

# Bodyguards: Backwash

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The compact eight-seater charter plane banked steeply over the string of small islands nestled in the impossibly blue water of the Caribbean, losing height and bleeding off speed as it started its descent in preparation for landing. The Cessna 403, a twin piston propeller-driven craft ideal for the type of island-hopping service that operated throughout the Caribbean, had made the trip from the mainland to the Virgin Islands in a little over thirty minutes and was now approaching the runway at Taylor's Bay on the leeward side of the nine square-mile island of Virgin Gorda.

Inside the modestly sized but well-appointed cabin of the aircraft, only two of the four passengers showed any interest in the fact that they were about to land, and then for very different reasons; one, because he loved flying, the other, because he hated it and found the prospect of landing in a small plane on a tiny island airstrip more than a little disturbing. He would have been surprised to find that the phlegmatic Southerner in the neighbouring seat was, in fact, thinking along the same lines. The difference being that the other man's apprehension stemmed from the fact that he, Ezra Standish, had been flying aircraft since the age of 15 and unless he was flying in a commercial jetliner it was natural for him to slip into the role of the quintessential back-seat pilot. The remaining two passengers seemed either oblivious or indifferent to the fact that they were within minutes of landing. In fact one was sleeping and the other was, atypically, engrossed in a book, and neither seemed inclined to surface before it was absolutely necessary.

Meanwhile Ezra stared thoughtfully out of the window at the island, thrusting ruggedly out of the Caribbean and now looming larger, coming sharply into focus as the Cessna dived out of the sky like some predatory bird with its target in sight, to land a few minutes later on the short runway with a soft jarring thud that confirmed they had touched solid earth once more. As the plane rapidly used up the frighteningly short runway, Ezra felt the pressure of sudden, intense, deceleration and he turned to glance at the man sitting on his left.

Tanner's relief at landing was etched clearly on his face and the Southerner silently sympathised with the Texan. Flying was probably the one thing that unnerved Vin and not because he was afraid, but because as soon as he was off the ground he suffered the inconvenient and often embarrassing agonies of air sickness. On this second leg he had been lucky but the flight from Boston to Puerto Rico had been something of a nightmare and as a result he had been sitting, tight-lipped and morose, all the way from San Juan. Ezra had not dared ask but he wondered if Vin got sea-sick too, because if he did it was definitely going to be a very long week.

Standish was more than ready for a break. Still officially recuperating from the injuries he sustained in Guatemala, the prospect of a week's vacation on a motor yacht in the Caribbean, compliments of Judge Orrin Travis – founder, financial backer and director of InterSept - fitted perfectly with his idea of rest and relaxation. For once he would be the first admit that he needed it. The Guatemala job had been a brutal initiation into the world of close protection and, if that wasn't

enough, he had then booked a flight to New Orleans a scant two days after he had signed himself out of hospital. He couldn't explain, even now, why he had felt such an urgent need to revisit the city that had nothing but painful associations for him but it had been something he felt compelled to do. He had spent almost two weeks there and in that time he had asked himself more than once just what he was looking for - what he hoped to achieve - and each time he had found no satisfactory answer because the simple truth was that he didn't know. Maybe he had just needed to face his demons.

He had arrived back to Boston with more questions than answers, but while he had not managed to bring an end to that particular chapter in his life, it gave him a sense of satisfaction to know that he had at least succeeded in turning the page.

Now, just three days later, he was in the British Virgin Islands with nothing more taxing on his schedule than deciding which wine to have with dinner. Perfect.

Virgin Gorda was the third largest of the British Virgin Islands, named Fat Virgin by Columbus who had considered the topography of the island to resemble a reclining woman. Wilmington's typical response to that piece of information was that if that was the case Columbus had, by that time, definitely been way too long at sea.

As the others exchanged wide grins, Ezra had shaken his head in mock exasperation.

"Buck, you are without a doubt a complete and utter philistine."

Wilmington sighed expansively as he stretched his lanky frame out in the front seat of the taxi which was now loaded with the four men and their luggage and heading north for Leverick Bay.

"Well gotta keep the balance, Ezra! How else are guys like you going to get a chance to feel superior?"

The Southerner merely smiled as he shot a sceptical look at the other man.

"No offence, Buck, but I don't think that's ever going to be a real challenge."

Beside him, Vin started to laugh.

"And he scores! Reckon that was a clean hit, Ezra."

Buck assumed a hurt expression and appealed to Chris, who had settled back to lean against the rear passenger door and seemed to be taking in the spectacular scenery unfolding around them.

"And what about you, old buddy?" he emphasised the last two words. "What do you think?"

Chris turned slowly away from the window and, waiting a beat, looked at each of the three men before he spoke.

"Me? I think I could use a beer."

And so it began.

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The Obsession was a magnificent vessel; a sleek eighty-five foot Hatteras motor yacht, she rocked gently at her mooring, her pristine white hull providing a dramatic contrast to the stunning backdrop of Caribbean blue.

Tanner gave a low, appreciative whistle as he looked her over from the dock.

“That's some boat.”

“And some serious money,” added Ezra, pragmatically.

“No kidding,” agreed the Texan, already smitten by the impressive dimensions and clean lines of the boat. “Sure looks like a little piece of heaven.”

“A whole lotta heaven if you ask me,” pronounced Chris softly, then with a smile he looked at each of them. “So, any of you guys done any sailing?”

There was a moment when all three men looked at Larabee with expressions that ranged from uncertainty and doubt to studied indifference, then Tanner leaned down to pick up his holdall, giving a casual shrug as he straightened.

“Guess the Galveston ferry don't count, huh?”

Larabee's grin broadened as he hefted his own bag from one hand to the other and started down the dock, the movement an invitation for the others to follow.

Buck hesitated and looked questioningly at Ezra.

“He's kidding, right? I mean, this is a vacation isn't it? You know the old R & R?” He watched for a few seconds as Chris walked away towards the moored boat then turned back to the Southerner. “Ezra, I think we just got ourselves hijacked.”

“I think the term you're looking for is press-ganged,” he muttered, stooping to pick up Wilmington's bag in his free hand, “and might I suggest that we make haste to follow Captain Ahab there before he gets truly into character and decides to have us keel-hauled.”

Buck leaned on his elbow crutch, his gaze fixed on Larabee.

“Is that before or after we catch the whale?”

Laughing, the two men moved along the wooden dock to follow Chris and Vin onto what was going to be, for better or worse, their home base for the next seven days.

Within five minutes of being on board Ezra quickly revised his original classification of the boat from shipboard home to floating palace. He was not easily impressed but he could see how the Obsession could easily become one. The polished wood interior glowed with the rich patina that only came from many years of loving care and attention; every piece of furniture, every inch of décor screamed the ultimate in luxury discreetly cloaked in good-taste; nothing about the vessel was ostentatious or overdone yet there was no denying the tantalising aroma of money that permeated the boat from stem to stern. Serious money indeed.

No one disputed Larabee's right to the only stateroom on the upper deck just off the main salon; the Captain's cabin. Even on vacation there was a natural order that none of the three would think of challenging. To them wherever they were and whatever they were doing, Chris was always

going to be boss. That's just how it was.

Finding the companionways that took them below-decks the others wasted little time in locating the remaining guest accommodation; two *en suite* twin cabins aft and one triple stateroom forward. Ezra staked his claim on the one in the bows chiefly because, although it lacked an *en suite* bathroom, it was larger overall and, more importantly, one of the three berths was a double. It also had the advantage of being private, separated as it was from the other guest cabins by the engine room and galley. In effect he had the whole forward section to himself. Later in the week he knew he would be obliged to take on a room-mate as cabin-space would have to be made for Dunne, Jackson and Sanchez, who would be joining them for the last few days on board, but until that moment it was all his. Slowly looking round the small yet lavishly appointed space he decided that he could definitely get used to the living the life of the idle rich.

The Southerner lifted his bag and swung it onto the bed, wincing as the sudden twinge in his right side reminded him just why he was there in the first place. Rest and recuperation.

It had been almost a month since Coban. The superficial bruising had long since faded and the deep, soft tissue damage healed. Even the two ribs he had fractured were almost mended and his finger, that had been so viciously broken on his first day as a hostage, no longer troubled him at all but he was still struggling to overcome the insomnia that had plagued him since his return to Boston. For the first twenty four hours he had slept the clock round thanks to the combination of exhaustion and medication but since he left the hospital he had not managed more than one night in three of uninterrupted sleep. Maybe this week of total relaxation would see a reversal in his fortunes, at least on the health and well-being front.

"Ezra!"

He smiled as he heard Buck noisily negotiating the narrow companionway just beyond the cabin door. So much for private.

"Door's open."

Wilmington had to duck his head to fit his lanky frame through the doorway and from Ezra's point of view the cabin suddenly seemed a lot smaller than before. As if reading his thoughts Buck grinned and leaned one arm on the upper bunk that was fitted against the curve of the starboard bulkhead.

"Kinda cosy, huh?"

"Indeed, but I, for one, am not about to look this particular gift horse in the mouth."

"Hell, no! But you gotta admit, you'd need to be on pretty friendly terms with your roomies."

"Well I don't know about you, Buck, but I don't plan on spending a great deal of time in here. And in case you haven't noticed, I don't have a "roomie" - friendly or otherwise."

"Ah, but come Friday..."

"Quite," interrupted the Southerner smoothly, "but for now, what brings you down here; apart from criticising my cabin?" A quick smile, took the edge off his words as he continued taking

his belongings out of his bag and stowing them in the various cupboards and drawers.

