



Bodyguards

Bad Timing

Jean Graham

2006

r

IN A DARKENED PLACE
MAN WITHOUT A FACE
COUNT ON FINGERS THE CHOICES HE COULD'VE MADE
PAINT A PICTURE OF THE VIEW FROM UP ABOVE
YOU - AND SOON HE'S PAINTING IN BLOOD
AND THAT MAN IS ME
LA VIDA PERDI
NOW I'M CASTING A SHADOW IN FRONT OF ME
NOW I'VE DRAINED MY HEART SO I NO LONGER BLEED
CLIP MY WINGS AND HOPE TO FLY
WAVE MY LAST GOODBYE
WILL I BE AWAKE?
HOLD MY HAND WHEN I DIE

He had no idea why he should be feeling any great sense of disappointment. After all Maude had never been the most reliable of people but, just this once, he had thought that maybe she would make the effort and actually follow through on a promise. He slowly swirled the amber liquid in the bottom of the glass, watching the motion of the decade-old bourbon over the ice as he wondered just who he thought he was fooling. Of course, he should have known better. Maude Standish only ever did what would best serve Maude Standish and, in his experience, her infrequent and somewhat variable demonstrations of maternalistic devotion were only ever a means to an end.

He swallowed the last of the whiskey, savouring its smooth and smoky flavour as it rolled over his tongue, and signalled the barman for another refill.

Right now, he should have been driving upstate and heading for Jiminy Peak. Maude's idea. Let's have a real Christmas this year, darlin'. I've found this sweet little lodge that's just perfect ...She had suckered him; just like she always did. He had agreed to go.

He swallowed another generous measure of bourbon. Now she had pulled the plug and, in true Maude style, had waited until he was at the airport before calling him to let him know she wouldn't be on the plane he had gone to meet. Well, honey, I just couldn't refuse could I? I mean, this is a God sent opportunity and I couldn't pass on it. We'll do New Year together instead. You do understand don't you, darlin'?

Yes, Mother.

He understood that Maude had made a choice and, as usual, he had come out second best. Some things never changed. He slammed the empty glass down on the polished bar top harder than he had intended and the bartender took it as a signal for another refill, but Ezra shook his head and got up from the barstool. Drinking alone in an airport lounge on Christmas Eve was not part of any agenda he had in mind. If he wanted to drink alone he could just as easily do it in his apartment.

The bartender sketched a quick salute in acknowledgment of the generous tip: "Merry Christmas!"

Ezra quickly turned and left. Yeah. Merry Christmas.

He left the BMW in the car park. In his experience anger, alcohol and driving a car were an unhealthy combination, and with two strikes already against him he had no intention of inviting strike three. There were enough idiots out on the roads without him adding to their number. He opted instead for a cab.

He gave his Harborside address and sat back as the yellow cab eased away from the kerb suddenly glad that he could relax as a passenger. Let the driver stress over the holiday traffic.

The cab driver talked in the way of cab drivers the world over. Ezra listened, while a separate part of his mind dwelled on the fact that he was heading home to an empty apartment when he should have been heading north to the snowfields and the prospect of good food, good company and the closest thing to a seasonal family gathering that he was ever likely to get.

The cab driver was heading home too. Ezra was his last fare. He was going home to his wife and kids. Sure I lose out on the extra money. I mean it's Christmas and all and everyone wants a cab, you know what I mean? But what the hell, I wouldn't miss being with my kids at Christmas for a million bucks. He laughed; a bright and joyous sound. A happy man. Well, maybe for a million but not for a few lousy bucks of overtime.

Ezra ended the ride a few blocks from his apartment. The cabby had unknowingly struck a nerve with his endlessly cheerful talk of family and home, and suddenly it seemed preferable to walk the rest of the way – and there was a 7-Eleven just around the corner. He gave the cab driver a hundred for a ten dollar fare. Go home to your kids.

He walked away from the kerb, hunching deeper into his overcoat as the chill wind bit into exposed skin and his breath clouded in the frosty air. He felt better for having at least spread a little goodwill of his own; but hell, what was a c-note to him? Money he had, but it was cold comfort right now. Suspecting that he still had a lot more in common with Ebenezer Scrooge than Bob Cratchit, he headed for the convenience store and made a mental note to make that at least a quart of sour mash.

The store felt unnaturally warm after the the street but Ezra didn't bother unbuttoning his overcoat; he was a man with a purpose and was, after all, only going to be five minutes. It took him less than twenty seconds to scan the selection of spirits and pick out a well aged Tennessee whisky. If his only companion for Christmas Eve was going to be a bottle, it had better be the best he could get.

Walking back to the checkout at the front of the store he awkwardly dug into the inner breast pocket of his jacket with his free hand and searched for his wallet then, casting a hurried glance at the falling snow outside, wondered if perhaps it had been such a smart move to give up his cab. Still, it was only a couple of blocks and, with a rueful smile, he reminded himself that he had really didn't have anything better to do.

Ezra waited as the check-out clerk scanned the whisky and bagged it.

“Twenty-four ninety.”

The Southerner handed over his credit card in silence to the bored-looking youth and waited for the cash register to produce his receipt. Here was a guy having almost as much fun as he was. Wordlessly signing the slip, he retrieved his card, slipped in back into his wallet and picked up the bottle of whisky. As he turned away from the sullen clerk he couldn't decide if it made him feel bet-

ter or worse to know that he wasn't the only man in Boston to be somewhat lacking in the spirit of Christmas – unless of course that included the very tangible kind of spirit that came out of a bottle. Starting towards the exit he reached inside his overcoat to shove his wallet back into his jacket pocket, a simple action made suddenly difficult by his layers of clothing and hindered by the bottle he was carrying in his other hand. With a soft curse of frustration he paused just inside the doorway, reasoning that he might have more success if he stopped moving and focused on what he was doing. Feeling a chill breeze as the door to the street opened, he distractedly raised his head and wondered if it was likely that he could cover the two blocks and get home before it started to snow earnest.

They were a couple of punks and as irritating as Ezra found their obvious need to demonstrate some kind of bad-ass street cred with their posturing he wasn't interested in getting into some territorial pissing contest with them over who was going to move out of the doorway first. Hell, all he wanted to do was get out of there. Taking a step back he left them room to pass but something about their body language and attitude that went beyond the desperate need to appear cool made him take a second, closer, look and the moment he made eye contact with the nearer of the two he understood that his already bleak outlook for the evening was just about to get a whole lot worse.

He had seen that look too many times on too many faces in the decade he had been a federal agent to mistake it but now he let his glance skitter away nervously, at once conveying the message that he was no threat. His mind raced, quickly filtering the options until he was left with the only sane possibility: do nothing. At this moment he was a private citizen who happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. This was not his fight.

The gun was a Saturday night special, the gunman a novice; it didn't take an expert to recognise either the awkwardness in the punk's handling of the cheap thirty-eight or the tremor in his hand. Ezra's already fluttering gut took a sudden nose-dive. He might be a pro but he was smart enough to know when to be scared, and a desperate kid with a gun he didn't know how to use was more than enough justification for the ripple of fear that sent his heart-rate into triple digits and sweat trickling unpleasantly between his shoulder-blades.

The scream was not loud; in fact as far as screams went it was insignificant. A tiny cry of surprise from a young woman suddenly confronted by a couple of armed men when all she wanted to do was pay for the quart of milk she had in her hand, but it was the catalyst that spurred the next, inevitable reaction.

What had been almost a static tableau for what seemed like interminable seconds to the Southerner immediately erupted into a noisy and disordered panic; the scenario that, given a choice, he would have most liked to avoid. But there was no choice now, not for him or anyone else. The juggernaut had been set in motion and those unfortunate enough to be in its path would suffer the con-

sequences.

