

# Bodyguards

## See You On Monday

Jean Graham

2001

“You’re going where?”

The look on Wilmington’s face was almost comical.

“Calgary,” repeated Tanner, as if he was talking about a cross town stroll instead of a cross-border excursion.

“But I thought you hated flying?”

“Oh, he still does,” interrupted Ezra with a cunning smile, “but he *loves* hockey.”

Buck looked evenly from Ezra to Vin and back again, a look that suggested one, or possibly even both, of them had lost their mind.

“You’re going to get in a plane and fly two thousand miles to Canada to watch a game that I can catch on cable without leaving my living room?”

“Avalanche and Flames,” affirmed Tanner, “for that I can make a sacrifice.”

“We’ll be there in just over eight hours,” continued the Southerner, “and be back on Sunday night.”

“You know something Ezra? You’re nuts!” Wilmington shook his head before turning to the Texan. “And you’re even crazier. So, what kinda plane is this?”

“Single engined, four seater, beefed up to do 190 knots,” supplied Standish, “I’m doing a friend a favour and flying some stuff up to Sioux Narrows on the way.”

Buck laughed.

“Hell, Ezra, everyone knows you don’t have any friends! So what’s in it for you?”

“Really, Bucklin, such a suspicious nature does not become you.”

“Cut the bullshit. How much? And is it legal?”

Standish grinned, flashing his gold tooth, as he launched himself away from the desk on which he had been leaning and slapped Wilmington heartily on the shoulder.

“Believe me, Buck, it’s worth it.”

“I bet it is, or you wouldn’t be doing it!”

“Look, it’s a win-win situation,” sighed Ezra, patiently, “Artie needs this delivery made, I get to log some air time and Vin gets to see a game.” He paused and glanced at the Texan. “Member’s stand. All part of the package.”

“Why is it that somehow you always manage to make a scam sound like the deal of the century?”

The Southerner gave Wilmington’s shoulder what was intended as a reassuring squeeze.

“Buck, this is legit. I’m just doing a guy a favour and getting a little something in return, okay? We all get something we want.”

Wilmington gave a laugh.

“I bet you’ve sold refrigerators to Eskimos too....”

Ezra gave the taller man a sideways look and briefly raised an eyebrow, suggesting that it was indeed a possibility.

“Coming Vin?” The Texan unfolded himself from the chair he had been sitting in and fell into step beside the already departing Southerner, who chose that moment to pause and turn back to Wilmington. “If you could just let Chris know we’ll be out of town for the weekend...”

Buck wheeled with a shake of his head as the implication sank in.

“Uh uh! No way! Now just wait a minute! I’m not doing your...”

But Ezra, ignoring any protest, was moving again and as he passed through the automatic doors he gave a casual wave.

“See you on Monday.”

oooOOOooo

Tanner looked doubtfully at the small aircraft sitting innocently on the tarmac outside the hangar. It had seemed like a great idea when Ezra had first mooted the plan to take in the Flames-Avalanche game, even though flying came a distant also-ran on his list of preferred modes of transport. It had even seemed a perfectly acceptable means of transport waiting and watching while Ezra methodically went through his preflight inspection. Now, face to face with the reality of climbing into an airplane that stretched a bare twenty eight feet from nose to tail, he wondered if Buck might not have been right. He was crazy. The Texan swung his duffel bag off his shoulder, not bothering to conceal his anxiety.

“Jesus, Ezra. My truck’s bigger than this.”

Standish grinned as he swung open the passenger door, well aware of Vin’s aversion to anything with wings that could not be shot and eaten, and stowing his overnight bag into the cargo space, he reached out for Vin’s own modest contribution to the payload.

“But,” he sighed, leaning for a moment on the door, “your truck can’t get us to Calgary in under nine hours.”

“No,” agreed Vin, “But at least it stays in touch with the ground.” He hesitated, then smiled. “Well, mostly.”

The Southerner firmly took Vin’s arm and steered him closer to the plane. He was familiar enough with the routine of gentle persuasion that was needed to get Tanner into any airplane.

“Just think hockey, Vin. Think two days in beautiful Western Canada away from the pressures of the job. Think chili dogs and...” He paused. “...and whatever else it is that you traditionally inflict on that cast iron stomach of yours.”

The Texan looked uncomfortable.

“Did you have to mention food, Ezra?”

