between sewers, rats and his weight loss but with Buck that was hardly an unknown phenomenon whose oft-quoted homilies were notoriously oblique.

"I take your point, Mr. Wilmington," he muttered, extricating himself from the embrace, "And as I have already assured Mr. Tanner, I'm working on it."

J.D., bringing up the rear behind Buck, threw a paper sack in Standish's direction. The Southerner caught the arcing missile reflexively, relieved that he had not fumbled the catch. Lately he had been as clumsy as a pre-pubescent girl.

"Here, start with a donut."

Both men traded surprised looks when Ezra did precisely that, and wolfed down one of the sugary confections. Traditionally, the undercover agent had been the first to come up with disparaging remarks concerning Buck and J.D.'s dietary preferences and neither man had ever seen Ezra actually eat a donut. Buck poured a cup of coffee and handed it to Ezra, his face a picture of open-mouthed wonder. Standish smiled, aware that his

actions had thrown the two men, brushed the sugar from his fingers and accepted the proffered cup.

“Thank you, gentlemen. Not quite a chocolate croissant but adequate.”

He moved towards his desk, his amusement genuine. Maybe this would not be so hard after all.

Wrong. By midmorning he felt trapped. The confines of the office, the steady stream of people passing by his desk -- some of them offering sympathy, some welcoming him back, some simply curious -- was driving him slowly insane. He felt tired, unmotivated and the pressing desire for a quick lift was starting to occupy his mind more than the details of the report in front of him and he found himself staring at the monitor, his thoughts far away.

Too hot. A sheen of perspiration glistened on his face and he could feel the uncomfortable sensation of sweat trickling between his shoulder blades, the indicators of an impending panic attack. *Got to get some air.* He slid out from behind his desk and made his way down to the ground floor foyer, joining the pariahs of the agency in a cluster outside the building -- the smokers. Bumming a cigarette and a light from one of the other agents, he moved into the shadow of the building gratefully drawing the smoke into his lungs and the nicotine into his blood. *Shit! Not as good as getting stoked, but after more than a week, better than nothing.* He leaned back against the wall and blew a steady stream of smoke from his nostrils, feeling the mild rush that settled, almost immediately, his racing heart. He lowered his head and looked pensively at the ground. *You sad bastard, Standish.*

“Ezra?”

The Southerner looked up sharply at the voice. Vin. Anyone else and he would have guiltily thrown the cigarette down, but the Texan was not just anyone. He was already familiar with the alter ego who smoked, who rode a Harley, who fucked, got drunk and got wasted with equal abandon when the situation dictated. An illicit cigarette now was not going to faze the Texan one iota.

“Jesus, Vin! Are you following me?” He was conscious that he sounded paranoid. “Next you’ll be tailing me into the men’s room.”

“You know you’ve been out here twenty minutes?”

Standish glanced at his watch, realised Vin was right and threw down the butt. Vin watched him crush it out under the sole of his shoe.

“Thought you’d quit,” he observed, no criticism in his voice, just a statement.

“Easier said than done this time, my friend.”

“Guess so.” He shuffled his feet and dug his hands in his pockets, then looked from Ezra to the building they had just left. “Getting a little claustrophobic, huh?”

The Southerner could not fault the marksman’s powers of observation.

“Something along those lines. Let’s just say the adjustment is more difficult than I anticipated.” He neglected to add that his inclination was to turn his back, walk away and never return.

Tanner looked at his watch.

“How about we get some lunch? Forget about all this crap.”

Ezra smiled slowly. He could still read the Texan like a book. It was no accident that it was Vin who happened to be concerned for his welfare, any more than it was an accident that he was suggesting lunch.

“Are you buying, Mr. Tanner?”

Vin shook his head, in disbelief rather than negation. “No wonder you’re richer than Croesus!” He laughed. “Okay, I’m buying.”

Standish straightened his tie and smoothed his jacket. “I’m impressed that you should possess even a rudimentary knowledge of ancient history, Mr. Tanner, let alone details of the legendary wealth of the King of Lydia.”

Tanner started to walk away, a smile on his face, obviously more comfortable with the turn of the conversation. “Okay, where to?”

“How about Marlowe’s?”

“Come on then, before Chris sets a posse on our tail.”

Ezra was in no doubt that Chris was already fully aware of Vin’s intentions. Indeed, he would be part of the conspiracy if not the instigator, but it mattered little to the undercover agent; the fact that they cared enough to try and draw him back into the circle instead of allowing him to orbit around the periphery like a wayward satellite made it all right with him.

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The townhouse was silent. Empty, dark and lifeless -- a reflection of his soul. He closed the door behind him and flicked on the light. Chris would be arriving soon so he had to assume the mantle of normalcy. If he gave in to the dictates of his own state of mind he would leave the house in darkness, crawl into bed and stay there till morning. The day had drained him, emotionally and physically. The sheer discipline of the eight hour working day had become, over the past year, an alien concept to him and in spite

of being glad to be part of the team again, the strain of maintaining the facade that everything was back to normal had become too much.

Between feeling hungry enough to eat the hindquarters of a horse and wanting to throw up, he had managed a more than adequate and surprisingly relaxed lunch with Vin. He smiled wickedly as he recalled Tanner's expression when he had ordered a \$30 steak but it had gone down easily and yet, barely taken the edge off his appetite. Tanner, much to his credit, had not commented on the amount of food he had succeeded in consuming. Vin, he knew, had been in his corner throughout his time undercover, in fact the Texan had been his only contact with his former life -- his former self -- and had been his lifeline then, just as he was trying to be now.

Wearily Ezra pulled off his tie and shrugged out of his jacket, leaving them both on the couch as he walked on through to the bedroom. The urge to crash on the bed, cover his head and shut out the world was tugging relentlessly at him but he knew that Chris would just drag him out. *Bastard*. Instead he slowly changed into sweat pants and a T-shirt, and was just lacing his Nike's when he heard Larabee's Ram pull into the driveway. He sighed. Chris Larabee -- drill sergeant -- was home and ready to swing into action.

They had run the same circuit for the past three days. Five gruelling miles. Chris had been lenient on the first day, tougher on the second and merciless on the third. Ezra knew he would be in for yet another hammering and mentally prepared himself for the verbal flogging he knew would come before the end of the exercise. The man was a martinet. He waited for Larabee to change, pacing restlessly, but not once did it occur to him to refuse to go. That would be a betrayal of trust and it was a matter of honour for the Southerner that he did nothing that would undermine Chris' obvious faith in him. Ezra fully appreciated the lengths to which Larabee was going to save his ass and get him back up to speed. What he did not fully understand was why.

Ezra had not been subject to such rigorous physical demands on his body since he had first been recruited to the FBI and had gone through basic training, and he was feeling the strain. He had switched to automatic pilot long before and he had ceased to be aware of anything except the sound of his own ragged breathing in his ears. He had still believed himself to be in fair physical shape, even considering the abuses his body had tolerated over the previous nine months, but Larabee had proved him absolutely and irrefutably wrong. The man had barely broken a sweat while he was already lathered, his T-shirt soaked, and he knew that if they went too much further he would be

puking his heart out at the end of it. As if reading his mind, Chris stopped, his own chest heaving but by no means at the limit of his endurance while Ezra bent over, hands on knees, trying to convince his stomach that it need not turn itself inside out in protest.

“You okay?”

“Thank you for your concern, Mr. Larabee,” Standish panted, “but I believe your timing could be better. Okay ceased to be an option about three miles back.”

Chris, much to the Southerner’s disgust, merely laughed and stood with his hands on his hips waiting for the younger man to recover sufficiently to make the return run.

“Stop whining,” he ribbed, good naturedly, “You got five minutes before we start back.”

Ezra dropped onto the grass and stretched out, groaning dramatically. “I’m pretty sure this comes under the heading of cruel and unusual punishment and as such is a criminal offence.”

Chris hunkered down a few feet from the sweat plastered Southerner and tugged at a stem of grass, suddenly becoming serious. “You don’t have to do this if you don’t want,” he said softly.

Ezra sat up and leaned back on outstretched arms, his breathing already back under control. “Yes I do. If only to prove that I can.”

Larabee shot an amused glance in the Southerner’s direction, squinting against the setting sun. “That’s debatable.”

“Has anyone told you lately, Mr. Larabee, what an unmitigated bastard you are?”

“Only you.” He sprang up and jogged a few steps in place, shaking his arms loosely. “Now get your ass into gear. I’d like to eat this side of midnight.”

Ezra got reluctantly to his feet and casually dusted off his sweat pants. “And so you shall.”

Flashing the blond man a mischievous and challenging grin he launched himself into a sprint, calling back over his shoulder to a stunned and still-stationary Larabee: “If you can keep up!”

Larabee set off in pursuit, confident in the knowledge that he would quickly reel the Southerner in, muttering under his breath: “You wish.”

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The sun’s soft fingers caressed the man’s skin; bars of light infiltrating the slats of the blinds and falling across the bed in golden slices. He stirred, becoming aware of the

brightening day and pushed the sheet back from his chest. Late. Forcing his eyelids open he peered at the clock on the nightstand and sank back. Very late. He lay for a moment contemplating the significance of the hour and the fact that he was just waking up. In two weeks this was the first time he had not been up before the sun. The very fact that he was going to be late for work made him smile. He was Ezra Standish and it was expected. So instead of rushing out of bed he stretched sinuously and savoured the tension in his muscles as the result of the previous evening's exercise, amazed that he should feel such an overwhelming sense of well-being. He listened to the house and by its absolute silence knew that Chris had already left. Allowing him to sleep had been deliberate then. Curiously energised, he swung his legs out of bed and took a deep breath.

"Thank you, Mr. Larabee."

It was after nine before he got out of the shower. He hadn't deliberately tried to dress down but he did not feel entirely comfortable in suits which no longer fitted him perfectly; either he would have to regain the weight he had lost or would have to visit his tailor. In the meantime he would settle for something a little less structured but even casually attired Ezra dressed well; Cerruti slacks and shirt, with a black leather jacket forming a picture of understated elegance. He glanced critically in the full-length mirror before picking up his sunglasses and car keys. It would do.

The house looked the same. The bikes were gone though.

He had parked on the opposite side of the street some thirty yards away, not wanting to get too close, and sat for a moment looking at the unprepossessing suburban house -- the house that had been his base for nine months -- wondering why he felt nothing. He had not intended to come to this place but he had been drawn like a magnet to take one last look. *What did you expect to find here?*

Against all his instincts, he slowly got out of the Jaguar and walked up the street, hands in his pockets and head down as he allowed the memories to wash over him. The sadness that he had been pushing deeper and deeper came bubbling up afresh as he slowed to a halt and stared at the equally sad looking residence. *God, why had he come? Some things were best left alone.* His eyes were drawn to the curtained front bedroom window.

Got a surprise for you...Love you babe...

He had told her she would be okay. He had told her he would be back. He had lied and those had been his last words to her. It summed up his life in a word - lies.

“Well look who’s here, boys. The Banker himself, come back home to roost! Got himself some fancy new threads too. What’d they pay you, motherfucker?”