“Oh, yeah. Chris wants us up on deck. The pilot's here to take us out of the marina.”

As if on cue the two GM engines rumbled into life, no more than ten feet away but buffered by the galley beyond, settling into a rhythmic, throbbing purr. Without haste, more out of respect for his healing ribs than any intention of dragging his heels, Ezra moved his bag to a locker under the divan before finally straightening and directing a canny smile at Wilmington.

“I believe we have been summoned, Mr. Wilmington. Best not keep our fearless leader waiting.”

## II

They had not ventured far having anchored in the North Sound well before dusk. With its six foot draft the Obsession could not anchor in many of the spots close to shore favoured by smaller vessels but the pilot had helpfully suggested several overnight alternatives before leaving them to literally sail – or in this case motor - into the sunset. After a leisurely recce of the sound Chris had settled for dropping anchor just off Bitter End, one of a number of vessels seeking a sheltered and secure berth in the Caribbean's most protected and secluded deep water harbour for the night. In these islands it was an unwritten law that no one sailed after sundown.

Now, with the engines silenced and only the muted hum of the generator to disturb the peace of the balmy evening, the four men relaxed on the aft deck as the big boat rocked gently on the water.

Supper had come together with surprising ease considering the fact that they were four single guys, whose culinary skills were generally confined to the bare-bones basics necessary to keep body and soul together, suddenly faced with an ultra-modern state-of-the-art galley and enough provisions on board to feed a small army. Somehow, between them, they had put together a three course meal that had gone down very well with a bottle of chilled chablis. Chris was still wondering where the seafood cocktail with a creole sauce had been conjured from but he had his suspicions that Ezra might have been involved with that one. No surprise there really; he was quickly finding out that the Southerner seemed to have quite an arsenal of hidden talents at his disposal.

With a sigh of contentment, Larabee leaned back in his seat, a Cuban cigar in one hand and a glass of cognac in the other. Ezra had already neatly sidestepped the issue of how he came to have a generous supply of *Cohibos Esplendidos* which Chris knew that in spite of the US ban on importation would, without any doubt whatsoever, be the genuine article. Instead he had effortlessly turned the conversation around to boats – and Chris's own hidden talent.

“So, Chris, exactly where did you come by your impressive nautical skills?”

“Yeah!” added Buck, with a touch of indignation, “You sure kept that little secret all to

yourself.”

Larabee smiled, more than a little pleased with himself at having made no embarrassing mistakes in handling the big vessel. It had been many years since he had last taken a boat out, and never one of this size.

“Lived for a while in South Bend, Indiana when I was in my teens. Used to go boating on Lake Michigan. Fishing mainly; great salmon up there. Learned to sail there too. Even crewed on a few yachts in my time. Messed a round in boats on and off most of my life I guess but haven't bothered much in the last few years. Priorities, you know? You kinda lose touch with the things you used to do...”

“You mean back in the good old days,” mused Buck, interrupting, “when all you had to think about was where the next party was and when you were gonna get laid.”

Vin slouched further down in his chair and took a quick swallow of his beer before he aimed a dubious look in Wilmington's direction.

“Hell, Buck,” he said evenly, “for you that was just yesterday.”

The slowly widening grin that came after was mirrored by Chris's and across the table the Southerner laughed softly, the three of them enjoying the rare occasion of Wilmington being momentarily struck speechless and gaping like a landed fish as he struggled to come up with a fitting retaliation. Before he could say a word, Chris aimed two fingers at his friend like a gun and pretended to fire.

“Down in flames, man, you're down in flames.”

Buck finally gave up trying to defend himself as laughter rolled over him in a solid wave, and instead gave a casual shrug and picked up his beer.

“Yeah, well I guess I just don't have as far to travel down that particular memory lane as some folks round here.” He looked pointedly at Tanner, his eyes alive with mischief. “Fact is, some of us just got it – some of us ain't.”

Ezra leaned forward to tap the ash from his cigar into a heavy silver ashtray, a sly smile on his face.

“Why, Mister Tanner, I do believe that Buck here is maligning your good name by casting aspersions on your...” he paused, as if searching for the appropriate word before cocking one eyebrow and adding, archly, “uh...manhood.”

“Don't know 'bout that, Ezra,” mused an unperturbed Vin, his Texas accent suddenly thickening, “but from where I'm sittin' it looks like right now Buck hardly got the strength to cast his own shadow never mind anything else. You know, him being an invalid and all. Anyhow,” he finished, straight-faced, “whatever it is you got, Buck, is like as not to be catchin', so for my money you can keep it.”

Wilmington's expression managed to say far more than any words, even if he could have found them, but he recognised when to make a tactical withdrawal and leaned back to nurse his

beer in both hands as he looked from one to the other.

"Okay, okay, have a few laughs on me with your low-down cheap shots," he invited, voice laced with sarcasm, then in a barely audible undertone: "Sonsabitches."

If he had expected any degree of contrition it was noticeably absent as Vin and Ezra seemed to find even greater hilarity in his reaction.

"Hell, it wasn't *that* funny," muttered Buck, darkly, finally rescued by Chris who, although he was doing little to hide his own amusement, finally stepped in to turn the conversation around and take the heat off his friend at least for a little while.

"So, Ezra, seeing as you're the one who started with the secrets, where'd you learn to cook?"

The Southerner slowly exhaled a cloud of fragrant cigar smoke before answering.

"If you knew my mother you wouldn't have to ask," he responded, drily. "With Maude you either hire a cook or learn to fend for yourself. The only remaining alternative is to starve."

"Aw, Ezra, she can't be that bad. She's your mother..." protested Tanner.

"Trust me, Maude would never demean herself by engaging in any form of manual labour."

"Hah," cried Buck, a note of triumph in his voice as if he had just discovered something that he had long suspected, "now we know where you get it from!"

Standish tilted his head slightly, his smile roguish.

"And it's a gift I've worked hard at perfecting," he admitted shamelessly, "Haven't you heard the old adage that only fools and horses work?"

"So that makes me...?"

"A veritable work-horse, Buck," came back Ezra, smoothly, "The salt of the earth."

He raised his glass in a mock toast, adjusting his expression to more convincingly support the sincerity of his statement.

"See?" He looked quickly from Tanner to Larabee. "What do I keep telling you? Slicker'n a teflon coated skillet!"

"I'll take that as a compliment," drawled the Southerner, stretching out his legs and crossing them at the ankles as he went back to enjoying his cigar.

"Well you can take this as a compliment, or not," put in Chris, mildly, "but I think we just found ourselves a ship's cook for the duration."

Ezra groaned theatrically, although in spite of his reaction the prospect didn't seem to worry him unduly and he made no objection to taking it on.

"Hoist on my own petard."

It was Wilmington's turn to laugh, finding the idea of Ezra preparing meals the best joke he'd heard all year.

"I call it being suckered real good, Ezra!"

The Southerner inclined his head as if accepting Buck's appraisal of the situation before



aiming a cunning look at Larabee.

“Of course, he added, reasonably, “A man of my culinary skill will require the appropriate support...” He paused as if considering his options then ventured: “A kitchen hand at least, Captain Larabee, and given that Buck here is prevented by his recent injury from undertaking more physical tasks...”

“Aw, hell, Chris! You wouldn't ... you can't do that to a man...Chris?”

Across the table Ezra grinned shamelessly and, without a word, mimed pulling a trigger then blowing down the barrel of a smoking gun just as Chris had earlier, sending his message loud and clear. The first points were on the board.

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He didn't need to look at his watch. Even here, out on the water and hundreds of miles from his Harborside apartment, he knew. It was four in the morning, or very close to it. And he was wide awake. As always he had awakened with his pulse galloping and in a lather of sweat, and, as always, that same moment of pure panic as he opened his eyes. He could never recall exactly what it was that ejected him from the depths of sleep with such precise efficiency but once he was awake there was no going back. The pattern had become so familiar that he had forgotten what it was like to sleep for more than four hours at a stretch. He had stopped trying to fight it. Now he just got out of bed and got on with his day.

Only today he was on a boat anchored in the Caribbean. No taking the Beamer out for a drive or walking along the Charles River long before the city awakened. Any hope that the change in environment would lift the curse of insomnia had flown straight out of the window the moment he had woken with that all too-familiar start, eyes snapping open to darkness while his heart raced like a trip-hammer.

He waited a few minutes until his body adjusted to the fact that there was no need for him to either fight or flee and his pulse returned to its usual rhythm then, resigned to the undeniable fact that his day had now begun, he flicked on the cabin light and eased himself out of bed.

It was slightly disconcerting to have the floor moving, however subtly, under his feet but there was no mistaking the constant motion of the hull even in the relatively calm waters of the sound; a gentle rocking motion that required constant minute readjustment in stance to maintain balance. He decided that shaving might be an interesting experience but for the moment that was not his list of immediate priorities, on the other hand coffee most definitely was.

He pulled on a pair of board shorts and padded out to the galley, smiling to himself as he measured ground coffee into the French press as the pure indulgence of getting away from it all in such spectacular fashion as this started to sink in. For the first time in a long and difficult year he felt a real sense of freedom and, more to the point, a sense of future.

Leaning with his back to the bench, he spared a moment to savour the solitude of the moment. While he had never had any trouble socialising, neither was he averse to keeping his own company; perhaps it was merely the legacy of being an only child or maybe it was just his way of buffering against the inevitable treachery of personal relationships. With a sigh he turned and mechanically removed the boiling water from the stove top to pour into the press and shunted that thought aside, deciding there was no place for it here. Time to turn the page.