A frown momentarily creased the pilot's forehead.

“Yes, I take your point. Cast iron everywhere but ten thousand feet in the air. Forget the chili dogs, think Forsberg and Sakic, Iginla...”

“Okay, okay. I get the message. You convinced me. Let's do this!”

Standish smiled and jogged around the front of the plane to quickly swing through the open door and into the pilot's seat, leaving Vin to board at his own pace. He had a good feeling about this. It was going to be a great weekend.

Vin leaned back in his seat, and watched Ezra as he completed the in-cockpit preflight check, talking intermittently with the tower through his headset as he performed the ritual that never changed, and which always impressed the Texan every time he sat through it. He allowed himself a smile as he turned to look out of the window. He was by no means as blasé about taking a machine into the air as the Southerner but he was learning to enjoy the flights that Ezra seemed to be making a more frequent part of his life.

He guessed he should thank Standish for his quiet perseverance helping him overcome his dread of flying. The first time Ezra had convinced him to go up in a light aircraft, a twin-engined King Air, he had lost his lunch; and his breakfast...and, he was certain, his supper from the night before. In fact he had been so sick that he hardly remembered anything about the flight itself and after such an embarrassing performance he had thought that Ezra would never ask him again. He had been wrong. The next weekend, the Southerner had invited him to try once more. For some reason he could not fathom, he had found the experience more tolerable in a smaller plane than he ever had in the claustrophobic and crowded interior of a commuter jet, but he still threw up.

He glanced back at the Southerner as he heard the soft drawl acknowledge the fact that they were clear for take off. He had wondered himself at one stage what made him do it; why he kept jumping through the same hoop and falling flat on his ass. But he knew it had less to do with himself than it had to do with the former FBI agent trusting him. He didn't try to analyse it too closely, he just understood that for a man like Ezra to share even a little part of himself was something he should not take lightly.

Standish rolled the Cessna along the confusion of intersecting runways and taxiways, and Vin marvelled again at how any of it made any sense to the pilot. To him the lights,

markers and signs meant nothing and he put his trust in the man on his left to understand the arcane symbols and keep them on the right track. It always worried him that they might somehow stray into the path of one of the commercial airliners but he never voiced his concern to the Southerner in spite of the fact that he always felt as if they were two little kids playing in the middle of a freeway. If it bothered Ezra in the least to be mixing it with the big boys he never showed it. Not that Vin would expect him to. He knew Ezra well enough now to know that it was impossible to tell what the Georgian was thinking or feeling, unless he wanted you to know. He smiled again. And if he wanted you to know, then he was probably lying anyway.

He had made a point of not talking during the takeoff and Ezra seemed quite happy to maintain the silence as he concentrated on getting the little craft in the air, so he looked instead at the grey of the runway and realised that it almost matched the colour of the sky. He had not given much thought to the weather but the heavy clouds were quickly building and he thought it would soon rain. With any luck they would be leaving that behind. He shifted slightly in his seat and gnawed at the edge of his thumb nail, hoping that bad weather wasn't written anywhere in their immediate future. He was barely comfortable with level flight in perfect conditions, a rough trip might be his undoing. Josiah's ginger remedy had worked surprisingly well in controlling his air sickness but he suspected there were limits to even its effectiveness.

He unconsciously braced himself as the Cessna came to a full stop and Ezra stood on the brakes as he took the engine to full throttle. Vin swallowed hard and tried to think of anything other than the fluttering in his stomach. This was it then. He was jumping through the hoop again. It was over in an amazingly short space of time. One moment they were racing along the tarmac and then the nose was up and they were off the ground. Short and sweet. Then they were banking into a turn, which made his stomach slide threateningly, and the ground was rapidly shrinking beneath them.

Tanner let out the breath he had forgotten he was holding, aware of the quick smile that crossed Ezra's face, then gave an embarrassed laugh.

"At least I didn't close my eyes this time."

Standish turned slightly and flicked a glance towards the Texan.

"Another six months and you'll be in this seat."

"Forget it," snorted Vin, "I'll just keep riding shotgun, pard."

The Southerner laughed and shook his head.

"Trust me. One day you'll do it."

The Texan looked for a long time at the ground, fascinated as always by the aerial view of Boston, before turning to look across the cockpit again.

“Can I ask you something, Ezra?”