“Down! Down! Now! Down on the floor, mothahfuckah!”

The punk caught him a solid blow in the chest shoving him backwards. Wanting to be neither hero nor martyr he yielded but, wrong-footed and with one hand still clutching his wallet and the other gripping the paper sack of whisky, he stumbled back a step and hit a display stand with his shoulder. The quart of liquor flew from his hand, describing a long, lazy arc before it finally hit the floor and detonated in a noisy blast of sparkling shards of glass and amber liquid.

The flat, frighteningly familiar, crack of a small calibre handgun discharging registered in his brain a millisecond after the resonating explosion of shattering glass and almost at the same instant that he felt the explosion of pain deep in his chest.

He was down; sprawled on his back and staring up at the bright fluorescent lights on the ceiling above him. He didn't remember how he came to be lying on the floor and now he didn't seem to be able to remember how to breathe. At the edge of his awareness there was activity, lots of noise and movement, but it didn't seem very important any more. Whatever was happening outside his own little sphere of existence was of little consequence to him. At that moment he knew and cared about just two things: one, he had been shot and two, it hurt like a bitch.

To even draw a single breath took an inordinate amount of effort, and if he could have delayed the process indefinitely he would have, but his body and brain were demanding oxygen and finally, unable to control his body's physiological response to the increasing levels of carbon dioxide, he snatched a shuddering gasp of air. Eyes widening in momentary shock as pain ripped savagely through his upper chest he felt with it the first stab of fear that he could well be dying.

He felt cold yet it was not the creeping invasive chill that came from blood loss and shock but rather the wintry blast of December snow coming in, unchecked, from the street. It took him some time to make the connections but it slowly came to him that the electronic tick-tick-tick that he could hear was the automatic doors repeatedly trying, and failing, to close. Something was close enough to the doors to continually interrupt the infrared beam and prevent them from closing. It didn't once occur to him that it could be his own body creating the obstruction.

Suddenly it registered that the noise, the panicked confusion and shouting had ceased and in its wake a kind of stunned silence had descended like a shroud; that absence of sound was the very reason he could now hear the rhythmic ticking of the door sensor and, as he struggled to take his next painful breath, he found it the ultimate irony that he could also hear the piped music still playing uninterrupted in the background: Bells are ringin' everywhere, season's spirits in the air, up and down the avenue, holiday dreams are comin' true. An errant snowflake, blown in through the open door, settled gently on his eyelashes and as he stared unblinkingly into the harsh, bright, lights overhead, a single bead of

moisture rolled traitorously from the outer corner of his eye and slid down his temple. Merry Christmas.

oooOOOooo

Chris Larabee had a particular affection for Christmas. It had always been his favourite time of year and even now, with his wife and son gone these past five years, he still felt a deep and abiding affection for the holiday and, while it was true that he could no longer share in the love and laughter with Adam and Sarah as he once had, he still made an effort to hold onto those special memories.

It was for that reason that tonight, on Christmas Eve, he had opened his home to what had grown to be almost his second family. Buck Wilmington had been a part of his life for more than a decade. He had been there when he had married Sarah, he had been there when Adam was born, and he had been there when, in one horrific night, his world had come crashing down around him and he had lost his family - and his will to go on without them. But, although a small part of him had died with his wife and son, he had gone on - and he owed the fact that he had found the strength to do so, to Buck. Theirs was a friendship that had endured the lows as well as the highs and, even now, they didn't always see eye to eye but the bottom line was that Buck had always been there when he needed him. And if that didn't make him family, then he didn't know what did.

The sound of scuffling boots and voices from the porch brought him out of his moment of reflection and reminded him that rather than dwell on the past, the time had come to fix his thoughts firmly in the present - and the people who had become, over the course of the past year, the closest thing he now had to a family.

Vin Tanner came in from the hallway grinning as he brushed powdery snow from his hair, with JD no more than a step behind and both looking chilled to the bone.

"So, who's been dreaming of a white Christmas?"

Chris glanced out of the window at the gently falling snow.

"Hell, not me. Just means I'll be shovelling snow from the driveway come the morning."

The Texan's grin widened.

"Well, good to see the Christmas spirit's alive and well ..."

"...and living right here in this bottle!" continued Larabee smoothly, holding up an unopened bottle of bourbon. "Come to think on it, you both look about ready for a shot of Christmas cheer." He cocked his head as he suddenly registered their windswept appearance. "You didn't come in on the bike?"

Vin shrugged.

“Sure. It's quicker. Swung by and picked up JD on the way.”

Dunne rubbed his hands together.

“It was a little fresh,” he admitted, then added with a quick burst of youthful enthusiasm, “but way cool!”

Larabee's comeback was a droll: “I think goddamned freezing would be a better description”, as he unscrewed the cap and poured two shots, pausing and looking at JD for confirmation before he started pouring the third.

At the unspoken question Dunne shook his head. “Beer's fine.”

In response Larabee gestured towards the fridge and JD moved to help himself to a Samuel Adams lager from the impressive range of beers stocking the refrigerator.

Vin glanced around at the familiar surroundings. He had shared the apartment with Chris for his first five months in Boston and even now it still felt comfortably like coming home.

“Buck not here yet?”

“Said he had some business to finish up at the office. Shouldn't be too long..”

Vin and JD exchanged a quick, sly look then Dunne laughed.

“Ha! What'd I tell you? You owe me twenty, Vin!”

Chris took a generous swallow of his bourbon and frowned, looking from Vin to JD and back.

“You gonna deal me in or what?”

Tanner just shook his head, a sign of resignation rather than refusal.

“No big deal, but I think you'll find Buck's unfinished business at the office goes by the name of Jessica Wells.”

There was no hint of surprise on Larabee's face, just a faint smile as he swirled the dark amber liquid in the bottom of his glass.

“Wouldn't be Buck if it didn't.”

The three of them laughed, an easy, relaxed sound and, as one, moved into the glowing warmth of the fire-lit living room.

He was cold. A visceral cold that went so deep that he could no longer feel anything beyond its paralysing grip except the fire that still burned in his chest. He knew pain; it held no secrets for him and it was the fact that this particular pain was whispering to him rather than screaming at him that frightened him the most. Something was terribly wrong.

He had never been shot before but he knew well enough the mechanics of a gunshot wound, had seen more times than he cared to admit the devastating effects in others and he knew that he was in trouble. He desperately wanted to move. He wanted to be able to sit up, to cough and clear

the congestion he could feel building in his lungs; he wanted to tell these people that were hovering around him, looking at him with expressions of mingled shock and concern that he was fine; that it was all some stupid mistake, and that he just wanted to go home. But he couldn't speak, he couldn't even breathe, and he knew that he wasn't moving anywhere. And he definitely wasn't going home.

A confused babble of voices flowed over him yet he found it impossible to distinguish one from another or even connect the words to be able to make any sense of them but he didn't need words to understand the panic and fear that oozed like rancid sweat from these people and now seemed to settle over him like a cold, damp shroud.

He flinched as a hand touched his skin, feeling pressure against his neck and instantly recognising the gesture for what it was; the most basic confirmation of life – or death. A woman's tear-streaked face appeared in his field of vision, an elderly but still handsome Latina, her lips moving as she lifted his hand and gently threaded a rosary through his inert fingers.

Not speaking to him; praying for him.

Gradually her whispered words penetrated his consciousness ...Maria ...Madre de Dios, ruega ...no sotros ...la hora de nuestra ...He felt dull and stupid, understanding yet not understanding as his brain struggled to complete the familiar prayer: muerte? At least in Spanish there was a sense of poetry to it.