As he waited for the coffee to brew he looked slowly around the small but practical galley, and allowed himself a self-satisfied grin. Goddamned ship's cook! Still, he was confident in his ability to respond to the challenge and knew his way around a kitchen well enough to be able to show Larabee a thing or two about culinary diversity. But then perhaps Larabee already knew that. Pouring himself a mug of the Jamaican Blue Mountain brew he came to the extraordinary and startling conclusion that even if that was the case the idea really didn't sit too badly with him. Not too badly at all.

With a good two hours to go before sunrise it was still cool on deck but, in spite of the distinct pre-dawn chill in the gentle breeze, not unpleasantly so and he was content to lean on the stern rail without feeling a need for anything more substantial than the shorts he already wore. Barefoot and shirtless, he found it hard to recall when he had last been quite so indifferent about his appearance but at the same time it was also a very long time since he had felt such a profound sense of satisfaction.

Silently he thanked Orrin Travis for what he was quickly beginning to realise was not only a generous but very shrewd gesture. Guatemala had been one hell of an assignment but this was more than a reward for a job well done, it was offered as a restorative. Yet it was more than just chance to recharge; rather an opportunity to recover both physically and psychologically. He smiled to himself. Not to mention more enjoyable and far less expensive than a month in therapy.

For a long time he stared out over the calm waters of the sound before instinct prompted him to look over his shoulder, his senses telling him that he was no longer alone. He turned back slowly having identified the intruder, a smile crossing his face as he stared once again into the distance. Evidently he wasn't the only person on board having trouble sleeping.

"Don't tell me. You're missing your teddy bear."

Larabee moved without haste towards the rail obviously having taken the Southerner's acknowledgement of his presence as tacit permission to join him.

"Coupla ladies I might be missing by the end of the week," he responded drily, "but nope, definitely no teddy bears that I recall." He leaned his elbows on the top rail keeping just enough distance from the other man to give each their own space without crowding. "What's your excuse?"

Standish didn't say anything for a long time, almost as if he had not heard, but Larabee let the silence ride. It was the kind of question that really didn't need to be answered yet left a convenient opening if Ezra cared to use it. Finally the Southerner gave a deep sigh.

“Not sleeping too well these days. So, if you ever need a four a.m. wake up call, I'm your man.”

He tried to play it down but Larabee's eyes narrowed fractionally.

“Not just a one-off then?”

Ezra shook his head but when he offered nothing more Chris did not press him for details. Instead he followed Ezra's lead and stared out over the water before murmuring quietly: “Ghosts and demons.”

Standish lifted his head and gave the older man a keen look then suddenly a gentle smile tugged at the corner of his mouth.

“That sounds like the voice of experience.”

“Yeah well, I don't mind telling you that after Sarah and Adam died about the only way I could make it through the night was to drink myself blind till I couldn't think or feel anymore. Not exactly the smartest thing to do, but there ya go; we don't always care much about what's smart, only what works at the time. And right then it seemed like just about the best idea I ever had.”

Ezra looked away and lowered his head. What was he supposed to say? That there was nothing Chris could tell him that he didn't already know about that craving for oblivion? And the only reason that he was up here now, hours before daybreak, was because he was trying desperately not to fall into that very same trap again. Then again, maybe Larabee already knew that too.

“You know, Ezra,” continued Chris, gently, “just because a man doesn't take the same journey doesn't mean he hasn't been down the same road.”

The Southerner bought some time by taking a long drink of his coffee. He was rarely at a loss for words but for some reason Larabee's quiet understanding had touched him far more deeply than he could have believed possible and now he was struggling to find something to say that wouldn't make either him, or Chris, feel ill at ease. In the end he could only meet Larabee's eyes and nod. Message received and understood.

With a quick and knowing smile Larabee offered a welcome reprieve from having to make any further response by smoothly taking the conversation in a different direction.

“Thought maybe we'd take a run down to Spanish Town today. Just take it nice and easy. Chill out and sink a few beers.”

“I think I can just about cope with nice and easy.”

“Yeah, it's been a rough few weeks,” admitted Chris, conversationally, “but this kinda helps make up for it.”

Ezra's eyebrows shot upwards, and although he said nothing his exaggeratedly sceptical reaction triggered an easy laugh in the older man.

“I said kinda!” he mockingly defended himself, “Consider it part payment.”

The Southerner's smile was cunning.

“Any chance of getting that in writing?”

They were keeping it on a light-hearted level but Chris knew that the cost to both Ezra and Buck was something that couldn't be so easily squared away by an expenses-paid vacation. He could only hope, as did Judge Travis, that it just might go some little way towards restoring the balance.

"You'll be asking for it in triplicate and signed in blood next," joked Larabee.

"Standard operating procedure with the Feds," he answered seriously, draining his coffee cup before adding, drily: "As long as it's someone else's blood, of course."

Chris tilted his head slightly and looked evenly at the man standing beside him.

"Nature of the beast."

Ezra straightened with a sigh and keeping his eye fixed on the distant horizon murmured absently: "A wild beast loosed upon this world."

Larabee cocked a cynical eyebrow.

"You personally?"

Standish grinned suddenly, his mood instantly lightening.

"There are some that might support that line of thinking..."

The two of them laughed then, a natural and unforced sound, and Ezra was surprised at just how easily it came, quickly followed by the sobering realisation that it had been a very long time since he had felt that kind of connection with anyone. Too long perhaps. But there was no denying the sense of kinship he felt for the man now standing at his side and the plain and honest truth of it was that he not only respected Chris Larabee, he trusted him. And, he had to confess, it was a good feeling to have. Their laughter gradually faded but the feeling stayed with him long after the moment had passed and he suddenly found there were things he wanted to say.

Definitely time to turn the page.

"You know, Ezra, there hasn't been much time to touch base since you got back from New Orleans..."

The Southerner half turned towards Larabee, barely managing to mask his surprise at the direction Chris was attempting to take the conversation given his own thoughts just seconds before, and waited for the rest.

"...and I just wondered how it all went down." Ezra didn't miss the slight hesitation. "Find what you were looking for?"

Ezra considered his answer carefully. Given the opportunity to talk, he didn't know where to start.

"Ever been to New Orleans, Chris?"

"Once." Chris gave a rueful smile. "Took Sarah there on our first wedding anniversary. Stayed in a little antebellum guest house right in the French Quarter. Strictly tourist stuff." His smile broadened into a wicked grin. "Truth is we didn't see too much outside of the hotel room..."

Ezra gave a discreet cough assuming a feigned diffidence that he deliberately exaggerated,

playing the moment for its humour as Chris had obviously intended but privately saddened by the other man's loss and the obvious bitter-sweet nature of the memory for Larabee.

"New Orleans has that effect on some people," he murmured, adding with a gentle smile, "Something to do with the heat." He set his empty cup aside and relaxed against the guard-rail again, shifting his body to find a comfortable stance that wouldn't aggravate the already nagging ache in his injured ribs. "Or so I've heard."

"Just walk in the park for an old Southern boy like you, huh? Georgia, right?"

"Savannah born and bred," affirmed Ezra, a slight change in his tone revealing an obvious sense of pride in his roots, "Grew up believing we were still fighting the war against the Yankees!" He gave a quick laugh then; remembering. "You know, my grand-daddy flew the stars and bars from the front porch every single day until the day he died?"

"So," grinned Chris, eyes alight with mischief, "when are you getting the gun racks fitted to the Beamer?"

Ezra shot him a look of mock disdain.

"Please! Having origins south of the Mason-Dixon line does not automatically qualify as Southern red-neck, Mr. Larabee!"

"You don't say?," murmured Chris, obviously enjoying the good-natured ribbing, "Have to keep that in mind."

"Anyway," retaliated Ezra, "Isn't Vin the one with the gun racks on that armoured personnel carrier of his?"

"Yeah, but he's from Texas. Gotta make allowances."

Both men laughed again and the natural lull that followed was an easy one, neither of them feeling the immediate need to fill the interval with anything but the companionable silence that descended. It took a few moments for Ezra to restart the conversation and when he spoke it was to resume the thread he had so cautiously begun some minutes earlier, but this time his voice was lower, more intense, and Chris sensed, rightly, that the time for banter was over.

"New Orleans is ...different. And whether you love it or hate it, I can guarantee you won't ever forget it." He gave a smile that didn't quite reach his eyes. "Or maybe that's just an observation based my own somewhat ...biased perspective."

"Guess you've got more cause than most to feel strongly about the place," observed Chris, "at least from what I heard."

"And what did you hear?"

Larabee looked evenly at the younger man, weighing his words.

"I heard that your cover was blown and you ended up being fished out of the swamp more dead than alive. The whole operation went belly-up and you took the fall, then when the crap finally hit the fan most of it landed back on you."

Ezra inclined his head.

“Then you heard it all; my experience of New Orleans in a nutshell. But,” he added, his voice taking on an edge of bitterness, “I’d like to bet you heard a whole lot more besides.”

“Well, you’d win that bet,” conceded Chris, “It was all over the news; goddamned media was on it like a pack of vultures for a while.” He shook his head at the recollection not bothering to disguise his contempt. “But I’ve never much liked being told what I should think, so I make it a rule to believe less than half of what I see with my own eyes and just about squat of anything I hear.”

“Then you are a rare breed of animal indeed,” murmured Ezra, yet he knew that Chris was speaking the truth. Otherwise he probably wouldn’t be standing here right now, and he didn’t really want to think about just where he might be instead if Larabee hadn’t thrown out the lifeline when he had and dragged him on board.