“You just did.”

“Cute. I mean something personal.”

The Southerner hesitated just that single beat that Vin knew so well. That internal debate of whether he could trust enough to surrender something about himself. Of course no one was ever quite sure if what Ezra said was the truth; he could manipulate it so well. He recalled Josiah saying Standish was like one of the Russian Babushka dolls; each time you got inside one, there was another one waiting to be opened.

“Okay. Just remember we’re a thousand feet up though...and climbing.”

“So what made you get into flying in the first place? I mean it’s not your average kid’s hobby and you told me you’d been flying since you were 15.”

“Mother’s third husband owned a small airline,” replied Ezra matter-of-factly, as he routinely scanned the empty skies around the little Cessna, “Charter business. Some of his enthusiasm rubbed off.” He flashed a smile that showed his gold tooth. “Some of his money certainly did.”

Vin was hard pressed to contain his surprise. He straightened in his seat.

“Your father owned an airline?”

The Southerner shot a quick glance at the Texan before returning his gaze to a visual patrol of the immediate vicinity. They were still in a heavy traffic area, just clearing Logan.

“No,” he corrected. “My mother’s husband owned an airline.” A pause. “He was never my father.”

For one fleeting moment Tanner knew that for once he was seeing a brief glimpse of the real Ezra, before the blinds were quickly drawn again, shielding the Southerner from further scrutiny. Vin was silent for a second or two before frowning slightly and turning fully to face Standish.

“You know what I was doing when I was fifteen?”

Ezra’s expression didn’t change. “Stealing hubcaps?”

The Texan laughed, not in the least offended.

“That’s not too far from the truth, y’know. Hung around with a pretty rough bunch back then. Woulda ended up in Juvie for sure if this cop my foster dad knew hadn’t straightened me out. Dragged my sorry butt outta the gutter, kicked me in the ass, got me interested in martial arts and pretty much kept me outta trouble after that.”

The memory was obviously a fond one for Tanner but the shadow that crossed the Southerner’s face was unmistakable.

“You were fostered?”

“Yeah.” The sigh was deep. “Mom died when I was five. There was no one else. Don’t really remember much about the first people who had me...”

Ezra turned to look directly at Vin with a frown. “First?”

“Yeah, reckon I was ten ‘fore I had to go back into care,” continued Vin, conversationally, “Got fostered out again pretty quick but that didn’t work out too well. I was a scrawny kid, who didn’t talk much and I guess I wasn’t what they had in mind.”

“Had in mind?” Ezra’s voice had changed just enough to reflect a quiet outrage.

Tanner shrugged, picking up on the Southerner’s tone. “Hey, man, that’s just the way it is. Guess I was fostered maybe four times more before I struck it lucky. By then I reckon I was a pretty hard case, with a lot of anger and nowhere for it to go. So I got in a bit of trouble, hung around with the wrong crowd but Jim, my foster dad, instead of just sending me back...” Vin stopped for a moment, a catch in his voice at the memory. “...well, he saw somethin’ in me that even I didn’t; somethin’ worth a damn and while we went head to head a few times, he was right in the end. He turned me around and sent me off in the right direction I guess and I’ve never looked back since.”

The Texan stopped abruptly and cast a quick, embarrassed glance at the man at the controls.

“Sorry. Didn’t mean to run off at the mouth like that. You don’t want to hear...”

“Vin.” The quiet voice cut him off before he could continue. “You don’t have to apologise.”

Tanner looked for a long time at the Southerner, his face a mask behind the mirrored aviator glasses that now reflected the setting sun, then gave a barely perceptible nod. Somehow Ezra understood and that was just fine with him. He looked out of the window at the scudding clouds as they climbed, comfortable with the silence, then flicked a sideways glance at Standish again.

“That plane. The King...whatever...” He ventured.

“King Air.”

“Yeah. That one. That’s yours isn’t it? I mean really yours, not a lease.”

The Southerner gave one of his half smiles. The admission there.

“Did I say it was?”

“No, but you didn’t say it wasn’t either! Man, what else do you have stashed away? A goddamn yacht in the Bahamas?”

“Florida Keys actually.”

Vin stared at the pilot, his eyes narrowing suspiciously, but he had no idea whether Ezra was telling the truth or yanking his chain; either was equally likely. He also knew that he was not going to get a straight answer any time soon so he might as well change the subject rather than risk pissing the Southerner off. After all, he was the guy flying the plane.