Is he...?

Hell, I don't knowthink there's a pulse

...still breathing ...

so much bloodcan't somebody do something?

Goddamn it, call 911!

...bells are ringin' everywhere, season's spirits in the air, up and down the avenue, holiday dreams are comin' true ...

He gasped, a reflex and incredibly painful intake of breath, as someone, at last taking action, jerked open his overcoat and roughly shoved aside the jacket beneath before quickly clamping a hand, solidly and unrelentingly, against his ribcage under his right armpit. Shuddering at the contact, he coughed wetly; tasted blood; choked on it; and suddenly he was fighting to breathe. Suddenly he was drowning.

Oh, shit!

If he could have made a response, made any sound at all other than an inarticulate bubbling in his throat that was beyond his control to either prevent or overcome, he would have been the first to agree with that sentiment.

Wailing. Keening. Moaning. The ululation of sirens sliced razor-like through all other sound only to cease abruptly and leave a momentary vacuum before it quickly expanded into a hum of mo-

tion and activity that rolled inexorably towards him like a wave, washing over him and sweeping him along; flotsam on the tide. And, unresisting, he let it take him.

Uh, we have a thirty to forty year old Caucasian male, single gunshot wound to the chest. Down time approximately five to seven minutes. Got a BP of eighty over forty, pulse 110 and respiratory rate 34, RTS 10. Entry wound two centimetres below right axilla; exit wound one centimetre above left clavicle. Breath sounds absent on right side ...

So detached had he become that if it hadn't been for his acute awareness of self, of being handled so intimately and invasively by strangers, he might just as easily have believed himself to be an observer; hovering on the outside; looking in. Having drifted into twilight, his grip on consciousness wavering uncertainly, he was no longer capable of complex thought yet his brain still registered every sound and, on the most basic of levels, he began to comprehend that not only his body but his life was now held in someone else's hands. And he had passed into the shadows.

Chris wedged himself comfortably into one corner of the sofa and glanced around the room. It was a smaller gathering than he had intended what with Ezra begging off at the last minute and Josiah mysteriously heading for some unspecified location making only, by way of explanation, a veiled reference to obligations. Whatever the 'obligations' that had taken Sanchez away on such short notice, he knew that it had to be something important and, judging from his uncharacteristic preoccupation before he left, it was also something very personal and private. As far as Ezra was concerned, he couldn't blame the Southerner for grabbing a rare opportunity to spend the holiday season with his mother; from what he understood of Maude Standish she was a difficult lady to pin down and, however distant their relationship might be, she was still his mother.

So, two down but, on the plus side, Mary Travis had promised to swing by when her shift at the hospital finally ended, though she had already given him fair warning that it might be touch and go, with a gentle reminder that, as far as the emergency department was concerned, Christmas Eve was business as usual. Looking forward to seeing her a lot more than he felt he had any right to he found himself hoping, for purely selfish reasons, that tonight at least it was going to be a quiet one in ED.

He took a swallow of his drink and stretched out his legs with a contented sigh. It wasn't often he had some guaranteed downtime but for the next few days he was planning on staying under the radar and taking it easy; a chance to kick back and chill out with no stress, no distractions and definitely no dramas.

For the moment Buck seemed to be more than capable of making up for the reduction in numbers by doubling his own output of volume and energy. As he fought with JD for control of the TV remote, Chris found himself wondering if Buck would ever grow up then, with a quiet smile, decid-

ed that he didn't really want him to.

"Hey," protested Dunne, as Buck managed to switch channels from footage of a city convenience store cordoned off with police tape to MTV in spite of his best efforts not to yield the remote without a fight, "I was watching that!"

"Yeah, yeah," answered Wilmington, without sympathy, "Life's a bitch, and then you die. Now gimme! It's Christmas Eve and I ain't sitting here watching the news, okay."

The picture on the big screen plasma TV rapidly changed as Buck surfed through a dozen channels at top speed while keeping a frustrated Dunne just out of reach.

"But there was a shooting ...I just wanted to ..."

"Not our business, kid," replied Buck, reasonably, then added with a grin, "It's not that I don't care about people getting shot, hell, I feel for any poor schmuck who gets himself wasted on Christmas Eve, but that's just it. It's Christmas, dammit, we're supposed to be having a good time here, so how 'bout we start havin' some fun!"

Larabee didn't necessarily agree with his friend but he knew exactly where he was coming from. Working as they did in security and close protection they saw enough of the darker side of humanity on a daily basis without needing to see more of it on their down-time, especially not tonight. Tonight was a chance for even the most cynical to join with friends and family and at least go through the motions of embracing the spirit of the holiday season. The thought, not too surprisingly, brought him back to Ezra again.

He glanced at his watch. Almost seven. By now he should have made it to Jiminy Peak. It was roughly a two and a half hour drive to the Berkshires and, knowing Ezra, he wouldn't have wasted any time getting there. Probably in front of a blazing log fire right now with a snifter of brandy to ward off the chill. He took another swallow of bourbon and, with a ghost of a smile, silently toasted the absent Southerner. Merry Christmas, Ezra.

II

"Come on, son, stay with me. That's the way. Open your eyes, now ..."

Wake up, Ezra. We have to go. Whispering. A sense of urgency.

Mommy?

Please, honey, just do as mommy says. We don't have much time. Now get dressed and be very quiet.

Dressing in the dark, stumbling with tiredness. Fearful of the underlying tremor in his mother's voice he obeyed his instincts and remained silent in spite of his misgivings. He already knew the difference between what was said and what was meant, and what his mother was not saying made his heart beat so fast he felt faint as he tried his best to get his

things without making a sound.

The house was in darkness but as he held tightly onto his mother's hand and allowed himself to be led down the stairs he could see the lights of the Christmas tree in the living room. His six-year old gaze drifted longingly to the mound of presents under the lowest branches then as his mother, ignoring both tree and gifts, tightened her grip on his small hand and moved quietly but purposefully to the front door he felt a curious sinking in his stomach. They were leaving.

As the heavy front door started to close behind them he glanced over his shoulder to look back at the glittering and decorated fir, but a tug on his hand pulled him reluctantly round to face his mother. She gave him an apologetic look as if she understood what was in his thoughts.

I'm sorry, darlin'. I'll make it up to you; I promise.

He looked up, suddenly afraid to ask. Not the obvious: where are we going or even why, but a far more terrifying idea that had crept into his head.

What about Daddy? Isn't he coming with us?

His mother's expression suddenly hardened as she wordlessly pulled him towards the car standing in the driveway and in cold silence they drove away. In the face of her quiet and controlled anger he dared not look back.

"BP's 70 over and falling."

"Got that second line in? Okay ...chest tube going in ...now. "

He recoiled from the sharp, thrusting pain that slipped between his lower ribs like the lethal blade of a stiletto, and retreated back into the shadows, wavering uncertainly between the seductive darkness which threatened to swallow him and the tenuous thread of consciousness to which he still clung. The temptation to surrender completely was strong but not nearly as strong as the instinct to keep fighting.

The terrifying sensation of suffocation suddenly diminished but he was still struggling for air, every breath a battle and never enough. Drowning.

Fighting.

Swallow. Cough. Blood.

"Shit! Suction here. Let's get a tube down or we're gonna lose him! How's the pressure?"

"Steady on 60."

Head tilted back, jaw angled forward, tongue held easily by an instrument he could only feel as cold, unyielding, steel as it advanced into his throat, his body obeyed the wordless but indisputable commands of sure and strong hands that neither asked nor required his permission to act.

Shudder. Gag. Breathe.

"Manual ventilation commenced at 1745. BP 60 over palp and steady, pulse 120 ..."