“So, did you go to rattle cages or lay a few ghosts to rest?”

Ezra gave him a shrewdly calculating look.

“What makes you think it was either?”

“Cos they’re the only reasons I can think that you’d want to go back to a place that has nothing but a whole lot of bad memories for you.” He looked away from the Southerner and stared down into the dark water below. “Don’t get me wrong, Ezra,” he carried on, his voice suddenly tight, “I know what it’s like. I can’t tell you how many times I drove by my old house when there was nothing to see but a burned out shell. And every time I went it was just like I’d taken a razor to myself and opened up all the old wounds again – and a few new ones for good measure.”

“Your wife and son,” said Ezra flatly, suddenly seeing Larabee at his most vulnerable, his grief tightly controlled and all the more poignant for it.

Chris nodded slowly.

“And I’ll tell you something, Ezra, it doesn’t change a goddamned thing. No matter how many times you go back, no matter how many times you pick over those broken pieces, they just don’t go back together the same way anymore. Just remember that.”

Ezra was left with the uncomfortable feeling that Chris had just reached deeper into his soul than even he himself had been prepared to delve but rather than resenting the intrusion he felt instead a sense of relief. He sighed; a soft sound of surrender.

“How did you know?”

“Call it a good guess. And too many years doing what you’re doing right now.” Larabee straightened and turned to lean against the stern rail with his hands buried deep in his pockets. “Spent a long time looking for answers; sometimes when I didn’t even know the question. Thing is, I always knew – whatever the ME ruled about accidental death - that my family died because someone torched my house. And I took that kinda personally. I also swore that one day I’d find whoever did it and kill the bastard with my own hands.”

Ezra felt a sudden affinity with man standing beside him. He could understand that kind of primitive urge; that rage of injustice. He had already felt something of that rage but it had been

without direction and mostly it had ended up being turned in on himself.

“So what made you stop looking?”

Larabee gave him a long, appraising look then the merest hint of a smile appeared on his face but it was a cold, almost wolfish smile.

“Who says I stopped?”

The admission came as no real surprise to Ezra. He didn't see Chris as the forgiving and forgetting kind, any more than he was and some things just cut too deeply to let the hurt go without putting up a fight.

Ezra returned the look in equal measure then gave a simple nod recognising the true extent of the trust that each of them had, whether by design or accident, placed in the other. In the space of a single conversation he had quite possibly revealed more of himself than he had to any other individual in a very long time but by the same token he believed that Larabee's last few words had also shown him more of the real Chris than anything that had gone before. And that, he decided after a moment's thought, was just fine with him. After all, as his mother always said, a fair exchange was no robbery.

He was saved from having to come up with a suitable reply, if there even was one, by the timely interruption of Buck noisily negotiating the companionway from below decks cursing and clattering as he stumped awkwardly up the narrow stairs, a simple action complicated by both the physical limitations of his injured leg and the additional encumbrance of an elbow crutch.

“Goddamn!”

Wilmington lurched inelegantly onto the deck recovering just in time to avoid a prat fall then, suddenly aware that he was not alone and, adding insult to injury, the focus of amused scrutiny, again teetered dangerously as he came to an abrupt stop to stare defensively at the two men.

“Well, if it ain't Butch and Sundance,” he drawled, once he regained his balance and a little of his tattered dignity, “What's up? We sinking or something? Can't think of nothin' else that would get you outta bed before sun up, Ezra.” He gave a cunning grin. “Except maybe to rustle up some breakfast, that is.”

The Southerner launched himself away from the stern rail with a gentle shove and smiled disarmingly.

“You know that's not a bad idea at all, Buck. Breakfast it is.”

Unprepared for Ezra's immediate and absolute surrender Wilmington stood open-mouthed, floundering for a fitting rejoinder. He had anticipated at least a few rounds of verbal sparring with the Southerner but by not countering with the expected protest Ezra had neatly robbed him of the opportunity to get any mileage from the moment. Uncharacteristically nonplussed he appealed to his friend for some support.

“Well, son of a bitch! What the hell just happened there?” He shook his head, still baffled by the total lack of argument from the Southerner. “That sure ain't the Ezra I know.”

Larabee watched Standish for a few moments as he headed for the forward companionway.

“Reckon Ezra's the kinda man you could know for years and never know him at all.” He sighed, then suddenly grinned. “Want a piece of advice though?”

Buck looked doubtful but gave a nod of encouragement.

“Go on.”

“Might not be the smartest idea to try and take a bite outta the hand that's going to be feeding you, first day out of port.”

Wilmington turned to follow the other man's gaze, his expression thoughtful, before giving a quiet chuckle.

“You may just have a point there, pard.” Adjusting his elbow crutch he gave Chris a comically exaggerated wink then deftly spun around and started to walk after Standish. “Better go see if he needs a hand.”

Still smiling Chris tilted his head in a gesture of guarded approval and murmured drily: “Good thinking.”

Turning away again as Wilmington limped across the deck in Ezra's wake Larabee looked out across the water at a lightening horizon still a good half hour shy of sunrise. Some days it just didn't pay to wake up in a morning; but today, he decided with a rare feeling of contentment, certainly wasn't one of them.

### III

For the next three days Chris had taken the *Obsession* on a leisurely circuit of Virgin Gorda, exchanging the more congested locations for the peace and tranquility of the open water away from the mainstream tourist attractions. It was a strategy that seemed to sit well with everyone and the boat was big enough for the four of them to find space of their own if they needed it although, contrary to all expectations, Larabee had noticed that they were rarely out of each other's company. If nothing else the baptism of fire that had been Guatemala had pulled them into a cohesive unit faster than he could have hoped for. It had been a steep learning curve for all of them, himself included.

There was no sign of the thinly-veiled animosity that Buck had initially shown towards Ezra; their shared experience at the hands of a psychotic Dutchwoman had seen to that, but it was always going to be hard to tell with Standish just where his loyalties might lie. After all the man was a supreme con artist, almost chameleon-like in his ability to change himself to fit the situation and while he ran with the pack when it suited him Chris had no illusions that Ezra was anything but the renegade; the wild card in the deck. For now though, he and Buck seemed to have found at least a grudging respect for each other which allowed them the freedom to move on from those issues that had created a barrier between them from the start. Ezra came from a world of smoke and mirrors,



where honesty was unlikely to ever be the best policy; Buck... well, Buck was just a man who liked to call a spade a spade. Now, at least, they had established some common ground and although neither had given much away about what exactly had happened at the *finca* in Alta Verapaz, Chris could see the subtle shift in the relationship. No doubt about it, the experience had changed both men. Just how much, and what it would mean in the greater scheme of things, only time would tell.

Right now, time was one thing they had an abundance of. Chris couldn't remember the last time he had felt so completely at ease. No schedules to follow, no clients to deal with and above all, no stress. He hadn't bothered putting on his watch in three days and that alone, he realised, gave him a rare feeling of freedom that was only surpassed by his sense of well-being.

He had already come to the conclusion that Orrin Travis was a canny old fox. If the others felt even half as good as he did then the trip had served its purpose and InterSept would again have a full complement of able operatives. He preferred to believe that Travis's motives weren't completely mercenary but neither would he put it past the old man to be thinking purely from a business perspective. In his experience the Judge was a hard man, tough as old leather, who didn't suffer fools gladly but for all that he had always found him to be fair-minded and generous. The freely-given use of the Obsession had proved that, although his cynical streak told him that the gesture had not done the Director's credibility any harm either. Right now Travis had been elevated to the rank of demi-god but it was a promotion he suspected, given the nature of the business they were in, that was unlikely to last beyond the next assignment. With these guys mercenary was always going to be a two way street.

Today they had made an earlier start than usual and cruised westward to the main island of Tortola finally anchoring in Cane Garden Bay, arguably the most famous and most popular beach in the British Virgin Islands, in the late afternoon.

It had been a deliberate move on Chris's part. There was only so much rest and relaxation a man could take without starting to go a little stir crazy - especially when that man was Buck Wilmington. They had been friends long enough for Chris to recognise the signs and by any measure Buck was starting to get antsy. Better to turn him loose on an unsuspecting Caribbean island than try and constrain him. Besides, when he'd really thought about it, he wasn't averse to a little socialising himself.

\*

"...twist your arm for another, Vin?"

The Texan looked down at the empty glass in front of him and wondered just when he had finished that one, but signalled his readiness for another shot anyway. What the hell. Wasn't as if he had to front up early for work or anything and, now he had gotten used to the taste, the spiced rum was going down real easy.

With a knowing smile, Chris leaned across the table and poured him another generous measure from a bottle that was already close to empty. Tanner let the glass sit undisturbed for a few minutes as he glanced around the bustling bar. The place had been doing a lively trade since they had first arrived but now, as the evening wore on, it seemed that everyone in Cane Garden had gravitated to what was obviously the most popular beach bar in the bay. At some point Buck and Ezra had both drifted away and while he was pretty sure that Wilmington was, as usual, following his baser instincts and pursuing any and every available female within visual range, he was curious as to what the Southerner had found to keep him occupied for the best part of the last hour.

Looking around for some sign of the missing pair he reached for the shot glass and downed the rum with practiced ease, feeling nicely mellow as the alcohol leeches into his system, but thinking that very soon he would need to take a walk, get some fresh air and clear his head.

As if on cue, Buck's distinctive laugh announced his return and the companionable peace that he and Chris had so easily maintained was instantly and irrevocably shattered as he swept in and started to rearrange the seating at the table to make room for what, at first glance, looked to Vin like half the patrons of the bar that seemed to be following in his wake.