The Texan stretched and walked a few yards from the Cessna, stamping his feet and digging his hands in his pockets to protect them from the biting chill as the wind howled across the airfield straight off the water. The airstrip was on an island and although it was dark, Vin just knew it was a beautiful spot. He could smell it; and he could hear the night sounds of wildlife. This was wilderness yet right over the bridge that spanned the narrows from which the wooden structure took its name there was a thriving tourist area. Great fishing and hunting up here.

He walked a short distance just to stretch his legs and watched the sky to the west light up with random flashes of lightning. No thunder yet and the rain had been sporadic but there was the crackle of electricity in the air and there were storms brewing. Ezra had been closely monitoring the radio while bemoaning the fact that Artie's plane didn't have hazard avoidance system installed but he had assured Vin that if they met bad weather head on then he would just fly around it. For now, their luck seemed to be holding.

Another five hours to go. He ambled across to use the rest room then walked a leisurely circuit of the airfield perimeter while Ezra took care of the refuelling and supervised the unloading of the cargo, suddenly glad he had come along. It sure as hell beat a Friday night in front of the TV with a beer. He sighed, probably give Chris some breathing space too. Nearly eight months down the track and he was still lodging in Larabee's spare room. Never seemed to be time to organise moving out but even though Chris hadn't said anything, he guessed he would be wearing his welcome pretty thin if he stayed much longer.

"Vin! Let's move it."

He jogged back to the aircraft, his breath steaming in the frosty air and drew up beside the Southerner.

"Ready when you are, pard."

Ezra turned, giving the driver who had picked up the cargo a brief salute, before tucking a sizable wad of bank notes into his pocket. Vin raised his eyebrows and watched the van drive away.

"Big tip." He commented drily.

The Southerner grinned and tapped the Texan's arm, signalling that they should be moving.

"Cash transaction."

Tanner decided this was one of those times when it was best not to ask too many questions and he reminded himself that he was no longer a Texas Ranger. He wasn't sure if Ezra's penchant for making an easy buck would stretch as far as illegal activities but one thing he did know: he sure as hell didn't want to find out.

It took a while for the cabin to feel warm again and it was a good twenty minutes before Vin finally unzipped his jacket and yawned. Boredom was making him sleepy but he fought the urge to close his eyes and instead stretched out as much as the cabin space would allow and looked sideways at Standish.

“So are we going to miss the storms or not?”

“It’s a big front. Moving fast from all accounts. Lots of electrical activity.”

“Guess that means it’s a good job I haven’t eaten, right?”

Standish smiled.

“Could be some turbulence. I’ll take her as high as I can and try to go over it, but I can’t guarantee a smooth ride.”

The Texan folded his arms and was silent for a few moments.

“Ezra...” He paused as if considering how to phrase his next question. “Just how dangerous is it to fly through a thunderstorm?”

“Well, let me put it this way, Vin. I’m going to do everything I can to fly us over, under or around that front.”

“And if we can’t?”

Ezra didn’t answer immediately, then glanced briefly at the uneasy Texan.

“Then, Mr. Tanner, it’s going to be an experience to remember.”

It was terrifying. Vin had no other words to express what he was feeling as the Cessna swooped into a sickening sideways slide, losing height at an alarming rate and plummeting earthwards before Ezra was able to wrestle it back into level flight and claw back some of the altitude they had lost. The storm was everywhere; above, below, and all around them. The moon had been swallowed by the billowing clouds but the night was alight with the erratic flickering of lightning, a curiously surreal effect that Tanner found unsettling and disorientating. His stomach heaved as the plane again canted to port and he watched the altimeter unwind as they were driven downwards by the gusting wind and rain. He swallowed hard in an effort to control the rising tide of nausea and barely managed to avoid his stomach turning inside out as the engine roared and they suddenly seemed to be sucked upwards again.