Ezra kept his expression neutral as he swung his gaze in the direction of the voice, someone he did not immediately recognise but who obviously recognised him even without the beard and longer hair; someone who recognised Eric Sinclair. His mind raced trying to place the man or one of his cronies. There were five of them -- the house was obviously not abandoned after all -- and the one thought that pushed out all others was that Chris was going to be mightily pissed at him.

“Jumped into bed with the feds didn’t ya, Eric?” The biker continued. “Fucked us over good! What ya come back for, asshole?”

The biker, six foot four and two hundred pounds of meanness, took a step closer and as he brought his fist back Ezra found himself wondering the very same thing.

The sky was very blue. A few cottony clouds drifted into his field of vision and on reflection he found his mind agreed with what his body was telling him -- he was lying on his back, the concrete sidewalk hard and unyielding against the parts of him that were in contact with it, staring into space. Encouraging his diaphragm to work again he sucked in a deep breath of air and gave silent thanks to whichever patron saint kept watch over wayward travellers and extremely stupid ATF agents. *A definite error in judgement, Ezra. Serves you right.*

He would have stayed down, lacking any motivation to rise, but he knew that a man lying on the footpath, even in this particular neighbourhood, would start to attract unwelcome attention and he decided that he had already had enough of that for one day.

The attack had been brief and vindictive, mercifully cut short when a concerned citizen driving by had interrupted the proceedings, after which the five had scattered, no longer keen on lingering to finish the job. Counting himself fortunate that he had escaped so lightly given the possible outcome, he slowly regained his feet, wincing as he felt various parts of his body protesting. The boot that had connected solidly with his ribs had been the worst, catching him in the left side -- a vicious parting shot -- and he guessed he would soon be sporting an impressive bruise, not only there but wherever fist or foot had made contact. At least his face had not been marked. Not that he cared about his looks but explaining away facial contusions to Chris Larabee would have taxed even his most skilful manipulation of the truth.

Cautiously sliding behind the wheel of the Jaguar he sighed heavily and let his head fall back against the padded headrest. *Close one, Ezra! Not fit to be out without a chaperone. No wonder Chris is sticking close. Doesn't trust you to be let loose.* Leaning forward he reached into the glove box, guarding his ribs as the flexion sent a friendly reminder to his pain receptors to reconsider such an action, and rummaged until he found the pack of Marlboros he had stashed there. He shook one from the pack and hit the dashboard lighter, thoughtfully contemplating the cigarette in his fingers as he waited to light up. *Way to go, Ezra. One addiction not enough?* In spite of his self-critical analysis he yielded, finding the nicotine answered the insistent demands of his body for artificial stimulants. Starting the engine he pulled out from the kerb and cruised without haste towards his destination, not once looking back at the house, feeling nothing but a profound sense of release. The cell phone shrilled from the dash and he glanced at the caller ID - Chris. He had to answer.

"On my way," he responded shortly, not bothering with any introductory niceties.

There was a momentary pause and the silence was more intimidating than a verbal tirade. "You're not on flexitime, Ezra."

The Southerner took a drag on the cigarette before answering. "Your fault. You left me asleep."

"So I did." Ezra could hear the smile in his voice. "Listen, we've got something on for this afternoon. Should be straight up and down the line, no complications. You up to it?"

Standish felt about as much like taking part in a bust as having root canal work. "Count me in."

"Okay. Briefing's in twenty minutes."

"I'll be there."

He terminated the call, feeling an unpleasant crawling sensation in the pit of his stomach, not exactly fear, but more a distinct feeling of trepidation. He had been flying solo for almost a year, dependent on no-one and having no-one dependent on him, but now he was expected to take his part on the team once again and get back into formation. Although he knew it was coming he had not realised the prospect would fill him with such dread. *Was he really so far out of the loop?* Manoeuvring the big car through the midmorning traffic, he couldn't decide if the sudden nausea he felt was his body reacting to not being jacked for a couple of weeks, a side-effect of the beating or plain old-fashioned panic. Whatever the reason his early sense of well-being had rapidly evaporated and he berated himself for having walked blindly into a compromising situation. *Losing your edge?* Visiting the house had been a mistake -- he had known it

would be -- but he needed to lay the ghosts to rest. He had believed himself strong enough to confront his demons but he had been wrong, the house may no longer mean anything to him but his memory of Andie had returned with such intensity that he felt the loss more keenly than ever. *Love you babe.*

The drive to the ATF building was purely automatic and he was surprised to find himself pulling into the underground parking garage, easing in next to J.Ds Kawasaki as he focused on bringing his raging emotions back under control before he left the car. Blinking away the moisture that had built up in his eyes he took a deep breath, immediately regretted it, and sat for a moment waiting for his heart to slow its frantic pace. After a few moments he assumed his best poker face, slowly -- reluctantly almost -- emerging from the car and adjusting his clothing before walking to the elevator. *Courage, Ezra. You can do it. This is what you get paid for, the fine art of deceit and illusion.*

Sanchez watched Chris from his position by the window and waited for the senior agent to end his call.

“Do you think he’s ready?” asked the profiler, as Larabee pushed himself away from the desk and turned to face his most experienced agent.

“I wouldn’t be doing it if I didn’t think he was, Josiah. You think otherwise?”

Josiah tugged thoughtfully at his lower lip and met Chris’s even stare. “I think there’s a lot of baggage Ezra’s still carrying around that he needs to get rid of.”

“He’s been doing okay. Better than I expected.”

Sanchez moved from the window and circled the desk. “Has it occurred to you that Ezra is just doing what he does best?”

Chris cocked his head to one side inviting Josiah to continue.

“How do you know when it’s Ezra and when he’s just playing the part that he thinks you want to see? Remember, this is a man well versed in the art of duplicity, the ultimate silver-tongued con artist.”

“Christ, Josiah, if you’d seen him the night he called me over, you wouldn’t be asking that.”

Josiah parked himself on the edge of the desk and sighed. “Admitted. I think you’re probably the only man to ever witness the man behind the facade, to see him so vulnerable, and that in itself is a measure of his trust in you. But I think we’re only seeing the tip of the iceberg here.”

Chris frowned and started toying with a paper-clip. "Don't do this to me, Josiah. I need Ezra back."

"I know you do and you might not want to hear this, Chris but I think we might be doing Ezra a great injustice. I'm not even convinced he has any meth habit - or ever had for that matter."

"Josiah," interrupted Chris, patiently, "We already know Ezra was using, that's why Vin wanted me to pull him out all those months ago."

"I'm not suggesting that we ignore that, what I'm saying is that he's been through an intense emotional upheaval, he's lost an incredible amount of weight, he's physically run down and he's still smoking."

"Your point is..."

"I'm starting to think his highly charged emotional state has convinced him -- and us -- that he's become a substance abuser when really it's something else entirely. I'm only making an educated guess here but I believe any dependence is psychological and related to his memories of a highly pleasurable experience which now seems particularly attractive given what he's been through."

Chris twisted the paper-clip into an unrecognisable mass and stared meditatively at the result. "I'd really like to believe that. I'm not sure you'll convince Ezra."

Sanchez nodded in agreement. "I know. That's why I want you to talk to him about seeing a friend of mine."

Larabee looked suspiciously at the profiler, himself a clinical psychologist. "You're talking a shrink here, right?" He shook his head. "Ezra will never buy it. He's already talked with the Bureau psychiatrist and did quite a number on him; what makes you think this guy would be any different and what makes you think I can convince him to see him?"

Josiah's deep laugh resonating in his barrel chest lightened the seriousness of the conversation. "Firstly, it's not a guy and secondly, you'll threaten him."

Chris was forced to smile. "I'll see what I can do."

"Just keep in mind that this could mean the difference between Ezra staying lost and finding his way home, Chris."

"I hope you're right, Josiah. It's about time we got him back."

oooOOOooo

Five men stood uncomfortably in a loosely formed semicircle, silent witnesses to a confrontation that all of them would rather not be part of. They had all seen Chris lose his cool before, indeed most of them had been on the receiving end of his temper at one time or another, but this was different. Larabee was incensed, beyond reason and the fact that his victim stood in silent acceptance made the unwilling audience even more uneasy.

“What the fuck did you think you were doing? Where the hell were you, anyway? You had a simple job to do and you couldn’t even manage to be in the right place at the right time! Goddamn it, what’s wrong with you, Ezra? I’ve cut you just about all the slack I’m going to. You either get your head around it and do the job or you might as well hand over your badge right now!”

Dunne took a step forward, unable to resist, unable to remain a mute bystander.

“Chris, don’t..”

“Shut up, J.D!” Larabee’s voice cracked like a pistol shot in the confined space. He had not even turned to acknowledge the young agent but kept his icy stare fastened on the undercover agent. “You can put your own life on the line, in fact you can take the road straight to hell for all I care, but don’t take someone else with you because you’re too fucked up to give a damn about anyone else. Do you hear me, Ezra?” He released the front of Standish’s jacket and pushed him away with an unmistakable gesture of disgust, a sign of dismissal.

The Southerner’s expression had remained fixed throughout the tirade and he now squared his shoulders and straightened his jacket before silently turning away and walking out of the building, his exit as dignified as his stoic acquiescence.

Ezra had no intention of either prolonging the ordeal or confessing to the senior ATF agent that he had missed his cue because he was throwing up at the time, recognising that the truth in this case would do nothing except seal his fate in the eyes of the senior agent. Instead he walked, a solitary figure, out into the yard and crossed to the two official Bureau vehicles from the car pool. As he passed the SUV, he reached into his inside pocket and took out his ID, tossing it casually into the front seat as he bypassed the 4 x 4 and continued on to the second vehicle, a nondescript blue Ford sedan. Without a backward glance he climbed into the driver’s seat, fired up the engine and drove away. *Fuck them all.*

“That wasn’t fair,” said Vin quietly, his voice rich with criticism, “So he missed his cue...big fucking deal. We nailed ‘em anyway.”

Chris' head snapped up and he pinned the Texan with a frigid glare. He could not remember when Tanner had ever questioned his actions before, let alone openly criticise him. "For Christ's sake, he nearly got J.D. killed!"

"No, he didn't!" Vin replied with uncharacteristic vehemence, "J.D. nearly got J.D. killed. Ask him, why don't you? He made his move too soon -- besides I had him covered all the time. Piece a cake."

"Jesus, Vin," protested Larabee heatedly, "I know you're on his side..."

Tanner snorted a disgusted laugh and looked away. "I thought we all were." Chris lowered his head, suddenly less confident in his judgement of the Southerner, as the marksman continued. "Now unless you really do want his badge, I reckon you should go talk to him, before he goes and does something you'll both regret."

Both men swivelled abruptly at the sound of squealing rubber, knowing without doubt that Ezra had already left.

It had been a mistake. He knew that now. He should have been honest with Chris, admitted he was not up to it, and pulled out of the operation -- end of story. He should have had the guts to be straight up with Larabee, to confess that the thought of working in a team again rattled him, that he felt like shit and that he had been stupid enough to get fingered and have the crap beaten out of him by a few old acquaintances. Instead he had drawn to an inside straight and lost. Instead he was looking at the end of his career. *Loser*. He had let the team down, let Chris down and been dressed down by an irrational and irate Larabee in front of them all. *Finished*. It was over. One mistake after another and now it was time to take a long look at his future. *What fucking future?* He unfastened the top two buttons of his shirt, sweating and feeling the familiar thudding in his chest as his heart started to race at almost twice its normal rate. *No. Not again*. He didn't want to feel this way any more. His body ached and just below his ribs where the biker had landed a hefty kick was so tender he could barely tolerate sitting in the car. God, he just wanted to go home, crawl into bed and sleep for a week. With any luck Larabee -- everyone -- would stay away and he could happily slide into a black hole where they would all just leave him alone.