Following Chris's lead, he stood up to shift his chair only to find body and brain not quite in synch and the room swimming disturbingly out of focus. He grabbed the edge of the table, a simple reflex to the unsettling sensation of the floor shifting beneath his feet, then sat down with a jolt no longer trusting in his ability to remain standing. Goddamn!

It took him a full minute to realise that Buck was making introductions and that his newly acquired entourage, which seemed to be entirely female in composition, was now in the process of squeezing into the limited space around the table. There were four of them in all, not quite the huge following he had first imagined but still a challenge as he struggled to remember the names Buck had just reeled off. Feeling decidedly punchy he came to the unhappy conclusion that he might just be a little drunk. Across the table, a grinning Chris Larabee watched him with obvious amusement and in a blinding flash of insight he understood that he'd been set up. *Bastard.*

He experienced a brief flash of alarm when he realised that the attractive brunette on his left was talking to him then, sparing just a moment to cast a baleful glance at a grinning Chris Larabee and curse him for a low down, conniving, son-of-bitch, he struggled to muster enough brainpower to come up with something to say that wouldn't immediately label him a loser with a capital L.

"So where's Ezra?" quizzed Buck, conversationally, reaching for the much-depleted bottle of VooDoo and making a quick survey of the crowded bar room, before lowering his voice for Larabee's ears only. "I got four lovely ladies here ready and waiting to be," he paused and struggled to find the word he needed before continuing with a sly smile, "...entertained. He can't go walkabout on me now."

Chris shrugged and emptied his glass in one swallow.

“Do I look like his mother?”

Wilmington gave his friend a hard stare that clearly indicated that he thought Chris was being unnecessarily obstructive.

“Come on, gimme a break.” He gave a wide, conspiratorial grin. “Bein' one man down kinda spoils the ...uh, natural balance.”

Larabee assumed an air of total disinterest but the hint of a smile rippled across his face.

“You telling me you're not man enough to handle two? Must be losing your touch, Buck.”

Looking offended at the suggestion Buck drew back with a snort.

“Hah! That'll be the day.”

Chris grinned and shook his head but relented as he pushed away from the table.

“Okay, Buck. Gotta water the horses anyway, I'll see if I can't round up our stray at the same time.”

Buck nodded.

“You do that.” Turning back to his guests he smiled disarmingly, switching on the Wilmington charm. Chris recognised from the smooth dismissal that in Buck's mind he was already gone, if not quite forgotten, his attention now firmly fixed on playing host. “Now what can I get you ladies to drink ...?”

His own immediate needs attended Chris focused on finding the errant Southerner if only to keep the peace with Buck. Not yet sure how he felt about his friend's well-intentioned but possibly misguided efforts in procuring company for the evening, he spared a moment to consider what Ezra's reaction was likely to be at Wilmington's heavy-handed attempt at social networking. He suddenly smiled in anticipation. Hell, it was going to be worth the hassle of tracking Ezra down just to see his expression.

Leaving behind the noisy, smoky atmosphere of the bar he stood, alone, on the beach for a few minutes, partly to appreciate the relative peace of the moment and partly to clear his head. The unfamiliar island rum might not have hit him as hard as it had Vin but it still packed a decent punch; enough to leave him with the first distinct warning signs that he should ease up unless he wanted to end the night in an alcoholic haze. He took a deep breath and dug his hands in his pockets remembering many other nights when he had done just that then, hastily putting that memory behind him, he focused instead on what he was supposed to be doing – finding Ezra.

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There was no change in his expression but as he allowed his eye to linger on the four eminently desirable and seductive ladies in front of him he felt the familiar thrill of impending conquest. It had been a while but the feeling of anticipation – the rush of excitement - wasn't

something he was likely to forget just because he'd been sidelined and on the bench for longer than he cared to think about.

And now, here they were right in front of him: quads.

Four of a kind. Four perfect, beautiful queens.

He was willing to wager, and indeed had already staked a tidy sum on the outcome, that he held the winning hand. Knowing he had previously discarded an ace and that he already held the king of spades as his fifth card only increased his confidence. A sweet hand. One that could only be beaten now by a straight flush and as the odds on anyone drawing that particular combination stood at around one in sixty-five thousand and greater than one in a million for the royal, he was on pretty much a sure bet. Still, this was poker.

At odds with his relaxed attitude, he eyed the others with the covert, and infinitely patient, intensity of a predatory cat, reading their body language the way other men might read the morning paper. Showing no outward sign of his own elation, he watched. And waited. *The flashy big guy with the gap toothed grin and ten yards of bling was going to fold.*

He didn't allow himself even the hint of a smile as the man, almost on cue, snapped his fan of cards closed and with a sigh threw them down on the makeshift playing surface – an upturned crate – signalling his capitulation.

Ezra resisted the sudden urge to look at his watch. He should really be thinking about getting back. For just a moment he allowed his mind to wander away from the game. Not that it required his full attention at this late stage but he made it his personal credo not to put his trust in strangers – especially where large sums of money were concerned. Hell, where any sums of money were concerned! He had known games to turn ugly over a lot less than was currently on the table. But that had been another time and another place. Tonight was definitely not going to be one of those times. In fact, in about two minutes he was going to collect his winnings and bow out of the game.

It had not been his intention to bail out on the others, at least not this early in the evening, but he had never been one to ignore the sound of opportunity knocking and when, like a moth drawn to a flame, he had stumbled across a little action he couldn't pass up the chance to play a few hands. It might be small potatoes compared to some of his past gambling exploits but its appeal was no less. Straight up draw poker – no frills – just how he liked it. And these guys were good, he would give them that; just not quite good enough.

Time for the showdown. A pair of nines with a jack kicker appeared on the table. One down, one to go. No sweat. A moment later his heart skipped a beat as the next man produced a spread of five black cards with a triumphant flourish that seemed to realise his worst nightmare. He quickly scanned the cards with a practiced eye and allowed himself to breathe again; not a straight flush after all, a single, errant spade among the clubs reducing the hand to merely a straight. Laying down his own hand to a groan from the man on his right he finally allowed himself a smile.

No, just not quite good enough.

“Ezra? What the hell...?”

The Southerner continued to gather up his winnings with deliberate indolence and did not immediately acknowledge the speaker, instead he focused his attention on the three islanders keeping up an easy line of banter with them as he smoothly pocketed a substantial wad of cash. There was no mistaking either the voice or the undertone of irritation but he would be damned if he was going to let Larabee's unexpected intrusion put him off his stride. He was about to walk away from a game with the better part of five hundred dollars and he had no intention of offending his hosts by cutting and running whether or not Chris Larabee approved of his recreational dealings.

“Gentlemen. Thank you for a most enjoyable game but, as you can see,” he glanced at Larabee, who had halted a good yard away, to make his point before sighing regretfully and tapping his watch, “my time is up.”

One of the island men shot a baleful glare at the blond intruder but Ezra rose quickly and, in a perfectly judged gesture of respect, offered his hand to each man in turn. “I look forward to a rematch.”

The biggest of the three grinned as he clasped hands with the Southerner. “You can count on it, man.” He stood up, towering a good head above Ezra, and clapped a hand on his shoulder. “Just make sure it's after pay day, hey?”

“I'm not even going to ask how after just a couple of hours ashore in a place this small you managed to wind up out back of some sleazy dive in a two-bit poker game but, Jesus! Ezra, what the hell do you think you were playing at?”

The two Americans had been walking back along the beach for at least three minutes before Chris finally broke the silence.

“Five card draw poker, jokers wild.”

Larabee ignored the flippant retort not rising to the bait, instead he abruptly stopped walking and pushed his hands deep into his pockets as he took a deep, calming breath. Ezra continued to walk on for a few more steps before he turned and waited with weary expectancy. This was a Chris he recognised well enough; time for the lecture.

“Look, Ezra,” he began, “I'm not about to tell you what you should or shouldn't be doing. You're on your own time here and the whole idea is that you're here to chill out...”

“But?” prompted the Southerner, suspecting that Larabee was likely to have a lot more to say.

Chris sighed then, slowly raising his head, fixed Ezra with a long stare before speaking again.

“You know gambling is against the law here?”

“You don't say? I'll be sure to keep that in mind.”

Larabee shook his head but there was a smile on his face, as if he had expected no less from the Southerner.

"You should. Any idea what the penalty is for illicit gambling on these islands?"

"No, but I'm sure I'm about to find out."

"Yeah," agreed Chris, affably before adding sharply: "The hard way! But," he continued, "that's your problem not mine 'cos I'm gonna tell you this for nothing, you wind up with your sorry ass in the cells and I won't be bailing you out. You'll be on your own, okay?"

He started to walk again leaving Ezra little option but to follow.

"Understood," the younger man murmured, far from contrite but relieved that Larabee had elected not to belabour the point. Still, for some reason he felt more discomfited than if Chris had come out and openly criticised him.

As it became obvious that Larabee had said all he was going to say on the matter Ezra began to wonder at the other man's motives for taking the time and effort to seek him out. Keeping him out of trouble was not likely to be his number one priority. No, it was something else. Suddenly what Larabee hadn't yet said became more important than what he had. He quickened his pace and drew level with Chris.

"And to what do I owe this laudable show of concern for my welfare?" The Southerner's tongue-in-cheek delivery robbed the question of the biting sarcasm it might easily have carried.

"You mean why did I come looking for you and sticking my nose in your business?" Chris paused a beat before quickly following up with: "You're needed, that's why."

"Trouble?"

Larabee gave a short laugh.