Fight ...

“Three lovely, lovely, ladies,” sighed Wilmington, happily, his grin reflecting his confidence, as he displayed three queens in a fanned arc with a finality that defied any opposition.

With a grunt that signalled capitulation Vin threw his cards face down onto the table, an action quickly followed by Chris and Nathan and accompanied by good-natured griping from Jackson that he'd seen better hands on the Venus de Milo. Only JD held back until Wilmington's eyes fixed suspiciously on the youngest of the five now sitting in various states of relaxation around the low coffee table in Larabee's living room.

“Okay, kid. Show us what you got.”

Dunne's face was a study in detachment as he casually laid out a straight flush. The smile came later.

“Goddammit, you been taking lessons, kid?”

JD scooped the poker chips towards him laughing softly as much at Buck's stunned reaction to his quietly executed coup as his pleasure at having so successfully pulled it off.

Wilmington leaned forward, an accusatory finger stabbing the air towards Dunne.

“You sandbagged!”

“Sure did,” admitted JD freely, “Suckered you real good.”

“Done cleaned me out is what you did,” muttered Buck, resigned finally to his loss, “Been spending too much time with Ezra if you ask me.”

“Ah, come on, admit it! You're just a sore loser, Buck.”

Laughing at the banter between the two of them Nathan gathered up the cards and began to shuffle the deck.

“Didn't you do a job in Las Vegas with Ezra early in the fall, JD?” he asked, as if he didn't already know the answer, “Saw a bit of action at the tables, huh?”

JD shot Jackson an arch look, managing to achieve a look of combined innocence and mischief as he gave a casual shrug.

“Well, Ezra did give me a few pointers ...”

Buck snorted.

“Did that include base dealing?”

Dunne, rather than taking any offence just grinned.

“Aw, Buck, just accept it. You were crap. Now are you in or are you just gonna keep griping?”

Buck waved his hand dismissively and picked up his drink.

“Better deal me out, on this one, kid. I kinda like this shirt ...”

The banter was abruptly interrupted by the musical chime of the doorbell and Wilmington, con-

firming his willingness to abandon the game, started to rise but Chris was marginally faster, the speed of his exit betraying a degree of eagerness that earned a silent and subtle exchange of knowing looks from the remaining four.

Breath frosting in the icy air, Mary Travis stood on the stoop looking miserable and cold with her gloved hands plunged deep into the pockets of her full-length leather coat, shoulders hunched against the biting chill as Chris swung the door open.

She stepped inside and, as Larabee shut the door against the bite of the winter night, started to tug off her gloves.

"It must be ten below out there!" she complained, starting to unwind her scarf, "I'm so cold, I can barely move."

Chris took her coat as she awkwardly shrugged out of it, quickly putting it aside to take her hands in his own and massage some warmth into them.

"Doctor's always have cold hands," he countered with a smile.

"Yes," she admitted, gently pulling her hands free of his and touching an icy palm to his cheek, "but not usually a degree away from frostbite!"

He pulled back with a soft laugh.

"Point taken. And the downside of a white Christmas in Boston," he added ruefully, then with a hand in the small of her back he ushered her through to the inviting warmth of the living room and a chorus of greetings from the quartet still clustered, in various attitudes of relaxation, around the coffee table.

Mary looked sceptically at the cards and poker chips strewn across the heavy, glass-topped, table.

"Poker?"

Buck coughed and hastily started to clear the table.

"Uh, Christmas tradition," he muttered quickly, but the grin that followed immediately erased any hint of contrition.

"Not one I've ever heard of."

"That don't mean it ain't a good one," murmured Buck, slyly, before quickly changing tack. "So, all quiet on the western front, Mary? Must be if you made it out before midnight."

"Sorry to disillusion you, Buck," Mary sat down on the couch with a weary sigh, "and the truth is I feel guilty even being here."

"Don't," said Chris, mildly, "You can't be there 24/7."

Looking up, she smiled and accepted a steaming mug of coffee from him.

"I know. But it doesn't stop me wanting to be sometimes."

“And this time?” Larabee sat down on the couch next to her.

She nestled back into the cushions and sipped the coffee, warming her hands on the mug.

“Gunshot wound to the chest,” she answered, bluntly, “Came in right as I was getting ready to leave. Went into v-tach just as they got him into ED. I was going to stay on but Phil Donaldson practically threw me out of the door, said he could handle it.”

“Good for Phil,” murmured Chris, with a hint of a smile, “Must have some clout if he got you out of there without a fight.”

“A John Doe,” she sighed, her expression suddenly distant and sad. She shook her head, obviously not finding it easy to put work aside. “Someone who just happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time ...”

“The convenience store uptown?” interrupted JD quickly, recalling the news item he had so briefly seen before Buck had switched channels on him.

“I believe so but I really didn't hear all the details.”

“Geez, talk about bad timing,” sympathised Dunne, “that's one unlucky guy.”

Mary ducked her head and took another sip of the coffee. “Luckier than you think, JD. Whoever he is, at least he's in good hands. Phil's the best trauma surgeon on staff. At least he'll have a fighting chance.”

“Yeah, but he won't be home for Christmas.”

“No, JD, unfortunately he won't.” She didn't add that he may not make it home at all. This wasn't the time or the place to dwell on such things. Instead she put her coffee down and smiled. “Okay, that's enough of talking shop! When do we eat? I'm starving.”

The intrusive ring of his cell phone was not a sound that Chris was particularly thrilled to hear but it was also one that he could not ignore; he still had a business to run and enough of his crew still out in the field to guarantee his attention. With an apologetic look at his guests, who had already started piling food onto their plates, he withdrew to a discreet distance and glanced at the screen to check the caller ID. The number displayed meant nothing to him but he took the call anyway.

“Larabee.” The line was noisy and the voice distant and unfamiliar but his initial expression of concentration quickly cleared to be replaced by one of momentary confusion before he responded with a baffled: “Maude? Maude Standish?”

At the end of the brief conversation he wasn't certain he was any less confused than he had been at the start of the call but the bottom line was that he was now obliged to follow through on the promise he had made to a woman he barely knew and who was currently half way across the Atlantic and on her way to Paris.

“What's up, pard?” called Buck, suddenly noticing Chris's troubled expression, “Got a problem?”

Chris shook his head genuinely unable to give a definite answer as he immediately started to make another call.

“I hope not.”

After two obviously failed attempts to connect Chris flipped the phone shut and swore softly. Across the room Vin looked up, his eyes narrowing as he watched the older man for a few seconds before slowly put down the plate of food he was holding.

“Want to tell us what's going on, Cowboy?”

Larabee sighed.

“That was Maude,” he began, then added quickly as he noticed a few blank expressions: “Ezra's mother. Calling from half-way across the Atlantic.” He rubbed his eyes, tiredly. “In the air. On her way to Paris.”

Buck suddenly stopped chewing as Larabee's words finally registered.

“What the hell ...?”

Chris held up a hand, effectively putting a stop to any further questioning.

“I don't know and I didn't ask, okay? But it seems for some reason there was a last minute change in plans; Maude didn't even make it to Boston. She said she's been trying to raise Ezra for the last two hours to explain but he's not picking up.”

Buck gave a derisive snort and muttered an ironic: “Wonder why?”

Chris shot him a warning look and continued. “I said we'd check his apartment.”

“And do what?” challenged Wilmington, “Tell him his Mommy's feeling guilty because she kissed off her own son on Christmas Eve?”

Chris heard Mary whisper a heartfelt: “Oh, no. That's so unfair.” She stepped forward and laid a gentle hand on Wilmington's arm. “He shouldn't be on his own, Buck. He should be here with us.”