The sense of relief as he closed the front door behind him was so profound that he actually leaned against the back of the door and closed his eyes for a moment. He would have stayed there longer, too drained to move, if his stomach had not once more rebelled and forced him to make a hasty dash to the bathroom. A few minutes later, leaning over the washbasin he rinsed his mouth and splashed his face with cold water.

God, he hated puking. He needed to lie down. Stripping slowly to his underwear he felt every aching muscle and, dropping his clothes where he stood, he slid under the cool sheets. If he could just sleep for a few hours...

The six men in the SUV maintained an uncomfortable silence on the way back to the office. Vin and Chris sat up front, each staring fixedly ahead not acknowledging each other, the tension between them palpable. Buck and J.D. had exchanged several questioning looks with Nathan and Josiah but they all took their cue from the men in the front seat and refrained from speaking, recognising that discretion was the best option in this instance. Tanner and Larabee rarely locked horns, but when they did it usually resulted in a monumental explosion and no one wanted to kindle the spark that would ignite the powder keg or, indeed, cop any of the fallout.

After Ezra had left, Vin had been the first to the vehicle and his face had become dark with suppressed anger as he picked the familiar BATF wallet from the front seat. He knew why it was there and he knew without question who it belonged to, but he flipped it open nevertheless and threw it to Larabee with no change in expression. The senior agent had caught it, not bothering to look at the ID and silently climbed into the driver's seat. Neither man had spoken since.

The fact that the whole operation had been a success, that it had been wrapped up in short order and that there had been no casualties had become a secondary issue. This was about one of their own. This was about Ezra. And it was about Chris. Chris losing his cool was nothing new. Ezra being the one on the receiving end was not exactly a novelty either, but every man there had realised that the confrontation was superficial, representative of something much more complex that none of them were sure they understood fully.

Once again, Buck and J.D. exchanged glances. A subtle change in features, the slight raising of an eyebrow, the minute inclination of the head, signalling agreement that this was going to be a very long ride.

Tanner slammed the door of the SUV shut with more force than necessary and quickly scanned the garage. Ezra's Jaguar was still parked in its spot but there was no sign of the Bureau Ford. The Southerner had not come back to base then. He had not really expected that he would. The Texan struck the fender of the 4 x 4 with the flat of his hand, an expression of disgust and frustration, then quickly turned on his heel and strode towards his Jeep without a word. The sound of the sadly out of tune engine

roaring into life echoed noisily around the underground garage, followed by the tortured squeal of abused tyres as Vin threw the vehicle into a sharp reverse arc then gunned the engine in first gear. The sharp odour of burning rubber suddenly filled the enclosed space as Larabee stepped in front of the Jeep and forced Tanner to either hit the brakes or run him down. For a long moment the two men stared at each other, then Chris -- decision made -- walked around to the passenger side and climbed in.

“Let’s go.”

J.D. watched the Jeep speed out of the parking area and frowned. “Did I just miss something, Buck?”

The mustached agent followed the younger man’s gaze and sighed. “I think we all did, kid.”

“You were wrong!” insisted Vin, heatedly, “For once just admit it, Chris!”

The blond agent sat looking out of the side window, half-turned away from the volatile Texan, his body language uncharacteristically defensive. “Okay. I shouldn’t have done it.”

Tanner swore. “Jesus, Chris, what the hell were you thinking? You’re the one who’s been spending every night with him, getting him through all this and now you go and shoot him down in flames? What’s up with you?”

Larabee sighed heavily and ran a hand over his face. “Aw, hell! I told Josiah I had no patience for this,” he said tiredly, his voice full of regret, “Maybe you should have been the one to take it on board, Vin. You’re better at this stuff than I am.”

Tanner ran an amber light as it flicked to red and accepted the abuse from a half dozen cars. “He asked you, Chris. He trusted you. You’re the one who kept him in one piece after Andie, not me.”

Chris fell silent for a long time, watching the blur of passing cars as Vin raced through the traffic. Finally he spoke again.

“What if I’ve lost him this time, Vin? Josiah said Ezra was like a drowning man going under and that I could either walk away and hope he could make it to the shore on his own or dive in, get wet and help him find his way back. And what did I do? I let go of him half way.”

Vin’s expression was sympathetic but uncompromising. “Then we both jump in and drag him back, Chris, but we ain’t letting go.”

For Larabee the Jeep was suddenly moving much too slowly. Vin was right. What in God’s name had he been thinking? First, he had betrayed Ezra’s trust then he had

denigrated him in front of the others and whatever happened from hereon in he would have to live with the consequences. With a deep feeling of regret Chris looked at the plastic folder he still held in his hand and cursed his own stupidity. *Goddamn it!* In spite of his angry words he had never wanted Ezra's badge and the fact that he now had it filled him with a cold emptiness. He had overreacted, his concern for Ezra so intense that it had quickly translated from fear to anger. Anger he had unleashed on the man least deserving of it. The thought crossed his mind that because of him Ezra might now be spinning so far out of orbit that he could never hope to bring him back, and if that happened he knew he would be handing in his own resignation. That he had already lost the respect of his closest friend was clear, and looking at the expression on Tanner's face he understood that he was on notice; if anything happened to Ezra, this man at least was going to hold him accountable. He had never seen Vin so angry. The Texan did not as a rule display such emotion. He would be quietly ticked off, would go off on his own and brood, but open displays of temper were rare -- that was Chris' speciality. On the credit side he considered himself fortunate that so far Vin had refrained from actually throwing a punch at him, and if the tension in his body language ever made the transition into action he knew he would be in for one hell of a fight.

Vin followed Chris into the townhouse, so close he almost tripped on the blond man's heels and earned himself a warning glare which he promptly ignored, as he pressed on past the man and into the living area.

"Ezra!" his raised voice echoed hollowly and prompted no response.

Larabee had moved immediately to the bedroom as if he guessed where Standish would be, and stood at the door waiting for Vin to join him. The Southerner was in bed, curled up on his left side, covers drawn over his head and either asleep or making a good pretence of it. Chris shook his head and stepped over the mound of discarded clothing beside the bed to pull the sheet back from the Southerner's face.

"Come on, Ezra," he chided, lightly, "It's only six o'clock."

The undercover agent stirred mumbling something barely discernible but which contained several words of no more than four letters, which Vin took as an invitation for Chris to remove himself from the Southerner's presence. *Couldn't blame him for that.*

"Ezra," the Texan moved to the opposite side of the bed, and tried again, "We need to talk, man. Come on and move your ass."

"No," he protested, flinching as Tanner touched his shoulder, "Just leave me alone."

Ezra had yet to open his eyes and Vin crouched down, noticing for the first time the fine coating of perspiration on the man's face and chest. He looked ill but that was nothing new these days; it was coming down time for the undercover agent.

"Can't do that, Ezra," he spoke softly, "You want me to leave, you're going to have to get up and make me. And even then I'll just come back and keep on coming back but I sure as hell won't leave you alone."

The Southerner uncurled tentatively, rolling half onto his back, face pale and expression drawn as he finally yielded and opened unfocused eyes. As he turned, the sheet fell away and the dusky bruising scattered across his upper body stood out in stark contrast to the pale skin. Tanner felt a moment's guilt for ever having allowed the thought to cross his mind that the undercover agent might just be coming down from being stoked.

"Go away, Vin," he breathed, "Not your concern."

"The hell you aren't!" Tanner looked up at the blond man standing on the other side of the bed, blue eyes accusing and put the back of his hand against the Southerner's cheek feeling with some alarm the cold clamminess of his skin. "Come on. Talk to me, Ezra. What happened here? Where'd you get all these bruises, man?"

Ezra, guarding his upper abdomen with one arm, reluctantly allowed Tanner to move it aside and reveal the purple contusion spreading across his left side at the lower limit of his ribcage.

"Met some former friends." He curled up again, a slight moan escaping as he clutched his side. "Went back...Myrtle Street."

Vin shook his head, wondering what had possessed Standish to go back to the scene. To open up wounds not yet healed and revisit the pain of Andie's death. Why would he want to put himself through that again? "Jesus, Ezra. Why didn't you tell someone?" His voice held no hint of censure.

"My own fault. Stupid."

Tanner was not sure if Ezra was talking about going back to the house on Myrtle Street or keeping his injuries a secret. Whatever, the Southerner was blaming himself. "It's okay, Ezra. Don't worry about it now."

The Southerner nodded slowly, accepting Vin's advice, then briefly struggling to roll closer to the edge of the bed announced quietly and apologetically: "I think I'm going to throw up."

He did.

Vin, moving rapidly out of range, gently rubbed the undercover agent's heaving shoulder and glanced up at a mute and guilt-ridden Chris.

"You wanna call an ambulance?"

oooOOOooo

Nathan looked from Buck to J.D. and then at Josiah, who was standing slightly apart from the others still gazing thoughtfully after the long-departed vehicle.

"Would someone like to explain to me what the hell just went on here? I feel like I just turned two pages."

Buck opened the back of the SUV and slowly started taking out his gear.

"Only two? I reckon I skipped a whole chapter somewhere."

J.D. joined Wilmington and began to drag out several kevlar vests.

"You guys are lucky. I don't think I'm even reading the same book," he complained ruefully.

"Those two have been keeping Ezra under wraps since he went ballistic after the funeral," observed Jackson, "It doesn't take a genius to figure out they're covering for him."

J.D. paused in his struggle to bundle five sets of body armour together.

"Covering for what, Nathan? Ezra's cool. How'd you feel if your girlfriend was shot and killed right in front of you? He's got every right to go a little crazy."

Buck leaned against the SUV's back fender and shot Nathan a defiant stare. "J.Ds right, Nate. What's to cover? The guy's strung out and hurtin' bad; just needs some space and a little time to get used to things again."

Nathan waved in the direction the Jeep had gone. "So what was all this about, Buck? Shoot, I thought Vin was going to drive right on over Chris. Never seen the guy so mad. And what's the deal with Ezra's badge? This is more than needing a little space."

The three men traded doubtful glances and turned to Sanchez who had remained silent throughout the discourse. Wilmington stared long and hard at the profiler, whose very silence was screaming conspiracy.

"Josiah? You know something you're not telling, don't you?"

The older man hesitated, seeming to weigh his response carefully before lifting his head and nodding slowly. "I know Chris will probably have me hung, drawn and quartered for breaking a confidence but it's time you all knew what's been going down here." He rubbed a hand over his face. "But if you don't mind, I need a drink first."

Jackson shook his head, his expression registering something between disgust and sadness. "I can't believe Ezra would be so stupid. Why the hell would he take such a risk?"

Buck's eyes narrowed as he appraised the man across the table. "Maybe he didn't have much of a choice." His voice was quiet but laced with an underlying challenge.