"Depends which way you look at it, I guess."

"Chris?" Their forward progress stalled again as Ezra pulled up, suddenly wary.

Larabee turned to look over his shoulder and seeing Standish at a dead halt, sighed and retraced his steps.

"Okay. Buck got friendly with a few chicks..."

"A few?"

"Well, four," confessed Chris reluctantly, "He thought we might appreciate some company."

The Southerner's expression moved quickly from scepticism, through bemused disbelief to finally settle on outright alarm.

"Blind dates? You're joking, right?" When it became obvious he was not, Ezra shot an accusing look at Larabee before giving a disbelieving laugh. "And this is what you drag me away from a profitable poker game for? Hell, I could have cleared a thousand bucks..."

"Yeah, and you could also have ended up in a back alley with your liver carved out and wearing your tongue as a neck-tie," interrupted Chris, reasonably, then adding with a barely concealed grin: "You should be thanking me, not arguing the toss."

“Really? Let's see if that still holds true tomorrow, shall we?”

“Look, it's no big deal,” he insisted, “Just be sociable. Have a few drinks. Can't be all bad, can it?”

Ezra's look gave him his answer but he gave the Southerner's shoulder an encouraging push to get him moving.

“Might I remind you this is Mr. Wilmington we're talking about?” muttered Ezra, darkly, as he moved with obvious reluctance towards the lights and noise of the beach bar he had left more than an hour earlier.

Following half a step behind Chris could well believe that at that very moment, given the choice, Ezra would rather have opted for the Colombian necktie.

## IV

The gentle, musical tinkling of wind chimes leached into his consciousness about the same time that he became aware that the night was long gone along with a good part of the morning if the strength of the dappled sunlight that was now warming his left shoulder was anything to go by. Resisting the natural progression to opening his eyes he made a minute shift in position to turn his face from the encroaching light and felt the merest breath of warm air on his skin; a soft, measured and regular caress that stirred the hair on the back of his neck. A frisson of pleasure rippled through him as he caught the faint, lingering scent of perfume – jasmine with a touch of green tea - triggering a rush of random images and emotions that stirred more than just a memory and quickly pushed him into wakefulness. He lay without moving, his own breathing quickening, but unwilling to let the moment go. Not a fantasy then.

She was breathing softly; asleep. Tucked in behind him, he could feel the length of her body pressed against his back and the light pressure of her arm curved around his chest, and found the unconsciously possessive pose oddly reassuring. Around them the bedsheets were snarled in chaotic disorder and they were both quite naked.

He smiled.

*Just be sociable.*

He hadn't really known what he'd expected but four thirty-something Vasser graduates on a reunion vacation was definitely not it. In his own defence he rationalised that he could be forgiven for conjuring a worst case scenario given Wilmington's notoriously indiscriminate taste in women. It was, after all, a standing joke in the team that the only prerequisite to score a date with Buck was to be female, under eighty and still warm.

As it happened Buck's impromptu soiree had gone off surprisingly well and Ezra's initial misgivings that anything good could possibly come of it had been quickly put aside and he had

done exactly what Chris had asked of him. He had been sociable. In fact he would go so far as to say he had been downright neighbourly.

Even now he wasn't sure how it had all started but there was certainly no doubt as to how it had ended although, at this particular moment, he was certainly not inclined to think about endings as inevitable as such things might be. Right now he preferred to focus on the decidedly pleasurable possibilities of the immediate future.

Carefully easing onto his back he took a cautious breath and winced as his over-taxed ribs protested, still not quite believing the impulsiveness of his actions of the previous night. He had never been the kind to engage in one night stands yet he had no regrets – either at the time, or even now in hindsight – and today all he could do was seize the moment. There was nothing for it but to go with his instincts. As for tomorrow, that could take care of itself.

Her name was Claire. And somewhere during the course of the evening the wary aloofness he had unconsciously maintained in the beginning had given way to an undeniable attraction. He resisted the temptation to start analysing the psychology of it if only because he was afraid of what it might reveal about himself. After all it had been a long time between drinks for him, and he didn't want to dwell on what that might suggest about him as a man.

A discreet beep from his cell phone, familiar but decidedly unwelcome given his current situation, signalled a missed call and immediately spurred him into action as he quickly tried to reach for, and silence, the Motorola on the night-stand without disturbing the woman beside him. He didn't need three guesses to work out who would be calling him but he did wonder just when the original call had come through and how he had failed to hear it. Normally he would have been awake and instantly alert at the first sound of the ringtone but today... well, today was different. With a sigh he flipped open the phone. He could – maybe even should – ignore it. He was on vacation after all but, when all was said and done, old habits died hard.

He had sent off a quick text message to Chris the night before – a courtesy – saying nothing more than: don't wait up. He hadn't felt any obligation to explain why he wouldn't be returning to the boat but at the same time he thought he owed it to Larabee to at least put him on notice not to expect him back. What Chris made of it he didn't much care but he had no doubt that he would have no difficulty putting two and two together. Or maybe in this instance that should be one and one.

The smile crept back onto his face. Some days – and by his own admission there had been far too many of them in the past year – it just didn't pay to wake up in a morning; but today... well, today was different.

Settling back into the comfortable niche he had been briefly forced to abandon in his efforts to reach the phone he slipped one arm around Claire's shoulders and with his other hand held the cell to his ear.

Never one to waste words Larabee had left a brief, almost cryptic message but, as Ezra



understood it, Chris and Buck had gone to meet the rest of the team at the airport while Vin, evidently nursing the mother of all hangovers, had stayed behind on the boat. The plan was to be back in Cane Garden Bay by 1400 for a 1500 getaway. A plan which, be it by accident or design, left him with the not too taxing prospect of having the rest of the morning and a good part of the afternoon free. A plan, he decided, that didn't sit too badly with him at all.

Flipping the phone shut he bent his arm awkwardly to replace it on the nightstand, wincing as the clumsy movement triggered a stab of pain from still-mending ribs, before relaxing with the gentlest of sighs against the pillow. The woman's head lifted, strands of hair the colour of honey sticking damply to her cheek as she pushed herself up onto one elbow to look at him. His stomach did a back-flip as she suddenly sat up, leaning on one outstretched hand, as she shook her head and lazily swept a hand through her hair finger-combing it away from her face.

"You're going to tell me you have to go now, aren't you?"

He blinked, her absolute conviction taking him by surprise. Then he smiled, his own expression softening as he recognised the resignation in hers. He hesitated for just a moment before reaching up and putting his hand to her cheek to tilt her face towards him.

"Claire, listen to me. I've done many things in my life of which I'm not especially proud but, amongst my many misdeeds, taking advantage of a woman has never been one of them."

She studied him for a moment and he waited, without taking his eyes off her. He knew that look. She was weighing up whether or not to trust him. The smile, when it came, was like the sun breaking through clouds and his stomach performed another somersault as she gracefully folded her arm beneath her and lay down with her cheek against his chest.

"Spoken like a true Southern gentleman," she murmured, her fingers lightly tracing the scar down his chest, "But I get the feeling that underneath that ...incredibly ...smooth ...finish you could be just a little bit dangerous."

He shifted closer, getting comfortable, enjoying the feel of her warm skin against his and wondered how she would feel if she knew that less than a month before he had killed two men – and for no other reason than it was his job. Did that make him dangerous? Or did it just make him a head-case? He wasn't sure he wanted to know the answer.

She slowly stroked her knee along his thigh igniting a slow fire in the pit of his belly as her fingers continued to teasingly travel the length of his body and back again, each time stopping just a fraction lower than before until he found himself holding his breath in anticipation.

"You know," she began, conversationally, "I don't know anything about you."

For several seconds he struggled for an answer then gave a soft laugh. She raised her head and frowned at him.

"What?"

"Here I am thinking right now I'm the luckiest son-of-a-bitch in the world and you want to know my CV."

She punched him lightly in the ribs and inched up the bed to lean over him, grunting disparagingly: "Men!" as if that explained, and possibly excused, everything.

At least he hoped it might excuse everything. What the hell was he thinking?

"Dear Lord! I don't believe I just said that," he confessed, a rueful smile begging forgiveness. "So much for being a gentleman."

She laughed throatily, a deep, rich sound that had his stomach doing cartwheels. Goddamn, but she was beautiful.

"A sudden rush of blood to the head?" she grinned, one hand now tracing lazy circles over his belly.

"Half right," he conceded, his smile widening as he eased onto his left hip and turned towards her. "A definite rush of blood, but it seems to be going in the opposite direction."

The kiss that followed sealed his fate robbing him of the last shreds of reason, until with a soft grunt of pleasure he finally surrendered to the increasingly urgent demands of his body.

\*

Buck was on a roll and when he was in this kind of mood it was hardly worth the effort of mentioning that there seemed to be a slight discrepancy between his and Chris's own recollections of the previous night's events. Buck was doing what he did best; telling stories and playing it strictly for laughs. Right now, he was in his element with a captive, if not always appreciative audience. Hell, even the cab driver was hanging on his every word.

To give him credit he had never known Buck to tell an outright lie, he simply had a creative way of editing the facts to come up with an abridged but undeniably more entertaining version of whatever story he happened to be telling; the world according to Wilmington. He might be quick to claim that Ezra was slicker than a greased pig but when it came to glib Buck Wilmington was a man with few equals.

Larabee sprawled at the rear of the open-sided taxi his attitude totally relaxed as, with both arms stretched along the seat back, he watched the interplay between the four other men. The three newcomers had all looked tired and drawn when they came through the Arrivals gate but already he could see some of that tension easing as Buck, ever the raconteur, regaled the trio with anecdotes of the previous few days as he brought them up to speed with just how the trip had gone so far.