“Hold on a minute,” interrupted Nathan, “Ezra's not going to welcome any of us poking into his business. You know what he's like. If he's holed up in his apartment, then that's where he wants to be.”

Vin nodded.

“He's got a point, Chris. Man has a right to spend the holidays any way he wants. Not sure he'd be any too pleased to see any of us right now.”

“But don't you think ...?” began JD, more than ready to put in his own dime's worth but Larabee's voice, cracking like a whip, suddenly silenced them all.

“Doesn't matter what I think! I said we'd check his apartment, and that's just what we're going to do. Whatever you might be thinking, Ezra's a grown man and can do what the hell he wants and

that includes spending Christmas on his own if that's what he chooses! From where I stand the last thing he needs right now is a whole lotta people trampling all over his feelings and besides, in my experience, it's never a good idea to get between a man and his mother – even one like Maude!”

There was a moment of subdued silence but no one thought to challenge Larabee's authority. He sighed heavily and looked at each of them before his eye settled on Tanner.

“Vin. You and JD go check Ezra's apartment. See if there's a reason he's not picking up his phone other than the obvious one. Take my car. JD can drive seeing as he's only had one beer.” Grabbing his keys from the bench he threw them to Dunne. “Oh, and Vin ...keep it frosty, okay?”

A quick nod from the Texan and the two of them were gone.

With a tight smile Chris moved purposefully towards the table and its impressive spread of food. “Okay, let's eat.”

There was no light or dark, just shifting shades of grey and a sensation of displacement that left him with no sense of self, only a vague awareness of existence. And pain. That was real; his only touchstone.

Standish!

The Rektor always infused his name with a guttural Teutonic inflection that emphasised the last syllable and somehow managed to make it sound like a profanity. Of course, if the Rektor had seen fit to summon him then as far as he was concerned it probably was.

Sir?

He responded in English and, as always, his Southern accent forced him to drop the r and made it sound less than respectful but he could hardly avoid the heritage of his Georgia birth.

You have a telephone call. Your mother. You may take it in my office.

Ezra followed the stern-faced master to his office and warily picked up the phone. It felt heavy in his hand but not as heavy as the feeling in the pit of his stomach.

Mother?

Hello Darlin'! How's that sweet boy of mine?

Fine.

For Maude to be calling him at school before the end of the semester – three days before the end of semester – did not bode well, and it left him with a cold, empty feeling somewhere in the middle of his chest.

What is it, mother?

He was already resigned to the fact that this was not a social call.

Slight change in plan, Sugar ...

Maude flying with Rudi to Bangkok, so no point in going home for Christmas. He would be staying on at school.

His fingers gripped the handset so tight that they were bloodless and white.

Not going home.

You do understand don't you, darling? I'll make it up to you this summer. How does Spain sound? Anyhow, Gstaad at Christmas is just divine, so you have the most wonderful time. Kisses, honey.

Yes, mother. But he was already talking to an empty line.

His heart was no longer beating, that much he could understand; instead he could feel it fluttering wildly against his ribs as if it wanted to break free of the physical bonds of his body. A fleeting but intense surge of raw energy seared through his chest like a bolt of lightning and suddenly, without warning, he was no longer floating but falling, crashing heavily back to earth.

III

"He's not here, Chris."

Larabee didn't respond immediately, instead he took a deep breath, letting it out slowly as he considered the implications.

"Chris?"

"Yeah, here."

"Security says he left around two and hasn't been back since."

"You checked the apartment?"

"Come on, Chris!" The censure in the Texan's voice was a reprimand he deserved.

"Okay, okay, just had to ask."

"Yeah, I know," continued Tanner, understanding, "But the place is clean and there's no sign of the Beamer. Wherever Ezra's decided to hole up for the duration it sure ain't here."

Larabee wasn't sure what he'd expected but somehow, in spite of what he'd said to the others about Ezra being a grown man, he privately felt a growing sense of unease. It just didn't feel right.

"Okay, so where to from here? Any ideas?"

"Uh, we thought we'd head on across the river to Logan seeing as we're this close anyway. You know, check out the place, ask around ..." he trailed off, then added: "Can't hurt."

Chris frowned.

"You think maybe he's still at the airport?" Chris sounded sceptical, although the possibility that Ezra had hit one of the airport bars when Maude had been a no-show suddenly crept into his mind, "That's one hell of a big maybe."

"Hell, I don't know!" confessed Vin irritably, "Got any better ideas?"

"Sorry, Vin. Go ahead, it's worth a shot. And while you're there you might want to check out

the bars.”

It was Tanner's turn to sound doubtful.

“We're talking maybe five hours, Chris. You really think Ezra's the type to get blitzed over something like this?”

“You tell me, Vin. How well do we know Ezra? How well do we really know anyone?”

The sudden pause on the other end of the phone was frosty and his tone, when he finally answered, glacial.

“I'll get back to you.”

Larabee sighed again as he keyed the off button. He really didn't need this.

“So where do you think he might be?”

Chris had been expecting the conversation to eventually gravitate to the subject of Ezra but it had taken almost an hour for Mary to work up to the question that had obviously been bothering her since Tanner's call. Now, as the four of them sat around the fire with the television, largely ignored, murmuring in the background as they chatted easily about anything and everything but work, she finally let the genie out of the bottle. In the absence of any probable cause for concern his pragmatic self had temporarily shunted the issue of the Southerner's whereabouts aside until there was something more concrete than an empty apartment and an errant mother to suggest that Ezra was in fact doing anything other than get on with his own life, in his own way. But he guessed that Mary was not the only one feeling uneasy about the whole thing; Vin had certainly taken up the baton and was prepared to run with it. The truth was, he had no answer.

“I don't know. Ezra must have a dozen bolt holes around the city, he could be at any one of them. Restaurants, bars, that private club he's a member of ...hell, for all I know he could have checked into a city hotel and dialled himself a call girl for the night!”

Mary's look was disapproving and he knew it wasn't because she was scandalised at his suggestion but that he wasn't taking a more serious view of something that was so obviously troubling her. Buck's soft chuckle didn't help.

“He's right, Mary,” he interrupted, quietly, “The truth of it is, Maude has a guilty conscience because she knows what she did was pretty low, even for her, and now he's giving her the cold shoulder she decides to turn into the concerned parent. That don't mean we have to go running around Boston half-cocked just to make her feel better. Ezra's a big boy, Mary and, last I heard, we hadn't been appointed as his minders.”

Chris winced at his friend's honest but insensitive appraisal, aware of the sudden subtle shift in Mary's temperament.

“That's cynical even for you, Buck,” she answered, coldly, her green eyes like chips of Arctic ice. “What about being his friends?”

Both men looked uncomfortable as she sipped her coffee in silence. Chris couldn't even begin to explain why her disapproval should bother him quite as much as it did but somehow she made him feel like the biggest asshole in the world. A feeling he suspected that was now shared by Wilmington who was looking suitably contrite and suddenly finding it difficult to make eye contact with the blonde doctor.

“Look, Mary,” he answered reasonably, “There could be a whole lotta reasons why Ezra didn't go back to his apartment when Maude decided not to show. He's also a guy with a lot of connections and a platinum Amex. By now, Ezra could be anywhere and to be honest, I'm not sure just what it is you want me to do.”

The look that she gave him was no longer disapproving but immeasurably sad, and her answer – just one word – before she stood up and walked quickly away into the kitchen, floored him.

“Care.”

With a low whistle Buck leaned forward, shaking his hand as if burned.

“Guess that kinda nixes any chance of a sleep-over, huh?”

Larabee kept his eyes fixed on the door leading into the kitchen, expression hard and showing nothing of his true feelings.