If Ezra was at all perturbed he was not showing it. Through it all, he had remained silent, his face a study in absolute concentration as he fought the elements to keep the machine in the air but there had not once been any suggestion of panic or alarm. In fact, if it had not been for the tightening of his jaw and the fixed intensity of his gaze as he monitored the gauges, he might have been driving down the interstate on a Sunday afternoon rather than thousands of feet in the air battling the elements. Tanner had no illusions that it was a battle,

but Ezra seemed to know just when to fight and when to yield and although the Texan would admit that it was the most hair-raising experience he had ever been through, he was less afraid than he might have been had there been someone else at the controls. He took another deep breath as the Cessna violently dipped one wing, certain that this time the small plane would roll belly-up, but once again the Southerner righted the aircraft and Vin closed his eyes.

The crack was deafening in the small cabin and the dazzle of bright light blazed redly through the Texan's closed eyelids.

"Jesus Christ!" He sat bolt upright. "What the hell was that?"

He looked quickly across at Ezra, who was rapidly flicking switches on the control panel.

"Close encounter of the lightning kind," he muttered grimly, before he started speaking urgently into the microphone, only one word of the aviation techno-speak which seemed to penetrate Tanner's reeling mind: mayday.

He fought the inclination to hyperventilate, realising that at least he could still hear and feel the noise of the engine, and although they were dropping like an express elevator, Ezra at least seemed to have some measure of control and was still forcing the Cessna to respond, if sluggishly. Powerless to be of any assistance, Vin braced himself and waited for the inevitable, holding on to a shred of optimism that the Southerner could indeed reverse their earthbound course.

"Fuck!"

That single, softly spoken word was enough to destroy any remaining hope he had. They were going down.

Silence. No! Rain.

Relentless rain and howling wind.

The ticking of a cooling engine.

Thunder rolling, moving away.

Ezra stared straight ahead, his hands still on the yoke as, stunned and winded, he listened in awe to the sounds that confirmed he had done it. He had actually brought the sucker down. The absolute reality that he still lived; that the plane was still around him and not scattered in little pieces across Saskatchewan, took his breath away as much the physical impact that had driven the breath from his lungs. Blinking, he slowly forced his fingers to release the yoke, and with a sigh sucked a lungful of air that seemed to break the spell that had held him in an almost catatonic state. A sudden surge of adrenaline, the fuel of fear, flooded his system and he remembered he was not alone.

“Vin?” The Southerner reached across and quickly grabbed Tanner’s arm, at the same time releasing the Maglite from its overhead clip and shining it in the direction of the passenger seat. “Vin!”

The Texan’s head rolled loosely to one side in response. Cursing softly, Ezra released his own seat-belt and leaned further across the cockpit to check on the unconscious man. With great care he tilted Vin’s chin upwards and turned his face towards him, sighing at the river of bright blood flowing down the side of his face from a wound at the outer edge of his right eyebrow. While the seat-belt might have saved the Texan from being launched through the Cessna’s windscreen it had done nothing to stop the equally forceful lateral movement

and Vin had obviously been thrown hard against the airframe during the crash landing. He tried again, lightly slapping Tanner’s face.

“Vin. Come on, wake up time.”

Satisfied with the resultant softly sighed moan Ezra gently let go his hold on the Texan’s chin and, balancing the torch on the instrument panel, reached awkwardly behind the seat for the first aid kit he knew was stashed there. At least Artie had invested in a decent medkit, even if he had scrimped on the cheapest emergency locator transmitter on the market. He pushed aside the unpleasant thought that it could be quite some time before anyone even realised that they had gone down and turned back to the semiconscious Texan.

There was a lot of blood but once he had managed to get some pressure on it and finally staunch the flow, he found a small but deep laceration that would need to be cleaned up and closed. Tanner was starting to make small unco-ordinated movements but was still a good way from firing on all cylinders so, working quickly, Ezra started talking to the stunned Texan in a reassuring monologue as he broke open a dressing pack. With any luck he could be finished before Vin even registered what had happened or that he was hurting. For one thing, he did not relish the possibility of Tanner coming out of it swinging once he started to interfere with the open wound.

As it was, Vin’s return to consciousness was slow and entirely uneventful with none of the drama Ezra had anticipated. The blue eyes, slightly unfocused, finally opening and staring uncomprehendingly at a point somewhere in infinity for several moments before he suddenly groaned and closed his eyes again.

“Shi-it.”

Standish smiled briefly at the heartfelt epithet hoarsely whispered by the Texan. A single expressive syllable that he managed somehow to stretch into two, which reflected almost exactly how Ezra himself had felt.