Turning to stare out at the passing landscape his thoughts drifted to the two players on the team currently missing in action. Vin had looked like hell when he had finally surfaced just before they had left for the airport and he had felt a twinge of guilt for his part in getting the Texan so thoroughly and absolutely drunk. Still, he smiled to himself, there were compensations; his plight the previous night as the rum had taken hold had scored him his own personal attendant for the

night. The Texan had been pretty much legless by the time the evening was through and one of the four women – Chrissie or was it Cassie? – who just happened to be a nurse, took pity on him and, after tearing strips off Chris for contributing to his sorry state, accompanied him back to the boat. He sighed at the irony of it. Tanner had been way beyond appreciating the fact that he, out of all of them, had been the only one to take a good looking woman back to his cabin that night.

Ezra though was a horse of a different colour. The last he had seen of the Southerner he had been with that Canadian photographer, Claire, but for all he knew Standish might have escorted the woman back to her lodgings like a perfect gentleman and spent the rest of the night trying to win what was left of the week's wages off those poor suckers in back of that beach restaurant where he'd found him playing poker. Then again, he might not. Somehow the more he thought of it, the more he thought it unlikely that Ezra would have abandoned the attractive brunette; the two of them had been getting mighty close towards the end of the evening. And then there had been that text message: *Don't wait up*. He sighed again. What the hell! It was none of his business where Ezra had spent the night. Good luck to him.

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The view from the pool deck was nothing less than spectacular. The villa, perched on what the Southerner estimated to be a prime piece of Virgin Island real estate, overlooked Cane Garden Bay its elevation guaranteeing an unobstructed view of the crystal clear waters and ever-present flotilla of recreational boats anchored offshore.

With the sun warming his back he leaned against the balcony rail and focused on the distant horizon letting his thoughts drift as idly as the scudding wisps of cloud floating high above. He smiled and for no other reason than it seemed like the most natural thing to do. It was a glorious day and, for the first time in many long months, he felt a sense of completeness; of being whole again.

It wasn't just the sex, although he couldn't deny that it had more than a little to do with his current sense of well-being, rather it was more that he had connected with someone on an emotional level. It had been a long time since he had let anyone get that close.

After New Orleans it had taken everything he had just to get from one day to the next; there had been no room for anything – or anyone – else. The closest he'd come to any kind of personal relationship in those long months of recovery had been a necessary but decidedly tenuous one with his physiotherapist. Even his mother had kept her distance after a while but then, some things never changed. His smile slipped just a fraction towards bitterness as he remembered her accusing him of being ungrateful and disagreeable before she left his hospital room in high dudgeon. He hadn't seen her again for a month. Maude never gave anything unconditionally; not even her love.

“Penny for them?”

Ezra half-turned to look at the woman he had just spent the night making love to; almost a stranger yet undeniably someone he felt not only drawn to but comfortable with. She already knew a little of his history; the bare bones, edited and sanitised version of the kind that you might share at a college reunion, just as he knew she was a fiercely independent thirty-six year old Canadian freelance photographer with an eclectic taste in music who had a passion for antiques, Australian wine and Italian cooking.

“Trust me,” he answered lightly, dismissing the innocent yet oddly alarming invitation with a smile, “You wouldn’t want them if I was giving them away.”

Claire moved up beside him until their shoulders were touching and mirrored his pose; forearms resting on the rail as she gazed reflectively into the far distance.

“Would you like to know what I’m thinking?”

“That’s a rhetorical question, right?” he interrupted, teasingly, before she could continue, inwardly breathing a sigh of relief that she had not made any attempt to press him on his obviously guarded reply to what should have been a harmless question. He liked her too much to start lying from the get-go.

She gave him a withering sidelong glance that did nothing at all to diminish his boyish grin and carried on regardless although she did jab an elbow playfully into his side in retaliation.

“I’m thinking about you.”

“Me?” He felt a jolt of surprise, although in all honesty he didn’t know why he should. After all, she had been in his thoughts enough in the last few hours. “What about me?”

“Oh, lots of things,” she said dismissively then, after a moment’s hesitation: “You’re not like other men.”

He ducked his head, smiling.

“I’m not sure if I should be flattered or devastated,” he countered easily, deliberately keeping the mood light although he suspected that Claire was intentionally moving the conversation into more serious territory. The reality was that no matter how long they tried to delay the inevitable time was running out. God, he hated goodbyes.

“Smart ass! I’m trying to engage in meaningful dialogue here, I hope you know.”

She laughed but he knew that there was at least some truth in what she had said and suddenly sobering, he reached out with a sigh to take both her hands in his, adjusting his stance until they stood face to face.

“I know, but don’t let a few good manners fool you. Believe me, there are so many skeletons lurking in my closet that I need a second for my suits.”

In spite of the Southerner’s habitually dry delivery, a tactic that she was quickly realising Ezra used often, the irony failed to completely mask the underlying pain in his voice. Claire’s smile faded and she studied his face for a long moment.

“You’re not joking are you?”

The self-loathing in one tiny shake of his head momentarily stole her breath away but she squeezed his hands and lifted her chin in an almost defiant gesture.

“Well, listen to this Mister Ezra Standish...” But instead of saying anything she impulsively drew him into a rough kiss, which quickly dissolved into a passionate clinch that kept both of them from making any coherent sound for the next few minutes. Finally breaking away, Claire leaned into the bemused Southerner and slipped her arms around his waist. “I’ve always believed actions speak louder than words. So I hope you heard that okay.”

Ezra slowly let out his breath in a tightly controlled sigh. “Loud and clear, Miss Ferguson.”

They stood together for several minutes until Claire finally, reluctantly, drew back. “I wish you could stay longer.”

“I could jump ship,” offered Ezra, only half joking.

She tilted her head to one side as if the prospect definitely had merit but then shook her head.

“The Captain would probably have you stripped and flogged ...” she stopped abruptly and raised her eyebrows suggestively, “Still, that might be worth seeing. But, as tempting as that may be, I have a deadline in New York that I can’t afford to miss.” She smiled ruefully. “Girl has to earn a buck somehow.” Flicking her hair back she looked at her watch. “We have around twenty minutes before you have to go. Long enough for a fitting send-off do you think?”

The Southerner laughed softly. “With bells and whistles if you like.”

“Why, Mister Standish,” she affected a coquettish Scarlett O’Hara drawl, “You surely know how to lead a girl into sinful temptation.”

Grinning, Ezra scooped the woman up into his arms.

“Well you know what they say: Opportunity may knock only once, but temptation leans on the doorbell.”

Laughing, she relaxed in his arms.

“So, what are you waiting for? Open the goddamned door!”

## V

The sun was just making a last minute sprint for the horizon, a blazing fireball of orange flame in a sky shot through with broad slashes of vivid pink dappled with streaks of muted magenta, as the Obsession cruised into Jost Van Dyke’s Great Harbour and found a sheltered deep-water mooring for the night.

As dusk cloaked the bay navigation lights from a dozen or more craft winked into life,

creating myriad orbs of pale milky white against a velvet backdrop of rapidly falling darkness like so many scattered gems carelessly flung from a broken strand of pearls. Around them a flotilla of smaller boats bobbed and weaved tugging at their anchor points in the gentle swell that was barely noticed aboard the eighty-five footer. One or two had drifted close enough to have a circumspect Larabee muttering about fouled anchor lines but he had been forced to admit to an impatiently hovering Buck, who failed to see any cause for immediate concern, that even in a worst case scenario there was nothing likely to happen that they couldn't deal with and so he had finally joined the others on the rear deck for a cold beer at the end of a long if not exactly taxing day.

Sinking into a deck chair with a chilled bottle of Blackbeard Ale in hand Chris sculled half the contents before coming up for air then, with a soft belch of contentment, turned his attention to the others all six of whom seemed to be debating the best way to barbecue lobster tails. Personally, he'd never barbecued lobster of any description so, unlike everyone else, he didn't feel any immediate urge to offer up an opinion. Instead, smiling for no other reason than it felt good he took another mouthful of the pale malty ale and slouched back in the chair to look out over the dark water of the bay. Goddammit but he could get used to this kind of life.

Yet, only two years ago it had been a very different story. Then, he had been drifting aimlessly still trying to get his head around the fact that he was alone and, however much he wanted it to be different, Adam and Sarah were gone from his life forever. Before that, in the months immediately following the deaths of his wife and son he had, in his grief, spiralled into a bottomless black pit of anger, remorse and despair. In fact Buck had often been the only thing standing between him and self-destruction but, after almost a year spent more drunk than sober, he finally realised that the ultimate choice was entirely his. He could go on the way he was and steadily drink himself into oblivion and an early grave or he could choose to live, and do something constructive with his life. Deep down he had known what Sarah would have thought of him descending into an alcoholic fog of self-pity and, with a few timely ass-kickings from Buck, he had made his choice but it had been the hardest thing he had ever done – to simply go on living.

Then he had met Orrin Travis; a happy accident that had completely turned his life around. He had been working in close protection at the time, after finding there wasn't much on offer for a forty-something ex-army captain who hadn't been able to hold a job down for longer than a few weeks at a time in the past year. He had already blown most of the money from the insurance payout and was basically living out of a suitcase, moving between cheap motels and short-term leases as he'd drifted without any real purpose across the country. So, he had taken what he could get and that was working as a bodyguard for an outfit working out of New York City.