“Shut up, Buck.”

Buck did, retreating with a shrug to talk to Nathan and, wisely, leaving Chris to himself.

The sound of his cell phone ringing was an almost welcome interlude and he quickly snatched up the Nokia answering with a quick and less than friendly: “Yeah? What you got?”

Vin's voice was tense as he started to relay the news. They'd found Ezra's car in the short term car park; luggage still in the trunk. But no sign of Ezra.

“One thing we did find though. Looks like he dropped his cell. It was in the trunk, wedged between his bags.”

“How'd you ...” he stopped abruptly, then sighed, “You broke into Ezra's car.” It wasn't a question.

“Uh, we ...uh ...thought given the circumstances ...”

“Yeah, yeah,” interrupted Chris, hastily, “Spare me the details. You can leave the explanations for Ezra. So, he's without his phone. That at least explains why he's not picking up.”

“Doesn't tell us a whole lot more though. We spent the last hour turning this place over and all we came up with was a barman who thinks he remembers a guy fitting Ezra's description but says he left at around five.”

“Was he ...?”

“Drunk? The guy reckons no, although he says he was hitting the bottle pretty hard for a couple of hours before he finally called it a day.”

“So maybe he took a cab rather than risk driving,” mused Chris, thinking aloud, “But to where?”

“Beats me, Cowboy. We already tried asking around the cab drivers here but it's chaos, backed up like you wouldn't believe. Like looking for a needle in a haystack.”

“Checked the outgoing flights?” Chris knew he was grasping at straws now, but he was desperate to find some logical explanation for Ezra having suddenly fallen off the radar.

“JD's still working on it but it looks like a bust. And, even if he did somehow finagle a flight out of here, why would he go and leave all his luggage still in the Beamer? My gut feeling is that he's still in Boston but I gotta tell you, Chris, I've got a bad feeling about this. Something just ain't right.”

Larabee ended the call by telling Vin to come back in, hoping that, for once, the Texan's instincts were wrong. And wondering what the hell he was going to do about it if they weren't.

He gently replaced the phone on the glass surface of the coffee table, now cleared of all evidence of the earlier poker game, and took a few seconds to muster his thoughts. He was aware that he was being watched – judged – and he knew that nothing he was about to say would be in any way reassuring for anyone there, but until he had some hard evidence to go on, bad feelings aside, he would play this by the numbers.

“Chris?” prompted Buck gently, and with a start he realised that the silence had lengthened uncomfortably and he was being cued to share what he knew.

Mary, he saw, had edged back into the room and it was to her that he looked now, still feeling the sting of her accusation that he didn't care.

“Ezra's car is at the airport, bags still in the trunk. His cellphone was there too but Vin thinks he probably dropped it rather than purposely leaving it. They got a possible ID from a barman who puts a guy fitting Ezra's description in the frame till about 5; says he was hitting the bottle pretty hard but that he wasn't drunk. But that's where the trail goes cold. No way of knowing where he went from there but it doesn't look like he was planning on going too far.”

“He would've caught a cab,” reasoned Jackson, “No way Ezra would drive if he'd been drinking.”

“Agreed,” sighed Chris, “but the most likely place for him to go would be back to his apartment ...”

“You think?” interrupted Buck dryly, “How about this instead? He's pissed with his mother for shooting his plans for Christmas down in flames so after a couple of hours at some overpriced and trendy bar in terminal E he takes a cab to his friendly neighbourhood watering hole and keeps going

where he left off .”

“Why do you always see the worst in everyone, Buck?” chided Mary, “What if something happened to him? I’ve been thinking, and he must have had his phone with him when Maude called him the first time, right? So if Vin found it in the trunk he must have gone back to his car sometime after that. It doesn’t make sense that he’d go all the way back to the car park and then decide to go back to the terminal to get a drink.”

“Nothing about this makes sense,” answered Buck, wearily, “but you got a point. Don’t see Ezra wasting time dicking around the airport. Fact is I just don’t see Ezra wasting much time there at all, he’d usually be outta there faster than a hobo on a ham sandwich!”

“Yeah, that’s true,” agreed Nathan, “but there’s nothing usual about this. First of all his mother waits till he gets to the airport before she drops the bombshell that she’s not coming, so my guess is he’s feeling pretty low and hits the nearest bar to think things over, stays there a couple of hours then calls it a day and leaves. Ain’t nothing too out of the ordinary in that if you ask me.”

“No,” agreed Chris, “That makes sense. Up to that point, but that’s when it goes pear-shaped. Mary’s right; he must have gone back to his car but he sure as hell didn’t drive it anywhere.”

“Which brings us back to him taking a cab,” reasoned Wilmington, “And the same question – to where?”

“I think you’re all missing one important point here,” interrupted Mary, her voice quiet but nonetheless forceful, “He might not have any choice in any of this. Maybe he had no control over what happened next. He could have been mugged, hit by a car, had some kind of accident ...I don’t know!” she hesitated, having finally given voice to her own fears, “I think we should check the hospitals.”

“And you say I think the worst ...!” protested Buck, but Chris held up his hand to stop the flow of objections that he knew were about to come from Wilmington.

“I guess that’s not a place any of us want to go,” he confessed, readily, “but it’s still a possibility that can’t be ignored. You and Nathan are the ones with the all contacts, so how about you both start making some calls?” He stood up and crossed to where Mary was standing, impulsively taking both her hands in his and giving them a quick squeeze, before lowering his voice. “One of the last things Vin said to me was that he had a bad feeling about this ...” His hesitation lasted no more than a heartbeat before he continued softly. “For Ezra’s sake, I hope you’re both wrong.”

The voices around him were calm; no sense of urgency or panic; the cadence of their speech confident, familiar even, yet still not reassuring. He knew the drill; knew the irony of the aggressive intervention of the trauma bay, knew that whatever the outcome of those interventions the same calm and unhurried voice would continue to dispassionately read out

his vital signs. Oh yes, he had been here before.

“Sinus rhythm, 120 ... Pressure 90 on 52 ...”

“That femoral line in yet? ...”

He could personally attest to the fact that it was but no one was asking him. As the sleeping partner in this business he was not expected to participate; his contribution was merely to be, and even then he was barely managing his keep his end of the bargain. But still the choice was his – surrender or fight.

“What say we get this guy under? He's fighting us. What's he had ...?”

“Diazepam ...”

“Jesus! RSI protocol mean anything to you people? Give me two point two-five of etomidate, five milligrams of midazolam and three hundred micrograms of fentanyl, stat! Okay, guys, let's start moving with a purpose and do this ...”

“...by the numbers.”

Chris raked his fingers through his short spiky hair as he briefly made eye contact with each of the three men now gathered around the coffee table, seeing in their faces the same uncertainty and doubt that he was starting to feel but also the tacit agreement that they were prepared to follow his lead. “

Vin's “bad feeling” had proven to be contagious and even those of the group, himself included, who were trying to remain totally objective could not easily put aside the nagging question of: but what if ...? Yet, they were all looking to him for direction and he could only do this one way. His way. And that was to go by the book.

Off to one side, out of sight but not out of range, he could hear Nathan and Mary systematically canvassing the city hospitals. It bode well that so far they had drawn a blank. Refocusing, he switched his attention to what had rapidly turned into a concern for not just Maude Standish but for all of them and dropped his gaze to the time-line JD had quickly sketched on a paper napkin based on the scant information they already had. He needed to get his head around this – and quickly. Maybe seeing events in a logical sequence would help trigger a flash of inspiration.

Suddenly he wished he hadn't had quite so much to drink.

“Okay, let's do this. What've we got, JD?”