"There's always a choice," responded Nathan, quickly, "He just made the wrong one."

Wilmington started to rise, eyes blazing but J.D. restrained him with a hand to his shoulder and he slowly sat back down.

"Jesus, Nathan, give the guy a break why don't you? He just spent nine months undercover. No backup. No nothing! Just him and sixty or so Coffin Cheaters. And while he was in the middle of all the shit where were you, Nathan? Behind a fucking desk, that's where. How the hell d'you think you'd go under those conditions? Deserves a medal if you ask me."

"He was there to do a job, Buck! That's what he does, isn't it? The job he's so goddamn good at? Well, I guess he fucked up and crossed the line this time. Started thinking with his dick instead of his head."

Buck managed to stand, this time easily shrugging off Dunne's hand. "I'll forget you just said that. Jesus! You're so self-righteous sometimes, Nate. This is Ezra we're talking about! Last time I knew anything about it he was your friend! Reckon some things change mighty quickly." He pushed back his chair and stormed away to the bar leaving the three to sit in the uncomfortable silence he left behind.

Nathan sighed and looked at the other two. "All I'm saying is..."

Dunne stood up and pushed back his chair. "Well don't, 'cause I don't want to hear it." The youngest member of the team abruptly turned his back and strode across to join his friend at the bar.

Duly chastised Jackson looked expectantly at Sanchez. "Guess I said the wrong thing. You gonna leave too?"

The profiler took a long pull of his beer. "Not me, brother. You have a right to your opinion but if you think about it, maybe that's just why Chris wanted to keep the whole thing low profile. Right now Ezra doesn't need criticism, he needs all the support he can get whatever it is he's going through."

Nathan thoughtfully rotated his glass through his fingers. "So why do I get the impression that Chris is the one who just blew it?"

Chris had not wanted to ride in the ambulance, protesting that he was the last person Ezra would choose to be with under the circumstances. The Southerner had, after all, made his feelings quite clear. The few words he had directed at the senior agent were plain enough and not exactly open to any alternative interpretation. Vin had finally convinced him otherwise; that Ezra needed him more than anyone else and he had reluctantly conceded. He wondered now why he had listened to the Texan.

Ezra was scared, that much was evident, wide green eyes betraying his apprehension. Slim fingers sought purchase on the edge of the gurney and Chris instinctively reached out and enclosed the Southerner's wrist in a firm grip. That he could even be of any comfort was debatable and he fully expected rejection but that was not going to stop him from making the gesture. Damn it, he knew Vin should have been the one to come. Tanner was the one who had been Ezra's support through the long months that he was undercover -- his lifeline -- while he had taken a back seat and given directions, never once getting his hands dirty. He had been the one who dismissed Vin's concerns so readily, not believing -- *not caring?* -- that Ezra might be in real trouble. He looked again at the calmly stoic but obviously fearful younger man and knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that somehow he had failed him.

"It's okay, Ezra." It sounded trite even to his own ears and he mentally kicked himself. *Good one, Larabee. At least sound as if you believe it.*

The undercover agent ran his tongue over dry lips and closed his eyes. "My fault. Sorry."

Holy Christ! Larabee's shoulders slumped, the words tearing into him worse than any rebuke could have done. *I should be the one saying sorry.* He knew what Vin would say. *Tell him that.* Beside him Ezra took a shuddering breath, a brief spasm of pain flickering across his pale and sweating features.

"Had to go back, Chris. Tie up loose ends."

Loose ends. Chris knew all about those. How many times had he gone by the blackened remains of his home after Adam and Sarah died, needing to see the evidence with his own eyes just one more time. He could understand what had driven Ezra to go back to the source of his grief, to see again the place where it had all happened, where his life had in one horrific moment become unglued and the very fabric of who he was began to unravel. Head still bowed, his fingers tightened around the undercover agent's wrist, a squeeze that conveyed more than he could find words to say.

"I know and it's okay. It's my fault, not yours."

Chris looked up as Ezra's other hand snaked out and urgently gripped his own.

“Not jacked, Chris. I’m clean.” He took a deep breath, wincing. “Know you think I fell off the wagon.” He shook his head, his eyes shining; brilliant emerald in shadowed sockets. “Didn’t let you down.”

The EMT moved into place, intent on his own job, forcing Chris to relinquish his grip and move back to allow him access. Ezra’s gaze lingered, a silent plea for Chris to believe in him, then his eyes closed and Chris was left feeling the sudden emptiness of regret for things left unsaid.

Buck strode into the waiting area first -- intense, worried -- his eyes searching for a familiar face as the three remaining members of the team brought up the rear. Vin rose from his place in the corner and the human wave rolled purposefully towards him drawing the attention of more than one person sitting quietly and patiently waiting. Wilmington frown deepened as he approached.

“Where’s Chris?”

Vin shuffled and ducked his head. “He...uh...went for a walk.”

Buck couldn’t have looked more surprised if Vin had told him he had spontaneously combusted. “A walk?” Several heads turned in his direction as his voice boomed through the waiting area and Tanner took him by the arm before he went completely over the top and made a spectacle of himself.

“It’s cool, Buck. He just needed some air. Time to think.”

J.D. pressed forward. “So what’s happening with Ezra?”

The Texan shook his head. “Long story. Not sure I have the right of it yet, but seems like Ezra went back to the Myrtle Street house. Ran into some “old friends” as he put it and took a beating. Don’t know any details but looks like they hurt him pretty bad.”

“Then it’s not...” J.D.’s question was abruptly terminated by an elbow to the ribs from Wilmington.

Tanner’s suspicious gaze swung in Dunne’s direction. “Not what?”

“Well, you know, we thought...” his voice trailed away and he was thankful when Josiah interrupted.

“They know, Vin. They know Ezra was using.” he explained quietly, “It wasn’t fair to not tell them what was going on.”

Vin’s eyes blazed for a moment and he raked each man with a hard stare, slowly going from one man to the other. “Fair? Fair to who, Josiah? Did you ever once stop to think about Ezra? Jesus, hasn’t he been through enough without all of us picking over his goddamned carcass? Man just goes through months of hell undercover with no

friends to back him up, loses both his girlfriend and his unborn baby -- a baby he didn't even know about, for God's sake! -- gets back to the Bureau and it's like it never happened. He's trying to hold it all together and no one gives a flying fuck about any of it, except maybe he's picked up a meth habit." He stared at the floor before looking sadly and accusingly at the assembled group. "And we're his friends?"

He started to walk away, but J.D caught hold of his arm. "It's not like that, Vin."

The Texan glanced at the hand on his arm and shrugged it off. "Then tell me, what is it like, kid? Tell me that your first thought wasn't that this was a drug problem."

Josiah stepped forward, ready to defuse the tension that was rapidly building. "We didn't know what to think, Vin. We just knew we needed to be here. Isn't that enough?"

Vin shrugged, suddenly tired. "I don't know. You tell me, Josiah. Is it enough?"

Chris stood alone, shoulders hunched against the biting wind, his hands plunged deep into his jacket pockets as he stared vacantly into the distance where the mountains reared up out of the earth and reached for the sky. The rain came in short, vicious bursts, stinging his cheeks and wetting his hair but he was oblivious to the discomfort and continued to focus on infinity as the elements raged around him. The intensity of the storm merely reflected his own turbulent emotions and for once he felt in complete harmony with nature.

Josiah had no difficulty finding the blond agent. Larabee was the only man braving the inclement weather, the only man standing outside in the storm. He did not count himself. His purpose had been to find Chris, and it was a secondary consideration that he had been forced to battle wind and rain to do so. For a moment he hesitated. A man had a right to his privacy after all and Chris, standing now like a sentinel against the black sky, was a man to be respected. Taking a deep breath he pulled up his coat collar, and pressed on up the rise, each stride bringing him closer to the man he had come to find.

He said nothing. Chris had not acknowledged his presence, not even with so much as the flicker of an eye but Sanchez knew that he had been seen. It was getting cold but Larabee seemed not to notice the change, his blond hair was plastered to his skull and dripping water down his neck but such minor details were ignored. Josiah turned his back to the wind and driving rain, bringing him almost face to face with Larabee. Finally the man allowed his gaze to travel the few degrees to meet Sanchez' eyes.

"How could I have gotten it so wrong, Josiah?"

"I don't think it's so cut and dried, Chris. There are no blacks and whites in this."

Chris angrily toed the ground. "Cut the philosophical bullshit, Josiah! This is my fuck up."

The profiler held up a placating hand. "Have it your way but that's a mighty burden for one man to carry."

"I'm the one who told him to hand in his goddamn badge. I'm the one who sent him undercover in the first place. I'm the one who single-handedly managed to screw up a man's life seven different ways from Sunday. Just me, Josiah! No one else."

"Chris, that's all so much crap and you know it."

"Vin knew there was a problem," Larabee continued as if Josiah had never spoken, "but I wouldn't bring him out. Too much at stake. You know Vin and I nearly slugged it out over that one? Told me it would be my responsibility if anything happened to Ezra. Son of a bitch was right."

"This is not your doing, Chris. Get this clear. Ezra's here now because one of those bikers kindly ruptured his spleen. That's what I came to tell you."

Larabee's eyes came into focus, as hard as flint, assessing what Sanchez had said. "What?"

"He's going into surgery any minute now. Vin's mad as hell with everyone and truth tell, I can't blame him."

Chris laughed, a short, hard bark devoid of mirth.

"Vin's mad alright. Today's the closest we've ever come to fighting and I reckon he could have taken me on." He sighed. "At least Ezra's got one good friend but it sure as hell ain't me."

Sanchez shook his head. "You're wrong about that. Else why would you be standing out here beating yourself up about the whole thing?"

"I really let him down, Josiah," he said sadly.

"Chris, you were trying to help him."

"Was I? Or was it just that I couldn't stand the thought of anyone finding out that my best undercover agent had been getting juiced the whole time he was under? I wasn't doing it for him, Josiah, I was doing it for me!"

The older man suddenly grabbed Larabee by the shoulder. "Then maybe it's time you turned it around, Chris. Maybe it's time you did do it for him. And this time, we'll all be right behind you."

He was tired of hurting and he was tired of being tired, of trying to keep it all together when the whole fabric of his life was slowly but surely unravelling strand by strand.

Exhausted, in shock and in pain, defenceless and vulnerable, he wavered between the desire to be left alone, and the fear that he would be. At least his pain finally had a name. His spleen had been ruptured during his altercation with the bikers and since then he had been steadily bleeding into his abdominal cavity. Now, prepped for surgery, he hovered in that drug-induced limbo between states of consciousness, aware yet pleasantly removed and sliding slowly towards sleep.

"You're not like the others."

She nestled closer against him and he allowed his fingers to trail lightly down her back, following the curve of her spine.

"Don't let a college education and a few good manners fool you."

"No," she protested, earnestly, "It's more than just knowing the right words to say. You...care."

He laughed softly. "Now, that would be a first, darlin'. Scratch the veneer and below the surface you'll find I'm not the man you think I am."

She slid her hand down his chest and across the flat plane of his belly, her touch igniting a flame of desire that was impossible to ignore.