“Welcome back, Mr. Tanner.” Fixing the last adhesive strip to Vin’s eyebrow, Ezra deftly applied just enough tension to bring the edges of the gash together, before pausing to

scrutinise his handiwork. "Could've done with a couple of stitches," he murmured, packing away the remains of the first aid equipment, "but that's all I can do. Feel okay?"

Vin touched tentative fingertips to the shiny purple knot bordering the cut over his eyebrow and winced, then sighed as he let his head fall back against the seat as if the effort of holding it up was too much.

"Yeah. Guess I'll live. Thanks."

"Well, just take it easy. You were out cold for quite a while," Ezra reminded him, his concern evident, "You sure you're alright?"

Tanner mustered a wry smile. "Yes, Mom."

The Southerner shoved the first aid kit under the seat with a sigh and looked out of the misted and rain splattered side window, the view completely obscured by the downpour that was still hammering down outside the cabin in an almost solid sheet.

"So what's the verdict?"

Ezra shrugged.

"Well, without getting technical, I'd say we're pretty much screwed. We took a lightning strike, Vin. Power surge like that tends to do bad things to the electrics."

"Any other good news?"

"The emergency locator transmitter triggered as soon as we hit the ground. That should mark our position.'

"Now that sounds promising."

"I said should. The bad news is that it could be hours before anyone responds. Even longer before anyone actually mounts a search. We'd have a better chance if we could use the cell phone to call them up personally but as you know..."

"...we're out of the service area. Great! So how long do we get to sit here?"

"Few hours maybe. Couple of days...hard to say."

"You're yanking my chain, right?"

"I kid you not, Vin. Nothing's going to happen in a hurry."

"So what do we do now?" He shifted in his seat. "Apart from freeze our butts off?"

"We wait."

"That's it?"

"Got any better ideas?"

He didn't.

Ezra pulled the kneeboard across his thigh and adjusted the beam of the torch to shed light over the chart.

"My guess is we got way off course just about here when we hit that storm front. Now, we left Sioux Narrows..." He checked his watch, "...two hours ago..."

"So? That leaves us...?"

Ezra didn't look up but Vin didn't miss the sly smile on his face either.

"Still lost."

"Goddamn it," the Texan snapped, exasperated, "but you have the weirdest sense of humour!"

The Southerner laughed. "Makes up for the fact that you don't have one at all."

Tanner leaned back against the head rest and sighed.

"Tell me again, Ezra, why are we friends?"

Standish set aside the kneeboard again and stared out into the gloom with a heavy sigh as the small craft rocked dangerously in the wind.

"Gotta tie this baby down, or we'll be in way more trouble than we already are."

Vin started to shake his head then stopped as he realised it was not the best idea.

"You crazy? That's a force 5 gale blowing out there."

Ezra shifted slightly in his seat to face Tanner.

"My very point, Vin. If I don't anchor us to the ground we risk being picked up and tossed around like a kid's toy in this wind." He reached under the seat, where the tie-downs were stowed. "And I need to make a structural check, set the emergency strobe, see if there's any risk of fire..."

"Great, now you tell me," interrupted Vin, drily, "when we've been sitting here for what...ten minutes?"

Ezra gave a quick smile. "Don't you pay any attention to the movies? There is always a chance the fuel tanks could have ruptured and if we're leaking avgas..." He left the sentence unfinished.

"Hell, if we're going by the Hollywood code we should have been a fireball the minute we touched down. But look at it this way, at least we could be sure of staying warm," the Texan joked, then waved a hand at the dismal scene outside the cockpit, an overwhelming but indistinct impression of grey and green. "You really think it's got a snowball's chance in hell of going up in this? That's rain out there, Ezra. You know, wet stuff."

"Smart ass." He turned, kneeling awkwardly on the seat to rummage in the back and retrieve his jacket. "You stay here, okay? No point in both of us getting drowned and you look like a sick dog anyway." He struggled into his jacket, finding it difficult to manoeuvre in the cramped cabin. "Besides, if disaster's going to strike, I'd like to at least have a fighting chance."

“Thought it already had,” Tanner muttered sarcastically, then louder: “Always guessed you were a crazy son-of-a-bitch, this just proves it.”

The Southerner grinned.

“Always thought you were the tough outdoors type, Vin. Climbing mountains, hunting, shooting and fishing...Where’s your sense of adventure?”