Dunne tapped the napkin with the end of his pen.

“Not that much. Ezra leaves his apartment at about two pm; we know he makes it to the airport okay because his car is in the lot and he's already there when Maude calls him to say the trip's off; then we have the probable sighting in terminal C at around five pm when he leaves the bar; after that we got squat, he disappears off the radar.”

“And it's now ...” Chris checked his watch, “just gone ten. So we're looking at maybe five hours. Hell, that doesn't even score as a missing person. Report that to the cops and you know what they'll say...?”

“That he's probably in a bar somewhere,” interrupted Vin, quickly, “Yeah, we all know the drill and maybe if it wasn't for the Beamer still being in the lot at Logan I might buy it. But I keep going over all this and right now any which way you want to look at it, it just don't add up – and that bothers me.”

“Gotta say I'm with Vin,” agreed JD, softly, “If Ezra was planning on spending the night alone with a bottle, that's exactly what he'd do. Spend it alone in his apartment, not in a public bar.”

“I'm not saying you're wrong,” countered Chris, carefully, “But we need to go easy with this. So, any ideas?”

Buck leaned forward, elbows on knees.

“What if he decided to fly out anyway. Take off somewhere on his own for the holidays?”

“We checked the flights...” began JD

“No,” interrupted Buck, “I mean in his own plane!”

Vin frowned.

“Doesn't make sense, Buck. He left his car. If he took a cab because he'd been drinking, do you think he'd be in any state to take a plane up? And how far is it out to Hanscom – 25 miles from Logan?”

Wilmington shrugged.

“Yeah, guess it was a stretch at that.”

“We can't discount anything right now, even if it seems way out there. Buck, you call Hanscom and see if he lodged a flight plan, okay? At least we can cross it off the list if it's a bust.” He looked across the table at Tanner. “Got any ideas on where Ezra might go to chill? Restaurants, bars ...?”

The Texan took a few moments to think about it but his look was guarded.

“There's a couple of places might be worth a try but...”

“Try them,” rapped Chris, shortly, “And anywhere else you can think of within a mile radius of his apartment.”

“On our way.”

JD and Tanner rose together and without any further discussion silently slipped from the room. Chris leaned back and sighed heavily wondering why the hell he was sending the two of them out on a freezing winter night on a wild goose chase looking for a needle in a haystack. The answer of course was the same for why Mary, Nathan and, now, Buck were tied to phones making calls to complete strangers on Christmas Eve; and the answer was simply because he had to. And even more

importantly because they wanted – and needed – to. After a few seconds he launched himself from the sofa and headed for the kitchen. He needed coffee.

The minutes had crawled by and Larabee was feeling drained. It was almost eleven o'clock yet there were as many unanswered questions now as there had been when Maude's call had come through some five hours before. Every avenue they had pursued had come to nothing; taxi companies, hospitals, clinics, clubs, pubs, restaurants, outgoing flights - dead ends all the way. He had pulled in every favour he was ever owed by anyone in the city and Ezra was still off the radar, whether by design or accident no-one could say but Chris was not willing to let it go beyond midnight before he felt obliged to call it in as a possible missing person. The admission, even to himself, was one that left him feeling not only apprehensive but somehow wanting. That Ezra obviously hadn't felt comfortable enough to return to the fold when his holiday plans had fallen through said a lot to Chris. There was always that element of reserve with the Southerner; the reluctance to ever let anyone get too close. For sure the man had been burned before, good enough reason in itself to be wary of giving too much of himself away, but he had thought ...

“Chris.” He turned at the sound of Mary's voice. Between them Nathan and Mary had canvassed every hospital in the Boston area but had found no record of an Ezra Standish being processed through any ED in the city. It had been a relief yet also another dead end and the process had left the blonde doctor looking as tired as he felt. “I don't want to even be thinking like this but what if we've been looking in the right place, but for the wrong person?”

Larabee frowned obviously not following.

“Uh, you might want to run that by me again, Mary.”

“I was just thinking that we didn't find any Ezra Standish's listed but ...” she hesitated, and chewed her lip before going on, “there were five John Doe's. I didn't think...”

“Uh uh, stop right there.” His voice was gentle but it still carried a note of authority as he crossed to where she stood near the fireplace, looking pale and drawn but nonetheless, determined. “What next? Start calling the coroner's office?”

“You said we couldn't ignore any possibility,” she challenged, “and just because you don't like what the outcome might be doesn't mean we shouldn't follow it through.”

For once he had no answer. And he had no answer because he knew she was right. For several heartbeats neither of them spoke but in those few seconds they reached a tacit understanding.

“Okay,” ceded Chris, “Where do we start?”

She smiled then, and reached out a hand to rest lightly on his forearm.

“I listed all the John Does and which hospitals they were processed through when I checked the

first time. It didn't occur to me to give Ezra's description.”

“Right, let's do this.” He leaned over to look at the neat list of medical facilities she had drawn up, each nearly scored through as she had completed the call, and the notations she had made beside several of the centres showing the John and Jane Does. He took out his cellphone and pointed to the first one on the list. “I'll take this one.”

It took longer than he thought, but at the end of it he could understand why Mary looked so drawn. Getting any information was like pulling teeth and all the time the underlying the dread that you might actually get the answer you were looking for but didn't necessarily want to hear. He put the phone down feeling something of the strain that Mary must have been under making dozens of similar calls.

At that moment the land line rang and Buck snatched up the cordless handset, saying little before putting the phone down again and turning to face Larabee.

“That was Vin. Him and JD have been from one end of the city to the other and just about frozen their nuts off. Even went back to the apartment again. Still nothing. If Ezra's out there he's laying low. So, I told 'em to come in.”

Chris stared at the floor for a moment then with a deep sigh he straightened but his expression revealed nothing of what he was thinking.

“ Good move,” he acknowledged, nodding his approval, “No point in keeping them out there now. Don't like to say it but truth is, we've run clean out of options.”

“So what now, pard?”

“We wait.”

Wilmington's shoulders slumped and, digging his hands deep into his pockets, he wordlessly turned away and walked slowly back into the living room, murmuring as he went what sounded to Chris very much like: Merry-fucking-Christmas. At that moment he had to admit that, while it wasn't exactly in the spirit of the season, he really couldn't fault the sentiment.

Turning on his heel he headed back to the kitchen; there were still some calls to be made. The sound of the TV drifted after him as Buck increased the volume, a sign that Wilmington had taken his advice that they wait in its most literal sense, and he was aware of a female voice intoning: “and now in local news an update on this evening's tragic shooting in a convenience store robbery, where an innocent bystander was critically wounded. The unidentified man...”

The rest was lost as his brain registered the fact that something was going down with Mary Travis and he felt an unwelcome jolt in the pit of his stomach as she slowly lowered the cellphone, her stricken expression hiding nothing of her emotions. For several moments she said nothing and Chris wasn't sure he wanted to hear what she was going to say. He didn't need words to understand

that the news was not going to be good.

“Mass Gen,” she finally managed, her voice steady but strained, “They think they might have a match.”

His first instinct was to close the gap between them, to go to her and offer his support but his mind was reeling, the random bits of information they had gathered over the course of the evening spinning and clicking solidly into place; two and two finally adding up to four.

“Jesus Christ, Chris! Get over here. Now!”

It was a demand, not a request, and the urgency in Wilmington's voice was enough to command an unquestioning response from him. He strode into the living room, his expression hard. Why did he get the feeling that he wasn't going to like this?

“Buck ...?”

“Goddamn it, shut up and look!”

The last of a grainy black and white CCTV clip, less than seconds of security footage from the convenience store robbery, played out across the screen. The images weren't clear but, like Buck, he knew exactly what he was seeing – recognised the build, the stance, the overcoat, the man - and he felt a cold, hard weight settle in his chest.