"You know, nobody else ever gave a damn about me before, but you make me feel like I'm something special."

He kissed her, reluctant to admit that he cared more than he could ever have imagined possible, wondering if she would think him any better than the rest when he finally left her. And leave her he would -- without a word, without an explanation and without even a goodbye. Even if he wanted to, it was forbidden. No. He was no different to the others. She would find that out soon enough.

"Ezra?"

Not Ezra. She had never called him Ezra. He had been someone else then.

He was Eric Sinclair. The Banker. The financial wizard who had made the Coffin Cheaters rich and who had masterminded the meth for guns trades, working all the angles until he had been able to reel in the arms dealers. It had taken nine months of blood, sweat and tears -- the sweat and tears had been his; the blood Andie's. That DEA glory-seeking bastard had shot her.

"Ezra." The voice again. Quietly persistent.

"She's gone." The words slipped out before he realised that he had uttered them, escaping on a sigh that took his soul with it and left only the emptiness of longing for something which could never be. He understood that now. There would be no tomorrow for Andie; she was the past, living only in his dreams. He wondered, did anyone else in

the whole world remember Andrea Prentice, or was he the sole guardian of her memory?

“Yeah. She’s gone,” the voice agreed. Somewhat sadly, he thought.

Concentrating, he struggled to open his eyes, unfocused gaze finally coming to rest on a shape, which gradually coalesced into solid form.

“Chris.” He swallowed, his mouth dry from the medication. “Chris. What happens when I don’t remember her anymore?”

Larabee felt as if the room had suddenly closed in on him. Unable to either draw breath or find his voice, he felt instead the familiar prickle of unshed tears as dormant emotions surged through him. *Jesus, Ezra! The sixty-four thousand dollar question.* He had no answer, but the fact that he had asked the same question himself gave him some insight into the Southerner’s pain, reviving his own experience of the raw and open wound of grief. He also knew first hand the fear of forgetting, of being unable to recall faces, events and places that kept the flame of memory burning and his heart went out to the man on the gurney. What could he say? That it became harder with each passing year to summon the past quite so readily? That the memory became indistinct and the faces blurred...*Dear God, don’t do this to me, Ezra.* Intense green eyes held him demanding a response, transfixing him like a deer caught in a car’s headlights and he found himself reaching out and grabbing Ezra’s pale, slim hand in both his own before his courage deserted him. “You’ll remember her. Trust me, Ezra, you’ll always remember.”

The undercover agent sighed softly and Chris watched sadly as the Southerner’s eyelids slowly closed again. He did not release his grip on the man’s hand until the orderlies finally came to take him for surgery.

Chris walked, without enthusiasm, back towards the waiting area. This was going to be another long night. He stopped abruptly and sighed heavily, battling conflicting emotions and wondering what he was doing. He needed to get out of this place before he went crazy! Turning slowly he moved mechanically towards the exit and out into the driving rain.

The bar was quiet. It was also warm and dry, and considering that he was soaked to the skin a drink suddenly seemed like a very good idea, in fact, probably the best idea he’d had all day. He smiled, acknowledging that lately he seemed to have been singularly lacking in the good idea department. The first shot barely touched the sides but the fiery spirit immediately warmed him, if only on the inside. He signalled for a refill

and stared for a long moment at the amber fluid. Maybe there was a lesson to be learned here. *Yeah, maybe that he should just stay the fuck out of other people's problems. He sure as hell hadn't done Ezra any favours.*

He downed the second whiskey and pushed twenty-five dollars across the bar.

"Just keep 'em coming."

"Hey, Cowboy."

Chris looked at his watch. "What took you so long?"

The Texan slid onto the stool beside Larabee and rested his elbows on the bar. "You're a hard man to find, Chris."

"Not so hard. Just look for the nearest bar."

Vin looked sideways at the blond man. "Hate to disillusion you but this ain't the nearest bar. Took me two hours to track you down."

"Well, here I am. You found me. Now fuck off and leave me alone?"

"That what you want?"

Larabee sighed and slowly pushed his upturned glass across the slick surface of the bar with one finger, describing lazy circles in the spilt liquid. "Guess not. Just being snaky."

"Yeah, I noticed. Feeling sorry for yourself too."

"You got that right."

"No shit."

Chris wearily rested his head on his arms. He had neither the energy nor the inclination to argue with Tanner. "Come on, Vin, give me a break," he muttered, more tired than drunk, then slowly he turned his head and looked for a long moment at the Texan. "What're you doing here anyway? I thought you were pissed with me."

"Still am, but that doesn't mean I'm about to let you wander off to wallow in cheap whiskey and self-pity. Looks bad for the rest of us."

"Ah, Vin Tanner, my self-appointed conscience and all round crusader for the upholding of my tarnished honour."

"Now I know you've had too much to drink. You're sounding way too much like Ezra."

Larabee suddenly straightened and wheeled on his stool, turning his back to the bar. "Ezra. He's out of surgery?"

"Hell, Chris. It took me so long to catch up with you that he's not only out of surgery but most likely been discharged and gone home by now!"

The blond man looked piercingly at the man beside him and allowed himself the briefest flicker of a smile, but his eyes were like chips of flint. "Vin, you're so full of crap. Just answer the question."

"Yes, he's out of surgery."

"That's it?"

Tanner shrugged. "Guessed you weren't too interested seeing as you didn't stick around to find out."

Chris moved quickly, grabbing a handful of Vin's jacket in his fist as he leaned over the younger man, eyes as hard as stone. "Don't play fucking games with me, Vin. I'm not in the mood for any of this bullshit."

The Texan met Larabee's glare unflinchingly. "You might want to think about where this is going, Chris," he said softly, "You sure you wanna start something you might not be able to finish? I ain't Ezra. I won't just walk away. It's your call, Cowboy."

Chris tightened his grip on the younger man's clothing, a vein in his forehead pulsing, a manifestation of his building anger. "Why'd you come here, Vin? I don't need this shit from you!"

Tanner put a hand up to Chris' chest, raising a physical barrier between them. "That's right. I forgot. You're pretty good at dishing it up, but not so good at taking it, isn't that right?"

Tanner knew the punch was coming but the certainty did little to soften the impact as Chris' fist crashed into his face. Shaking his head, he spat blood and mustered enough energy to throw Chris off balance as he launched himself from the barstool. The last thought that entered his mind before his own fist connected solidly with flesh and bone was that he hoped to God he knew what he was doing.

His next thought was that Chris was not as drunk as he had seemed and any notion of an easy fight rapidly evaporated as the blond man came at him again like a freight train. They were evenly matched in height and weight but Chris was not only mad, he was mean and Vin was suddenly on the defensive and fighting for all he was worth just to stay in the game. He grunted as Chris landed a couple of short, sharp kidney punches, retaliating with a combination that gave him just enough time to draw breath before Chris was all over him again. Vin had always wondered if he'd be able to take Chris in a fight. Now he knew. Even half drunk the man could still manage to beat the crap out of him but then, he had anger enough for both of them and then some. Breathless and bloodied, he staggered back from a vicious right to the ribs, cannoned off the bar and half-fell against Chris prepared for another punishing blow. Instead, Larabee

suddenly checked, hesitated and stepped back, releasing his grip on the Texan with an almost gentle shove. Steadying himself against the bar, Tanner drew the back of his hand across his mouth, wiping away blood and saliva.

“Feel better?”

“Yes,” snarled Chris, half-turning away, fists clenching and unclenching at his sides, then quietly: “No, goddamn it, you son of a bitch!”

Vin straightened and shook his head in response to the questioning glance from the barman, who already had the phone ready to dial. No cops. Too many questions. Just one more complication neither one of them needed. “It’s okay. We’re...” He paused and looked at Chris, “...we’re friends.”

The barman shrugged and put down the phone, shaking his head. As he moved further down the bar Vin tentatively probed the split in his lip with his tongue and winced, the action eliciting a rueful: “I think,” from the Texan.

Chris took a mouthful of the scalding coffee, grimacing at the bitterness of it before setting the cup down and finally meeting Tanner’s eyes across the table.

“Friends, huh? Sure you don’t want to think about that?”

“Reckon I can live with it if you can.”

Larabee looked down and gazed into his coffee. It was a long time before he spoke again. “Do you remember your Mom, Vin?”

Tanner looked surprised, the unexpected question coming out of left field and catching him off guard. “What?”

“Can you remember what she looked like? Can you describe her to me?”

The Texan closed his eyes and sighed wistfully. “I was five, Chris. My memories are feelings more than anythin’. I guess I only think I remember her face because I had a photo to look on growin’ up. All I know is she had long hair and was as pretty as a picture. Why?”

“What if you hadn’t had a photo, Vin? What then?”

“Shit, Chris. I don’t know! I was a kid. I just don’t know.”

“Ezra doesn’t even have a photo.”

The words were so quiet that Vin almost missed what Larabee had said.

“Andie.” He uttered the name as a sigh, suddenly understanding. “So that’s what all this is about.”

Chris toyed with his cup, endlessly rotating it through three hundred and sixty degrees as he continued to stare at the dark liquid swirling against the white porcelain.

“He asked me what would happen when he couldn’t remember her any more and I told him he’d always remember.” He looked up, his eyes moist. “And you know, that’s the biggest fucking lie I’ve ever told anyone.”

Vin straightened in his chair, recognising Chris’ emotional turmoil. While his own history meant he was the only one of them who could truly empathise with Ezra’s anguish, at the same time it opened up old wounds for the blond man and, from the sound of it, inflicted new ones.

“Chris...”

“He’ll forget, Vin!” he almost shouted, “just like I’m forgetting but how the hell I am supposed to tell him that.”

Tanner was stunned by the admission, knowing how deeply Chris cherished the memory of his wife and son. “You did the right thing, Chris. Some things a man just has to come to on his own.” Tanner reached out and gripped the older man’s shoulder. “But right now, pard, you’ve gotta keep it together. Keep us together.”

Larabee took a moment to absorb what the Texan had said and remembered Josiah’s words from earlier in the evening: *Maybe it’s time you turned it around. And this time, we’ll all be right behind you.* Well, he hoped to God they were, because this time he knew there was no way he was going to be able to do it alone.

oooOOOooo

Jackson leaned back in the chair, lifting his eyes from the case notes in his lap to the still form in the bed and massaged the back of his neck, easing out the stiffness. His gaze strayed once more to the file in front of him and, not for the first time since he had taken up station beside the Southerner, felt a deep sense of guilt overriding his concern. No matter how many times he reasoned that the events of the last few weeks had muddied the waters, and what may have been obvious at any other time had become obscured by both circumstance and Ezra’s own ability to create a convincing facade of normality, he felt a sense of failure. He was a doctor for God’s sake!

He had been more than ready to believe that Ezra had created his own problems; that in taking methamphetamine while undercover the Southerner had created a monster of his own making. What did that say about him? In truth, he did not like the answer he came up with for it brought into play the question of his own prejudices. Nathan scanned the lab results again. Now he seriously doubted that Ezra’s fears -- the fears shared by both Chris and Vin -- of addiction had any real grounding in fact. The blood work

suggested something else entirely. The man was in crisis and it had nothing to do with his reaction to Andie's death or any drug use.