Travis had been his first big assignment and the high-profile judge had been shot on his watch. It had been one of those career-busting fuck-ups that left the old man lying on the footpath in a pool of blood, Larabee himself wounded and, worse still, drawing more publicity than Britney Spears in meltdown. Ready to wave goodbye to yet another failed attempt at a steady line of work

he had instead found an unexpected ally and mentor in Orrin Travis himself. The fact that the old judge would consider even giving him the time of day after the unprepossessing start to their association came as a surprise; that he should be prepared to take him on to oversee his latest venture came so far out of left field that Chris had been hard pressed at first to believe either the proposition – or his luck.

In the week following the shooting Chris had spent long hours in Travis's company and over the days a growing mutual respect had quickly developed into a rock-solid friendship and it was from that and Travis's trust in his abilities he had come to take on the stewardship of InterSept. At the time Buck had called it falling on his feet - and he was right - but for Chris it had been even more than that; it had been his salvation.

With a deep sense of satisfaction he took in the scene around him. These were six guys from vastly differing backgrounds who had been brought together for a common purpose. They didn't always see eye to eye – hell, if he was honest he doubted they ever would – and at the beginning he had his doubts that some of them would be able to put aside their individualism and pull together as a team. But each of them had been tested under pressure, pushed to the limit at times, and had proven themselves again and again as both individuals and, ultimately, as a unit. In short, this was a team of guys he knew he would trust with his life. And right now, that seemed a pretty good measure of success.

Still lost in thought he absently reached for another beer from the ice chest but the move was neatly intercepted and rather than the frosty neck of a second Blackbeard he found instead a heavy cut-glass tumbler being thrust into his hand.

"Time for a real drink, Mister Larabee."

Chris shot a quick glance from the Southerner, who had wasted no time in sinking fluidly into a vacant deck chair, inspecting the generous double measure of amber liquid in the bottom of the glass with an exaggerated degree of suspicion.

"Been raiding the cooking sherry again, Ezra?" he grinned, but the other man ignored the bait and simply laughed, waving airily in the general direction of the barbecue grill over which a vocally energetic Wilmington now seemed to preside.

"That's more Buck's domain I believe; he could drink paint thinner and be none the wiser! This, my friend, is the world's finest eighteen year old single malt scotch." He took a generous swallow and leaned back, closing his eyes while his expression said it all: pure bliss.

Chris laughed in turn then took an exploratory mouthful struck by its initial sweetness, fruit and toffee threaded with smoke and a hint of seaweed, followed by wood and peat that somehow reminded him of chewing on a mouthful of honeycomb and smoky bacon at the same time; gentle waves of flavour that ended with a peppery bite in the back of his throat.

"Damn, I reckon whisky don't come much finer than that," he admitted readily, "gotta hand it to the Old Man; he sure knows how to keep a first class bar."

“First-class everything,” agreed Ezra, settling deeper into the cushions of the chair, “Nothing quite like the smell of Old Money.”

“Jealous?” teased Larabee, hoping to get a rise out of the younger man who made no secret of his love of the finer things in life.

“Me? Hell, no!” retorted the Southerner in mock horror, the lazy drawl suffused with irony, “What would I want with a million dollar boat, a hundred acre retreat in Connecticut and a string of polo ponies?”

“Polo ponies?” The puzzlement in Larabee’s voice was genuine yet he had no doubt that Ezra knew what he was talking about. It was so typical of the Southerner; that same degree of meticulous attention to detail on which covert operatives relied to keep them alive had again given him an edge. It was a minor point but one which left Chris feeling as if he had been caught on the back foot and he couldn’t quite decide if it was a trait that irked or gratified him. “How come you know so much about the Judge anyhow?”

“You should check the Forbes listings some time,” advised Ezra offhandedly, as if it was something he would expect any sane person to do.

Chris shook his head, lost for a suitable reply.

“You know something, Ezra? You worry me sometimes.”

The Southerner swallowed another mouthful of whisky before directing an infuriatingly self-satisfied smile at his boss.

“Only sometimes? I’m disappointed.”

Chris stretched and shifted into a more comfortable position, uttering drily: “Not half as disappointed as you’re gonna be when you have to say goodbye to all this come Monday.”

It was a deliberate goad on Larabee’s part and he took perverse enjoyment in the result; Ezra’s consequent spit-take being everything he could have wished for. It wasn’t every day that he could manage to score off the Southerner.

“Now that,” protested Ezra with an injured look, “was not kind. Not kind at all!”

Larabee just grinned but then sobered a little when he noticed Ezra wince as he shifted back in the deck chair. Here it was easy to forget how messed up he had been just a few weeks ago. Guatemala had been a baptism of fire for all of them but both Buck and Ezra had taken the brunt of the damage. On the surface the former FBI agent seemed fine, but if Chris had learned anything about the Southerner it was to take absolutely nothing about him on face value.

“Everything okay with you, Ezra?”

The other man shot him a look of disbelief but his eyes were alight with the fire of devilment.

“You mean apart from the fact that I just inhaled three parts of a double measure of whisky?” To make a point he brushed lightly at an imagined area of spillage on his slacks, muttering under his breath: “Shameful waste.”



“As tragic as that may be,” conceded Larabee, facetiously, “I was thinking more of your well-being than the whisky’s!”

Standish gave a short laugh, not meeting Larabee’s gaze directly.

“Fear not, after last night you can take it on good authority that this is old Southern boy’s as good as new!”

“Glad to hear it,” he drawled, then suddenly did a double take as he processed what Ezra had just suggested, however casually, by referring to the previous night and pinned the younger man with a perceptive look. For his part Ezra’s bland expression gave nothing away but as far as Chris was concerned he’d already tipped his hand. Until that moment he hadn’t been 100% sure of where Ezra had spent the night. Even after Buck’s tireless barrage of, often inventive, speculation on the Southerner’s overnight absence, on his return Ezra had kept them all guessing by adroitly avoiding confirming or denying anything. Now he had no doubts. He took the bait anyway. “So, what were you doing last night to bring you to that particular deep and significant conclusion?”

“Let’s just say I was...” he hesitated for a split second before continuing with a half-smile: “exercising my options.”

Chris grinned.

“Sounds like you were exercising something. Come on, ‘fess up!”

At that Ezra chuckled softly, gently turning the tumbler in his hand back and forth to catch the reflected light from the deck lamps as he watched the swirl of the remaining quarter-inch of amber liquid.

“My only answer to that is to plead the fifth and stand resolutely by the golden rule that a gentleman never tells.”

“Reckon that’s all the proof I need,” joked Chris, adding with touch of rueful envy: “Lucky bastard!”

“And all you’re going to get,” warned the Southerner, “unlike a certain member of this team, who shall remain nameless, I prefer to conduct my personal...er...” he coughed, discreetly, “..affairs, for want of a better word, with a little decorum.”

Larabee laughed out loud.

“Buck? Hell, he’d have been broadcasting his latest seduction to the whole island by now!”

Ezra winced at the mental picture that generated.

“Precisely.”

Chris waited a beat before going on, not sure what was going to be the right thing to say. With Ezra it was hard to tell. Claire had seemed affable enough; not only easy on the eye but smart and well-grounded; not the type of woman to play games. At least, for Ezra’s sake, he hoped not.

“So, you planning on seeing her again?”

Ezra drained the last of his whisky and kept his gaze on the empty glass.

“Thinking about it.”

“Well, my advice, for what it’s worth,” ventured Chris, “is don’t think on it too long. If you got something worth going after, then do it. Get out there and grab onto it with both hands.” He grinned. “And in this case I think you can take that literally.” He ducked his head then, overcome by a sudden wave of longing for his own, dead, wife. “Goddamn it, Ezra, life’s too short to spend it alone.”

For a moment neither man spoke, each caught up in their own private thoughts until finally Chris sighed and abruptly stood up signalling the end of the conversation with a self-conscious: “Reckon that’s enough preaching for one day.” Then suddenly at a loss as to what to say he jerked his thumb towards the five men still clustered around the barbecue. “Looks like supper’s about ready. I’d better get over there before the wolf pack over there leaves us with nothing but the bones to chew on!”

“Hell, yes!” encouraged the Southerner in mock alarm, although he made no attempt to move from his own chair. “And while you’re about it don’t let those uncouth bastards at the scotch. I plan on getting much better acquainted with this particularly fine drop before the evening is through.”

Chris shook his head stopping just short of rolling his eyes and wondering why he should expect any less of the incorrigible Georgian. Some things just never changed.

“Just make sure that’s not the only thing you plan on getting much better acquainted with, huh?”

Ezra tilted his head briefly, acknowledging Larabee’s perfectly timed, if not exactly subtle, appeal and offered a quick, wry smile in response.

“Point taken.”

Satisfied, Larabee started to move away but paused, turning expectantly, as Ezra added: “Oh, and Chris...”

“Yeah?”

“Thanks.”

Nodding just once Larabee spun on his heel and resumed the short walk to join the others leaving the other man to follow in his own time.

Ezra sat for a few minutes without stirring, his expression unreadable; a study in introspection. In an almost unconscious action, he reached into his pocket and took out his cellphone, not looking at it as he continued instead to stare into infinity but holding it loosely in his hand as if still undecided what he was planning to do with it. Then slowly, tentatively even, he flipped it open and finally dropped his gaze to the display. With deliberate slowness he scrolled through the contact list until he found the name he was looking for. A sense of relief washed over him as if he had half-expected not to find it but there it was: Claire Ferguson.

With a sigh of contentment he slowly thumbed the Motorola closed – and smiled.