“Oh, it’s there all right, standing in line just behind common sense and a healthy instinct for self-preservation, which is another way of saying don’t make things hard for yourself when you don’t have to.” He gestured at the small cabin. “In case you hadn’t noticed this isn’t exactly Caesar’s Palace. You get wet, pard, and you’re gonna be staying wet and wet means cold. Not a great idea considering where we are!”

Ezra zipped up the leather flying jacket, turning up the collar before reaching for the Maglite. The grin faded as he became suddenly serious.

“Believe me, Vin, I wouldn’t be doing this if I didn’t have to, but I have certain responsibilities and making sure we’re safe is one of them. Don’t worry, once I get all this shit squared away I’ll be more than happy to sit right here until search and rescue find us.”

Tanner nodded, appreciating the urgency and accepting that this was something Ezra had to do. As the pilot the Southerner was in charge and Vin was going to have to both defer to his knowledge and trust in his judgement. After all, he had put the plane down on solid ground without killing both of them in the process, though whether more by good luck than management he wasn’t prepared to hazard a guess.

“Just don’t stay out there any longer than you have to.”

Standish opened the door letting in a frigid blast of air and driving rain. “No, Mom.”

Vin shivered and plunged his hands deep into his pockets, already feeling the drop in temperature inside the cockpit. He wished now he had thought to put something more substantial in his duffel than a couple of spare shirts, a change of underwear and an Avalanche sweatshirt and he doubted Ezra would have come any more prepared for a wilderness outing than himself. He sighed and listened to the pounding rain hammering on the aluminium skin of the Cessna. Well, at least water wasn’t going to be a problem.

“So what have we got?” The question came as a cautious response the Southerner’s discovery that the mandatory 2-man survival kit was incomplete.

Tanner critically eyed the Southerner now crouched in the cargo space, who glanced up in response to Tanner’s question, still looking uncomfortably damp although he had been back in the shelter of the cabin for almost twenty minutes. On his return, Ezra had said little about their situation except that the plane had suffered some fairly serious structural damage then with a grin had assured him that they were in no immediate danger of

exploding. The brief sortie had, however, left him soaked and although he had immediately shrugged out of his jacket and dried off as best he could, he had been shivering intermittently ever since.

“Well, apart from a sleeping bag and a blanket, there’s an axe, a hex stove with three tablets of fuel and a poor excuse for a survival kit with most of the rations missing but there is a space blanket and, I’m sure you’ll feel better for knowing this, a whistle.” The Southerner hefted the hand axe and smiled. “No doubt you could always go out and rustle us up a bite if things get desperate.”

Vin shot a doubtful glance at the Southerner.

“Yeah, sure. Ever tried to cook a moose on a hex stove?”

Ezra grinned as he continued his catalogue of supplies. “Thanks to you, we also have three candy bars plus we have a thermos of coffee, a half pint of cognac and...” he focused the beam of the torch on the windscreen, “all the freaking water you could possibly want.”

Vin hunched morosely down in his seat. “Good thing I ain’t hungry then.”

Ezra laughed softly and shortly after the tantalising smell of coffee filled the cockpit.

“Could I possibly interest you in a cup of the finest Sulawesi then?”

The Texan twisted in his seat, facing back towards the rear of the plane.

“Coffee? Now that sounds like a plan. In fact it’s the best idea you’ve had all night.”

He grinned and accepted the plastic cup the Southerner had unscrewed from the top of the flask. He should have expected the alcohol that accompanied the caffeine, this was after all Ezra Standish, but the raw bite of it in his throat took his breath away as the ball of liquid flame seared its way into his stomach. He was more circumspect with his second swallow, fully aware of the green eyes on him and anticipating one of Ezra’s facetious remarks. Instead Standish looked away and focused on slowly replacing the screw cap on the thermos.

“I’m sorry for doing this to you, Vin.”

Tanner took another swallow of the fortified coffee to cover his surprise.

“Sorry? For what? For getting us down in one piece? Truth is, Ezra, I should be saying thanks. Ain’t no cause for apology the way I see it.”

Ezra frowned and rubbed his forehead.

“I shouldn’t have asked you to come. I was only thinking of myself when I talked you into taking this trip.”

The Texan slowly drained the cup and held it out, ready to pass it back.

“So what’re you saying? That you’d rather be here on your own?”