Just behind him he heard Mary's whispered: “Oh, my God. No.”

A match.

Ezra.

IV

The eyes were closed; his face calm and untroubled; at peace.

Mary swallowed hard to clear the lump that seemed to be obstructing her throat and reached out to touch the pale hand that lay, inert, against his thigh. Gently squeezing the unresponsive fingers she looked down at the still form on the bed through a blur of unshed tears.

“Oh, Ezra,” she breathed, “I'm so sorry. I should have been here.”

Too little; too late.

With a soft sigh she released his hand and turned away. It crossed her mind that Maude would need to be told but that wasn't her priority right now. The others were waiting.

I'm so sorry.

Mother?

I should have been here.

Yes.

His first awareness was of hushed voices, a gentle murmur that ebbed and flowed between the background hum of activity and the more intrusive electronic radar blip of a cardiac monitor. Sounds that he found oddly reassuring. Senses awakening, he could now feel the almost sensual contact of the bed sheets against his naked body, the distinctive crackle of plastic sheeting under his buttocks, and the tug of the tubes and wires that anchored him to the bed. He knew this place. Too well perhaps, but that in itself brought its own comfort. As did the narcotics.

Familiar friends and old enemies. The story of his life.

He blinked slowly, his body uncoordinated, his responses sluggish. Unfocused eyes registered a blur of ill-defined shapes and a mosaic of colours but it was a challenge to keep his eyes open long enough to make any sense of what he was seeing. Fighting the overwhelming temptation to slide back into untroubled sleep he finally mustered the strength to turn his head. His left shoulder was heavily bandaged although he had difficulty remembering why that should be so. His only thought was that at least it didn't hurt. His eyes moved lazily, wandering a little before settling on a figure sitting on a chair a little way from the bed.

He was sitting forward with his legs apart and his elbows on his knees, head bent as he kept his eyes fixed on the floor and his fingers continually folded, unfolded and refolded a small piece of paper. He knew those mannerisms. Knew the man. Wondered how long he had been there.

Suddenly the blond head lifted; made eye contact; smiled.

Familiar friends indeed.

He blinked, not sure if the answering smile he had tried to summon ever reached his lips, and with a quiet sigh he relaxed, sinking easily back into the depths of sleep.

oooOOOooo

It was late. He didn't know how he knew but even in the too-familiar timeless stasis of ICU he could sense that night had already fallen. How long he had slept, however, he had no idea. He had a vague but imperfect memory of having briefly wakened once or twice before but it may have been nothing more than his imagination for all he knew. But he preferred that to the nightmare which had gone before, even though his memories of what had brought him to this point in time were sporadic and indistinct. Be thankful for small mercies, Ezra. He shifted, tugs and twinges making every movement an exercise in caution as he half turned and transferred his weight to his left hip.

He was still there. Not imagined then.

“Hey.”

He managed to raise his right hand in reply but it was much harder than he expected and the effect was half-hearted at best. He wasn't sure if he could master his voice enough to speak.

Larabee leaned forward, a slowly widening grin instantly erasing the lines of worry that had previously been etched on his face. “I'd wish you a Merry Christmas but I have a feeling you might tell me what I can do with it.”

“Damn right,” he murmured, tiredly, then almost as an afterthought nonetheless laced with indignation: “Bastard shot me.”

“Yeah,” Chris agreed sadly as he drew his chair closer and studied the Southerner for a moment before he spoke again. “Just tell me one thing, Ezra. What the hell were you doing there?”

Ezra closed his eyes, remembering. Not wanting to.

“Long story.”

The Southerner was grateful that Chris didn't press for more. One day. Maybe.

“We looked for you.”

Ezra processed that, his mind responding slowly.

“Looked for me? How ...how did you know ...?”

“That you weren't in the Berkshires?” completed Chris, gently, “Maude called. She was worried.”

He wanted to laugh but the bubble that welled in his throat turned into a solid lump that constricted his throat.

“Maude? Worried? About me?” He forced his next words out between the tightness in his chest and the need to catch his breath. “Forgive my ...cynicism but that, Mr. Larabee, would be a first.”

The following silence was comment enough from Larabee, and Ezra had never had any problem with reading between the lines. That alone should have had him reliving some of the bitterness and hurt that he had felt when Maude had dropped her bombshell on him at the airport, but somehow it didn't seem to matter anymore.

“You looked for me.” It wasn't a question.

Chris held the Southerner's gaze for several beats then gave a wry smile. Ezra noticed how tired he looked. Something at least they had in common.

“Long story.”

He nodded, understanding. There would be time. Later. He eased onto his back again, starting to feel the discomfort of his injuries through the pain relief as the novelty of just being alive lost some of its initial impact and the inertia of exhaustion slowly crept over him. He had to fight just to keep his eyes open.

“Thanks.” It was no more than a whisper.

“For what?”

He managed a smile but he was drifting.

“For giving a damn.”

He felt the brief contact of Chris's hand as it closed tightly over his own.

“Merry Christmas, Ezra.”

Merry Christmas, Mister Larabee.

*

Endnote:

Lyrics from the following songs appear in this story:

HAPPY HOLIDAYS - Alabama

(Ron Rogers & Swain Schaefer)

Smilin' faces on city streets
Crowded shoppers and busy feet
And every smile just seems to say
We're having some Happy Holidays

Twinklin' lights on Christmas trees
Kids up on old Santa's knee
And busy lines on telephones
Sending a Merry Christmas home

Bells are ringin' everywhere
Season's spirits in the air
Up and down the avenue
Holiday dreams are comin' true

A choir singing songs of cheer
Carols we all love to hear
And Rudolph with his glowin' nose
And lovers under mistletoe

Postman bringin' Christmas cards
Reindeer out in the yard
And Frosty with his eyes of coal
And presents wrapped in pretty bows

Sidewalks full of happy eyes
Flakes fallin' from the sky
And boys and girls at the big parade
To see Ssint Nick up on his sleigh

The scene is set, it's beautiful
Sounds of peace, joy and love
From all of us we'd like to say
Have yourself some Happy Holidays

LA ULTIMA HORA – Breed 77

Si ah

In a darkened place
Man without a face
Count on fingers the choices he could have made
Paint a picture of, view from up above, you
And soon he's painting in blood
And that man is me
La vida perdi
Now I'm casting a shadow in front of me
Now I've drained my heart so I no longer bleed

Clip my wings and hope to fly
Wave my last goodbye

Will I be awake? Hold my hand when I die, won't you try?
Will you take my place? Burn your name in the sky
Will I be awake? Hold my hand when I die, won't you try?
Won't you take my place? Burn your name in the sky

Will you call to me?
Just in memory
En la oscuridad de acordaras de mi
Now you turn and run
Up towards the sunrise
You can't, you're walking on glass
Now it's you or me
Ya no creo en ti
Too late to say that you should have followed me
Too late to sell my flesh so I no longer feel

Clip my wings and hope to fly
Wave my last goodbye

Will I be awake? Hold my hand when I die, won't you try?
Will you take my place? Burn your name in the sky
Will I be awake? Hold my hand when I die, won't you try?
Won't you take my place? Burn your name in the sky

Si ah

Will I be awake? Hold my hand when I die, won't you try?
Will you take my place? Burn your name in the sky
Will I be awake? Hold my hand when I die, won't you try?
Won't you take my place? Burn your name in the sky

Will I be awake? Hold my hand when I die
Will you take my place? Burn your name in the sky
Will I be awake? Hold my hand when I die
Won't you take my place? Burn your name in the sky