The soft sound of the door opening barely filtered into his consciousness as he continued to stare intently at the printed sheets in front of him, totally absorbed. The fact that someone was standing beside him finally registered and he looked up, vaguely surprised to find a dishevelled Chris Larabee reeking of whiskey, minus suit jacket, with his shirt sleeves rolled up and tie hanging loose, silently watching the sleeping Southerner. For a moment he seemed mesmerised by the thick drops of dark red blood that dripped regularly into the chamber of the electronically monitored intravenous line running into Ezra's arm, then he raked his fingers through his already unruly hair and sat heavily on the edge of the bed as if his legs would no longer support him.

Nathan finally focused his attention on the blond man. "Chris?"

Larabee raised his head as if seeing Jackson for the first time and Nathan noticed the graze high on his cheek. The fact he had been in a fight hardly came as a surprise. He had been spoiling for a chance to use his fists on someone -- anyone -- since the altercation with Ezra that afternoon and by the looks of it he had finally given vent to his anger.

"What the hell is wrong with me, Nathan?"

Jackson was caught off guard, unprepared for that particular question. Suddenly forced to mentally switch gears, he sat up and closed the file in front of him giving the older man his full attention. "You mean apart from the fact that you've been fighting, or that you're stressed out, over-tired and more than a little drunk?"

Larabee started to shake his head, a gesture more of frustration than disagreement. "No. It's more than that. I'm..."

"...a bad tempered son-of-a-bitch."

The words were quiet, laboured even, but clearly audible; the lazily drawling Southern accent unmistakable. Nathan raised one surprised eyebrow and smiled, his relief evident.

"He does have a point, Chris."

Ezra stirred, grunted softly as he moved and opened his eyes for the briefest of moments. "Mr. Larabee..." He paused to take a breath. "You look worse than I feel and believe me..." Another pause as he raised a hand to support his left side. "...that is...quite deplorable."

Chris half-turned towards the Southerner, his expression unreadable. "Smart ass."

Ezra's eyes remained closed, his efforts to speak already having drained his limited resources but his expression relaxed and his lips curved in the hint of a smile before he sighed and seemed to drift back to sleep. Nathan quietly rose and checked the undercover agent before turning his attention to Chris. He settled a large hand on the man's shoulder.

"You okay?"

"If I said yes, I'd be lying." He winced and jerked his head sharply back as Nathan touched the swelling on his cheek.

"This the only damage?"

"Short fight," answered Chris brusquely by way of explanation, pushing himself away from the bed and Nathan's impromptu examination.

Jackson sighed wearily. Ezra was right. Chris was definitely a bad tempered son-of-a-bitch.

"Just as well," he commented wryly, returning the Southerner's chart to the foot of the bed. He hesitated a moment before turning back to Chris who was in the process of stuffing his discarded tie into his pocket. "Chris, we need to talk. There's something you should know about Ezra."

Larabee paused for just a heartbeat then continued with his task before raising his eyes to look first at Jackson, then at the sleeping figure. "And exactly what is it that I should know?" His voice held a challenge.

Nathan moved forward and took a firm grip on Chris' shoulder. "Not here. Let's get some coffee." He felt Larabee tense, ready to resist and increased the pressure of his hand, steering the blond man towards the door, and making it abundantly clear that he expected no argument. For once there was none.

Chris was tired, the familiar pressure behind his eyes signalling the start of a headache, and the caffeine he had consumed over the course of the night was starting to kick in with a vengeance, making his heart race and his muscles twitchy. The last thing he needed was more coffee but he accepted the cup from Jackson, half smiling when he saw that rather than being strong and black it was *cafe au lait*, no doubt laced with sugar. He briefly wondered what any of them would do without Nathan to look after them. Josiah and Nathan; the calming *yin* that balanced the otherwise overwhelming *yang* of the rest of the group. Masking his anxiety and showing a patience he did not truly feel, the blond man sipped his coffee and waited for Nathan to start talking.

Jackson finally looked at Chris over the rim of his cup and sighed. "Ezra's got some big problems, Chris."

“Tell me something I don’t know.”

“Not the ones you think. His blood work just came back and there are some...irregularities.”

Chris slowly lowered his cup, not taking his eyes off Jackson. “Irregularities? What the fuck does that mean?”

“It means that Ezra has been in health crisis for some time. He’s been rapidly heading towards a serious electrolytic imbalance which I won’t waste time explaining now. His haemoglobin is dangerously low and his white cell count is way up. The blood picture is all over the place.”

“What’s that in plain English?”

“That he’s a damn sight sicker than you, I or anyone else ever imagined. I guess the only good thing is, that I don’t think he has or ever did have a drug problem.”

“He already admitted that he was using,” protested Chris, “Vin saw him wired more than once.”

“I’m not saying he didn’t get juiced, I’m saying I don’t think it ever became an addiction.”

“So what is it? I didn’t just imagine those nights sitting up with Ezra when he had the jitters or when he was so wasted he could hardly drag himself out of bed.”

“No. That was real, and without getting too analytical it’s just that the cause was more likely to be his screwed up metabolism.” He paused and looked evenly at the blond man across the table. “All the symptoms he -- and you -- put down to a withdrawal from meth can be explained.”

“Such as?”

“First there’s the extreme anaemia which points to some kind of chronic blood loss – maybe a bleeding gastric ulcer – then the self-induced vomiting to avoid having to ingest the drugs he couldn’t refuse or manage to palm, which then screwed up his electrolyte balance, add to that some overdosing on antacids and his generally poor nutritional state and there you have a recipe for disaster.”

Chris shook his head struggling to come to grips with what Nathan was telling him.

“On top of that,” Nathan continued, “he’s had to cope with a major emotional trauma, his immune system is shot to hell -- he’s thrown a positive for Epstein-Barr virus -- and the blood work indicates he’s been fighting a major infection for quite a while.”

“So what’s the deal here? He’s going to be okay, isn’t he?”

Jackson slowly drew his finger through a sprinkling of spilled sugar beside his cup. His response was noncommittal. “Look, Chris. He’s a mess but the physical stuff is

reversible; it's the psychological effects that might be a little harder to deal with. I'd make an educated guess that some of his symptoms that you both thought were from meth use were really depression. The trick is now to do something about it."

Vin leaned against the wall in the waiting area and gently probed the laceration in his lip, feeling the stiff and unyielding sutures with the tip of his tongue. He winced at the contact, making a mental note to remember that Chris threw a vicious right hook and to be better prepared next time. Not that there would ever be a next time if he had any choice in the matter. He straightened, easing away from the wall slightly and feeling the pull of bruised muscle across his back where Chris had jabbed him in the kidney -- another move to remember and avoid. He looked at his watch and thought about going back to his apartment to catch a couple of hours sleep. Buck, Josiah and J.D. had already left, reasoning that someone should at least make an effort to show up at the Bureau for work the next day. He already knew Chris would be too wasted to front up, and unless he got some shut-eye soon then the day was a no go for him too. What the hell, three out of seven was better than nothing. *What were friends for if they couldn't cover your ass in a crisis?* The Texan finally yielded to the urge to move and slipping his hands into his pants pockets he walked slowly back and forth between the window and the bank of elevators wondering what was keeping Chris.

Ezra. It still rankled that no one seemed to fully appreciate the Southerner's unique talent for the work that he did undercover, or how mentally and physically taxing upholding the charade could be. It was his job and he did it well but as Ezra's contact in more than one operation he had seen the effects first hand, and he knew that this last one had been his most difficult and challenging assignment since he had joined both the Bureau and the team. *Shit, be honest Tanner, it had almost killed him.*

His mind wandered back to a day the previous August when he had suggested to the Southerner one lunchtime that body piercing would strengthen his credibility in his role as a biker. It had started as a joke but the idea had fallen on fertile ground and after several shots of Dutch courage the Southerner had, to Vin's astonishment, promptly sought out a body art and piercing studio and done the deed without further ado; not only a nipple ring but a Prince Albert. The Texan still cringed at the memory, recalling the guilt he had felt at encouraging Ezra to undergo the obviously painful mutilation but afterwards they had gone back to Ezra's townhouse where, still pale and sweating from the ordeal, the Southerner had shared a bottle of ten year old Tennessee whiskey with him. They had both ended up totally wasted on the living room couch and Chris had

ripped into them the next day first, for taking a five hour lunch break and second, for not calling in.

That had been before. Quite clearly in his mind he could separate the before and the after. In between came the months of hell when Ezra had risked all for the Bureau. Only this time the Southerner -- the consummate gambler -- had staked more than he had to give, and had lost. The Bureau had won. The DEA had won. And Ezra had been fucked over by them both. Then came the after. Ezra had returned to them a grief-stricken stranger. Lost, alone and no longer sure of his place in the scheme of things.

And now? While Ezra was lying in a hospital bed, the very men that the Southerner trusted the most were falling apart, fighting and squabbling among themselves. He stopped suddenly in his tracks, his shoulders slumping, and dropped heavily into one of the uncomfortable plastic chairs ranged with military precision across the open space. He dredged a sigh from deep within and buried his head in his hands. What the hell was happening to them? He felt the firm pressure of a hand in the middle of his back and slowly looked up. Chris. Red-rimmed and bloodshot eyes stared out from deeply shadowed sockets and he suspected that the blond man was as close to coming unstuck as he was himself, worn down by the events of the day, and exhausted from fighting not only with themselves but with each other.

“Come on, Vin. Let’s go home.”

Tanner hesitated, wanting to say no, reluctant to leave without some indication that Ezra was at least stable, feeling a keen sense of betrayal that he should even be tempted to leave. He felt Chris’ hand move to his shoulder and squeeze, a gesture that told him better than any words that they were indeed allies again.

“Nathan’s going to stay. There’s nothing we can do, Vin.” Permission to be relieved of his watch.

The Texan nodded then. Accepting. Chris picked up the jacket he had discarded earlier and carelessly slung it over one shoulder. “You mind if I crash at your place? I don’t think I can make it any further tonight.”

Vin considered the request for a moment then allowed the ghost of a smile to cross his lips and dug in his pocket for the keys to the Jeep, realising that he did not mind one bit. “No I don’t mind. I just hope you’re not hungry. There’s nothing in the place to eat.”

The two men moved off in unison, their weariness evident in their step. The blond man rested his elbow on Tanner’s shoulder. “So what’s new?”

Nathan resumed his place at the Southerner's bedside aware of every breath, each flicker of an eyelid, each twitch of muscle, every heartbeat, watching and waiting as the various intravenous infusions gradually filtered into Ezra's bloodstream slowly reversing the imbalances and restoring homeostasis to the undercover agent's ravaged system. The reassuring tick of the electronic infusion set as it delivered the solution into his veins, offset the regular beep of the cardiac monitor creating a soothing counterpoint to the even, if slow, respirations of the man in the bed.

Drawing his chair closer, Jackson rested his elbows on the bed and took the Southerner's relaxed hand in his own, not sure if the gesture was entirely for Ezra's benefit or whether he was seeking his own form of reassurance. He would stay even if he had to sleep on his feet, his own penance for allowing emotion to overcome reason and in so doing put a friend's life in danger. Bowing his head, Nathan wished he could erase the past few weeks, not only for himself but for Ezra. For Chris. For Vin. Wished that he could somehow take back all the hurt and anger. Feeling a deep sense of sorrow he wondered when it would be over and decided that for Ezra the answer was never.

"Hang in there, Ezra. Don't you give up on me now, you hear?"

oooOOOooo

Ezra had never liked waking up. That he was in hospital made the prospect even less inviting, so it was with great reluctance that he finally responded to the litany of his own name, interspersed with various urgings to wake up, being repeated insistently in his ear.

"Enough, already," he mumbled, protesting, "I'm awake."

He struggled with unco-operative eyelids to prove the fact that he had indeed roused, and was promptly forced to squint against the bright sunshine flooding through the window. It was an effort to keep his eyes from sliding shut again but he fought the urge and instead focused on whoever had rudely summoned him.

"Nathan," he breathed, feeling again the dull ache in his left side, "Is there a fire somewhere I should know about?"

Jackson parked himself on the edge of the bed and showed even white teeth in a warm smile. "No. No fire."

The Southerner sighed deeply and moved his shoulders in an effort to relieve some of the stiffness in his back. "Good. Does that mean I can go back to sleep?" He glanced around the room. "Was Chris here, or did I imagine that?"

Nathan laughed softly. "If you mean when you woke up long enough to tell him he was a bad tempered son-of-a-bitch then you've skipped a few chapters, Ezra. That was two days ago, but yes he's been here along with everyone else at one time or another."

Standish frowned and swung his head back to look at Jackson. "Two days? You're kidding, right? I've been out of it for two days?"

"Well, I don't want to sound too dramatic but it was getting pretty hairy for a while there. For a man who had one of the lowest blood counts I've seen in along time you've come out of it better than expected."

"Do I really want to know this?" The apprehension in his voice over-rode his attempt at affecting ennui.

Jackson raised the head of the bed slightly and offered the Southerner some ice. "I won't bore you with details but believe it that you're a very lucky guy, Ezra Standish."

"Lucky - my middle name," he sighed, "So why do I feel like I've been shafted."

"You can take my word for it, you really lucked out this time."

"So when do I get to feel better?"

Nathan laughed. "I don't have a crystal ball, Ezra."

The Southerner shifted restlessly. "That's hardly reassuring, Mr. Jackson."

"Alright," he joked, "what if I said tomorrow?"

Standish turned his head, his voice quiet and suddenly sad. "Some tomorrows never come, Mr. Jackson, and that, my friend, is something I know from experience."

Chris had waited long enough already and he knew that if he put it off one moment longer then his resolve would fail him completely. Taking a deep breath he pushed open the door of Ezra's room and walked into what he understood was going to be the most difficult confrontation of his life. At best he guessed Ezra would feel betrayed, and he was loath to even contemplate what to expect for the worst. Ezra sat by the window, staring into the distance, his expression neutral -- unreadable -- and giving no indication that he had even noticed another person had entered the room. Chris quietly closed the door behind him and leaned against it.

"Ezra."

Standish kept his gaze fixed on the view outside but acknowledged Larabee. "Chris."

"Can we talk?"

The Southerner made a gesture towards the other chair by the window, an invitation for Chris to sit. The older man dropped easily into the vacant chair and kept his gaze on the undercover agent for several moments but if Ezra was aware of the intense scrutiny,

he gave no sign. Chris thought he still looked tired and the doctors had confirmed that it would be several more weeks before he would be well enough to resume even minimal duties. The Southerner had rallied physically and was recovering from the ruptured spleen and the assorted health problems that had so debilitated him but there was still something in his eyes that finally convinced Chris that what he was about to do was the right thing. Larabee suddenly realised that Ezra had finally deigned to look at him and was watching him expectantly although his expression had not changed.

"I'm not sure I can stand the pace of this intellectually stimulating conversation," he commented after a minute or two of silence.

Chris sighed. "Sorry, Ezra. Just that I don't know how to say this."

Standish showed the first flicker of interest. "That bad?" His expression softened. "Spit it out, Chris. Whatever it is, it's obviously causing you as much grief as it's likely to cause me."

"Okay. Now I don't want you to take this the wrong way, Ezra but I'm recommending that you be put on suspension pending psychiatric evaluation."

The lengthy silence was not unexpected, the bitter laugh was. "I'd say you must be joking, but I already know you're not."

"No joke." The blond man dropped his gaze, unable to meet the Southerner's hurt and accusing stare any longer.

Ezra stared down at his hands. "You already have my badge, Chris, isn't that enough?"

"I don't want your badge." His voice was quiet. "I want you back with the team."

Standish stood up, one hand guarding his still healing surgical scar and faced the window, turning his back on the blond man, his shoulders set in an attitude of defeat. "I don't know if I can do that, Chris. I don't even know if I want to do it."

Larabee rose and moved behind him, digging his hands deep in his pockets, suddenly afraid that he had set something in motion that he was now powerless to stop. The risk had always been there, he had just dared to hope that Ezra would be able to see beyond the trees to the wood. "Wait a minute. Listen to me! Just hang ten." He knew he was sounding panicky. "Don't make any hasty decisions you'll only regret later. This isn't the time."

Ezra turned and Chris was shocked by the haunted confusion in his eyes. "No, you're wrong. Maybe this is exactly the time." He ran his fingers through his hair and sat down heavily on the window sill. "Maybe it's time to just call it quits."

A thrill of raw fear went through the senior agent and he shook his head, not sure if he was more disturbed by Standish's words or the calm, dispassionate tone in which they were delivered. If the Southerner was beyond caring then the battle was already lost.

"Don't do this, Ezra. This is not the way to go. It's not what you want and it sure as hell isn't what I want."

The Southerner's head came up. He leaned forward, still holding his torso where the surgical incision bisected his chest but his pain was the anguish of a man tortured by indecision. The sigh was dredged from deep in his chest. "God, I'm so tired. I just don't want to feel this way anymore."

Larabee moved a step forward, wanting -- no, needing -- to explain that he was trying to help but Ezra pushed himself away from the sill and turned his back yet again.

"Ezra..."

"Please, Chris, just go."

Larabee hesitated for a moment, then sighed and started to walk away. As he reached the door he stopped and dipped his hand into his back pocket, impulsively turning back and moved to where Standish was still standing, his hurt a tangible entity that surrounded him. Wordlessly he slipped something into Ezra's palm, his own fingers firmly closing in a fist around Ezra's own, before he wheeled and quickly strode out of the room leaving the Southerner alone once more.

Slowly Ezra opened his hand and stared for a long time at the object resting in his palm. His badge.

Chris sat alone in the Ram, for once relishing the solitude and reluctant to seek anyone's company although he knew that Josiah would be waiting to hear from him. He leaned back and closed his eyes, suddenly afraid that he had finally lost Ezra once and for all, but he had needed to do something, to take some kind of action, before he went so far down the path of self-destruction that he had no chance of returning. He had not fully appreciated Nathan's concern for the Southerner's state of mind before, but now he could understand why Ezra was being considered as a possible suicide risk. The man's despair was tangible, a real and living thing that coloured his every thought and action, dragging him down into the darkest depths.

Sitting up and shrugging off the cloak of despondency that had settled over his own shoulders, he angrily stabbed the key into the ignition and the engine roared into life. The sooner this was settled the better. He fitted his phone into the bracket on the

dashboard, switching to hands-free as he released the brake and manoeuvred out of the parking lot, speed dialling Buck's cell phone. Right now he had no intention of leaving Ezra alone, whether he liked it or not, neither he nor any of the others were about to let go of one of their own without some sort of fight.

"Buck? You got anything on tonight?...Yeah? Well, take a rain-check..."

The light had faded to a dull, metallic grey that suffused the room with soft shadows, smoothing the hard edges of the room and descending like a comforting blanket over the man in the chair. The door cracked open allowing a sliver of light from the corridor to infiltrate a few feet into the room before being swallowed by the gloom. For a brief moment, a head appeared, checking, then the door closed again. He did not acknowledge the regular intrusions, fully aware that he was on suicide watch and smiling inwardly at the unsubtle attempts of the staff to ensure his safety. They did not understand that the last consideration on his mind was taking his own life, but it pleased him to think that should he have indeed been contemplating the ultimate act of self-absorption he could, and probably would, have already succeeded in spite of their best efforts.

His fingers moved again over the irregular surface of the medallion in his hand and, just as he had come to disregard the intrusiveness of the staff, with an equal degree of disinterest he ignored the moisture that gathered at the corners of his eyes and which, at intervals, tracked steadily down his cheeks. He ignored it because he was powerless to stop the feelings that now cascaded over him, sucking him further into the vortex and drawing him into the black pit that his emotions had become. Fragments of his life -- memories -- tumbled over one another in an endless parade of hurt and failure, engulfing and swallowing all that had been good, such as those times had been in a lifetime of under-achievement. *So, what now?* He would do what he always did. He would move on.

Buck did not know what to say. He had been summoned but Chris' call had not prepared him for this. Stay with him; don't leave him on his own, had been the instructions. *Thanks, Chris, you owe me a big one.* He walked slowly forward feeling completely out of his depth; the silence was disconcerting enough but the sight of the tears glistening on Ezra's face was enough to undo him. Jesus, what was he supposed to do now? He moved into the Southerner's line of sight, at first embarrassed for the urbane undercover agent, uncomfortable that he should be witness to his pain and grief,

then overcome by a surge of protectiveness towards the man he had come to count among his closest friends. Kneeling in front of the chair he took the man's cold hands in his own, his heart going out to the Southerner as his fingers brushed the agency badge that nestled in his left palm. The badge he knew he had given up to Chris.

"Hey, pard."

No response.

"Ezra."

Nothing.

"Jesus, man! Don't do this." He had to fight to keep his voice steady. "Talk to me."

Another silent tear escaped and Buck, responding to nothing more than instinct, suddenly released Ezra's hands and instead roughly clasped him in a bear hug, wrapping his muscular arms around the smaller man. He could feel the tension in the Southerner's body, the resistance as each muscle strained, as tight as a bow string and as unyielding as steel, and eased the pressure of his grip. Unable to find anything to say that would possibly come out sounding as he intended he just held the embrace, trying to express physically what he could not put into words. Very slowly, so slowly he was hardly aware of the change, Ezra relaxed finally accepting the human contact and the two men clutched each other almost aggressively.

After a few moments, Ezra pulled back obviously uncomfortable with the continued closeness and Buck released him, well aware of the Southerner's disinclination to any overt physical displays of male bonding. *Damnit, he was worse than Chris.* He sat back on his heels giving Ezra some space.

"I won't tell if you don't," he joked, his voice a conspiratorial whisper, still charged with emotion.

Standish kept his head down but Buck could see the ghost of a smile playing across his lips. "I would sincerely appreciate such uncharacteristic discretion on your part, Mr. Wilmington," he answered gravely, "I have more than enough to contend with without adding rumours regarding my sexual orientation."

Buck laughed softly and started to get to his feet, slapping the Southerner playfully on the back. "Hell, Ezra, what's another rumour when you're just another black sheep among many? Been rumours about Chris and Vin since we teamed up..." His grin widened. "...but I reckon that's somethin' best left alone."

Ezra gently put his hands together, still cradling the badge between his cupped palms and looked up at Wilmington, his eyes bloodshot and tired-looking but also filled

with a question. "Might I assume then that you are to be my nursemaid for the evening? Come to make sure I don't find a razor and slit my throat."

Buck looked uncomfortable, scuffing his boot-toe on the carpet. "Just here as a friend, Ezra."

The Southerner's tired smile was infuriatingly smug. *Goddamn, even when he was dealt what looked like a sure-fire losing hand the man could manage to finesse his way to taking the entire pot.* "At Mr. Larabee's invitation no doubt."

Buck noticed that the undercover agent carefully slipped his agency badge into the pocket of his robe and wondered briefly at its real significance. Unable to lie under Ezra's measured gaze he simply laughed. "Well, he may have suggested that you might be looking for company." He looked keenly at the still drained Southerner. "And I guess the man was right."

Inclining his head, Ezra wordlessly acknowledged the truth of Buck's observation. If nothing else Larabee was a canny bastard. His hand dropped to his pocket and he smoothed his thumb over the embossed surface of the still warm metal badge in his fingers. One day he might actually be able to repay him.

oooOOOooo

Ezra had assumed his best poker face and sat, at apparent ease, in the waiting room flicking with feigned interest through an ancient copy of Time magazine. It took someone who knew him, and knew him well, to detect the panic raging just under the urbane veneer. Vin leaned across and deftly snatched the magazine from the Southerner's hand.

"Chill, Ezra. You'll be okay."

Standish levelled a frosty stare at the Texan. "Mr. Tanner, I have the gravest reservations about parading the minutiae my life in front of a psychiatrist."

"She's a friend of Josiah's."

Ezra laughed, a sound completely devoid of humour. "And that's supposed to make me feel better?"

Tanner shook his head. "You're just making it harder for yourself, Ezra. Why do you do that?" His voice held a note of exasperation.

The Southerner opened his mouth to answer, and then snapped it shut again as the door to Jennene Fairstein's office swung open.

"Mr. Standish?"

Dr. Fairstein was hardly what he expected. He had assumed that she would be of Josiah's vintage but she was closer to his own age, perhaps a few years older. She moved forward and any preconceived notions of psychiatrists flew out of the window as he calculatingly appraised the woman, noting the casual attire -- no professional identity to maintain here -- the lack of makeup and the confident, friendly smile. Not conventionally beautiful, a face too strong to be considered attractive, but pleasing enough on the eye. Switching on the charm he rose to meet his judge, jury and possible executioner; the perfect Southern gentleman.

Five minutes into the session, the woman got up from her chair and walked to the coat rack beside the door, grabbing a worn leather jacket before turning back to her client.

"You're obviously not comfortable here, Ezra. Shall we go for a walk instead?" She tilted her head to one side, gauging his reaction. "I promise that this is not some devious ploy to trick you in any way."

The Southerner slowly stood up and moved to stand beside her, his expression as neutral as his voice. "A walk? Sounds perfect."

She shrugged into her jacket, flicking her hair free of the collar and reached out to touch Ezra's arm with the tips of her fingers. "You don't trust me, do you?"

He looked thoughtfully down at his shoes for a long moment, his tongue protruding slightly between his lips, considering his response, then switched his gaze to the psychiatrist.

"I don't *know* you."

He had tried to put the memories aside, to hide them deep enough to buffer the pain and he had almost succeeded, but she had somehow found the key and unlocked the door. Now, sitting on a park bench, relaxed in the somnolent heat of the mid-afternoon sun, he reluctantly began the most difficult and sorrowful journey of his life -- one of remembrance. He had never been comfortable sharing his feelings with others. From an early age he had been taught to conceal his true feelings, to suppress any hurt, to turn others' emotions to his advantage but never to reveal his own. Those particular lessons he had learned almost too well. In a vulnerable moment he had opened up, just a little, to Chris but the barricades had gone up again the moment he had regained some control over his emotions. He had buried his feelings just as surely as he had buried Andie.

It had never been his intention to disclose any more than was absolutely necessary to persuade the psychiatrist that he was fit to get back to work but somehow once he started to put feelings into words it was easier to go on than to stop. Several times he faltered, the slight catch in his voice betraying the intensity of his emotions but he maintained his composure, something he had been afraid of losing once he set the memories free. It was late afternoon before finally, emotionally drained, he fell silent. The briefest touch on his arm reminded him that he was not alone and he sat up, rubbing one hand across the back of his neck, his fatigue obvious.

"I think that's enough for today," Fairstein's voice was sympathetic, "You're tired."

Ezra sighed and toyed self-consciously with the heavy signet ring on his finger. "You know, the nights are the hardest," he confessed suddenly, his voice barely a whisper, "I really miss her."

"That's only natural. Those feelings don't just go away, Ezra. What matters is how you deal with them. The venlafaxine will help in getting your balance back and while it can't take away the hurt it can make it more manageable." She rested a hand on his arm. "You said you didn't want to feel like this anymore but, tell me, if it were possible to erase all the those memories of Andie, to forget the fact that the two of you created a human life together, to wipe the slate clean, would you do it?"

The Southerner continued to focus on his hands, the mobile, well-manicured fingers endlessly twisting the ring on his finger the only indication of his inner struggle. After a few moments of silence he slowly turned his head to look at her, his hands suddenly still.

"No." He paused for a heartbeat, a sad smile briefly touching his lips. "Not for anything."

oooOOOooo

He walked without haste. No need for urgency in this place where the pressures of life no longer had any meaning. In the quiet of the early morning he reflected on the absolute serenity of the day and felt an overwhelming sense of peace wash over him. This was the final step for him, a catharsis of sorts. He had not been back to this place since the day after the funeral, when the pain of loss was new and all-consuming. With a sigh, Ezra slowed to a halt and lifted his head. Gone was the plain marker and in its place stood a polished granite headstone. Nothing else had changed though. How could it? This was still the last resting place of Andrea Prentice -- Andie -- and her unborn child. His child.

He stood for a long time staring thoughtfully at the dark stone and the three words etched beneath her name and the dates that represented her too-short life: *Love...always perseveres*. He hoped so.

Starting to turn away, he hesitated and looked back, a fist closing around his heart and squeezing the breath from him as he fought to utter the words he needed to say, his voice a whisper. "I won't forget."

Love you, babe.

oooOOOooo

The low slung Jaguar cruised into the underground parking garage and nosed into a vacant spot between two familiar vehicles, the throaty purr of the twelve cylinder engine sounding loud in the confined space. Flanked by Vin's Jeep and Buck's Chevy he felt an unexpected sense of security, which he then promptly dismissed as sentimental bullshit; deciding instead that anti-depressant medication had a lot to answer for.

He cut the engine and took his time leaving the car, having already made himself late by driving three times around the block before finally mustering the courage to turn into the ATF garage. Unconcerned, he reminded himself that he had an image to maintain, and for Ezra Standish to arrive anything but fashionably late would be out of character. On the other hand he had no desire to piss Chris Larabee off on his first day back at work in over a month. A fleeting smile crossed his lips at the thought and straightening his tie, he walked the short distance through the deserted garage to the elevators.

As the doors hissed open with a pneumatic wheeze at his floor, he felt his heart rate kick into an up-tempo rhythm, the prospect of walking into the office suddenly robbing his mouth of moisture and making his palms sweat. They would all be there already and he knew he would feel like a prima donna making a grand gesture out of a late entrance. Now he wished he had come early. The doors began to close and he hurried out of the elevator car into the foyer, abruptly changing course and making a detour to the men's room in the hall.

Leaning over one of the hand basins he dashed cold water on his face, annoyed at himself for having given in to his apprehension, then quickly wiped his face on a paper towel and leaned back on the utilitarian metal fixture. Jannene had told him it would be hard, he just had no idea it would be quite so traumatic. With a sigh he turned again to face the mirror, critically appraising the face that stared back at him. He had regained most of the weight he had lost and the suit that had hung on his too-lean frame a few weeks ago now fitted perfectly. To all intents and purposes he was the old Ezra; only he

knew just how much he had changed in ten months. On the outside he was still the same -- well, almost. He had kept the Prince Albert, a reminder of a past he was not quite ready to forget. The smile, as he recalled Buck's attempt to embarrass him all those months before, was one of genuine humour as he considered what Wilmington's reaction would be should he discover that he was still pierced. He decided that was one secret worth keeping.

No. The changes that mattered were invisible and far more elemental. The ones that scarred his psyche. The ones that had left a huge, empty hole in his soul that he doubted would ever be filled again. The ones that came from surrendering his heart to someone else, just to have it returned to him in broken pieces. More secrets. He found the thought amusing and his smile broadened, touching his eyes at last. Maybe the changes had not been quite as significant as he imagined after all. With a sigh, he dismissed the moment of introspection, and quickly straightened, his manner suddenly businesslike. Shoulders squared, he adjusted his cuffs, ready to make his appearance, hoping that he had made the right decision.

The bustle and activity in the bull pen was a comforting buzz of white noise. Through the murmur of indistinct words he could hear Buck's voice rising in a plaintive whine.

"Aw, hell, Vin. That's not fair!"

Tanner's resulting laugh told him who was winning that particular argument and suddenly he very much wanted to be a part of the familiar banter. Unnoticed, he moved quietly behind the two men, leaning between them with one hand on the back of each man's chair and keeping his voice low.

"Gentlemen, please. I find it hard to believe that in all these months you have still not found anything more stimulating than thumb wrestling with which to occupy your idle moments!"

The Texan's guilty start was overshadowed by Buck's unrestrained bellow of welcome. "Ezra!"

Wilmington jumped enthusiastically to his feet and threw his arms around the smaller man in a welcoming bear hug. The Southerner endured the embrace for a full half-minute, recognising the sentiment as genuine, before pulling away from the demonstrative agent murmuring: "Appearances, Mr. Wilmington. Appearances." Buck roared with laughter, delivering a hefty slap to Ezra's shoulder as he painstakingly rearranged his jacket.

Vin twisted in his chair, a broad smile on his face as J.D, Nathan and Josiah left their desks to join the fray. "Good to see you back, Ezra."

“Want some coffee, Ezra? It’s okay, Vin didn’t make it.”

“You’re looking well, brother. Guess that won’t last long now you’re back in this snake pit.”

Standish had subconsciously been aware of the conversation around them dying by degrees and as complete silence descended, he raised his eyes already knowing the reason. Chris, almost as immaculate as the Southerner himself, in an expensive charcoal grey suit, was frowning and looking at his watch.

“Jesus Christ, Ezra! Your first day back on the job and you can’t even make it on time.”

The Southerner inclined his head, unperturbed. “Some things, Mr. Larabee, never change,” he replied smoothly, “My punctuality, it would seem, is one of them.”

Larabee’s stern expression softened into a rare, warm smile. “Been waitin’ for you. Thought you’d maybe changed your mind and decided not to show.”

Standish gave a crooked grin, suspecting that Chris already had a good idea why he was late. He swore the man was clairvoyant.

“Believe me, Chris,” he said earnestly, “I wouldn’t have missed this for the world.”

And he found, to his own immense satisfaction, that he really meant it.