Ezra looked up, that familiar self-deprecating smile on his face.

“Wouldn’t you prefer it that way?”

“Well, I ain’t saying that given the choice I’d be asking to be in a plane crash, but seein’ as that’s how it happened, better that there’s two of us.”

The Southerner finally took the cup and poured himself a measure from the flask.

“There is that,” he conceded, between sips, “but you might just change your mind if we’re still here in another 48 hours. The hard reality of sub-zero temperatures and no real food tends to get in the way of charitable thoughts.”

Vin shook his head. “Man, you really like to make things hard don’t you?”

“It’s called pragmatism.”

“It’s called bullshit,” snorted Tanner dismissively, leaning over the back of the seat. “Now hand over that blanket. I’m bushed. Might as well try and get some shuteye.”

“Take the sleeping bag, it’s warmer.”

“Ezra, you’re the one who needs to get warm not me. Christ! You’ve been shivering for the last half hour, so how about for once taking some advice and, as dumb as it might sound, shuck off those wet clothes, and get yourself in that goddamn sleeping bag. Now gimme that blanket, and shut the fuck up!”

The blanket was held out in stony silence and Tanner was almost afraid he’d overstepped the mark as he reached out to take it. Dammit, the last thing they needed was to start fighting but the response, when it finally came, brought a smile to his lips as he heard an echo of his own words from earlier in the night delivered in Ezra’s distinctive Southern drawl.

“Tell me again, Vin, exactly why are we friends?”

oooOOOooo

The Texan shivered as he felt a bead of icy water slide down his neck, groaning as he tried to uncurl from the most uncomfortable position in which he had ever been obliged to sleep. His left arm was numb all the way from his shoulder and as he tried to turn onto his back and stretch out his legs he discovered, quite painfully, that his neck had such a crick in it that he wondered if he would be able to coax his head upright anytime in the immediate future. He had spent a restless night shifting from one cramped attitude to another until finally, at some indeterminate time in the what was possibly the longest night of his life, swathed in the blanket and with his knees drawn almost up to his chin, he had fallen into an exhausted sleep.

The cold hit him like a slap in the face as he emerged from the soft woollen folds, and as he struggled to disentangle himself he squinted at the luminous hands of his watch. Five o’clock. Not even light yet. Another drip fell onto his cheek startling him and he lifted his

hand to touch the roof, feeling the accumulated moisture of condensation beneath his fingers before it coalesced and ran in a trickle across his palm and into his shirt sleeve. Shit! Everything felt cold and damp, and to make matters worse the sudden chill that sent a shiver down his back reminded him of the unwelcome reality of an aching full bladder. The idea of leaving even such meagre warmth as the cabin offered to venture outside held no appeal for him but there were some things that just could not be ignored.

“Ezra?” Softly grunting as his muscles continued to protest every movement, he manoeuvred himself into a reasonably upright position and leaned over the back of the seat. “Ezra!”

No response.

Remembering the torch, he reached across to the pilot’s side of the plane, swearing roundly as the yoke jabbed painfully into his hip -- another bruise -- and fumbled in the door cache for the Maglite. The door swung open with a sharp jerk and Tanner, caught off guard, leapt back as if burned painfully striking the same hip on the way back. In a blur of movement a dark shape swung up into the cockpit and slammed heavily into the pilot’s seat with a gusty sigh and a flick of wet hair that arced a spray of droplets across the cockpit, before the door slammed shut again.

“Jesus fucking Christ, Ezra!” Vin was angry and embarrassed that he had been so startled by the Southerner’s unexpected appearance. “What the hell were you doing? It’s still pissing down out there!”

Standish stuck his hands into his pockets, his voice not quite steady when he answered as he tried to control his shivering.

“Exactly,” he drawled, “Call of nature. And I had to check the tie-downs were still secure.”

Vin sighed and ran his fingers through his hair, wincing as he inadvertently brushed the knot at his temple. Well, he couldn’t criticise the man for doing precisely what he had been about to do but it troubled him that the Southerner had managed to leave the plane without him hearing.

“You scared the crap out of me, goddamn you!”

“Well, if it’s saved you a trip outside then believe me, I’ve done you a favour.” It was delivered with such heavy irony that Vin was forced to give in and laugh, although his pulse was still bounding from the sudden surge of adrenaline.

“Gimme the torch, smart ass. My turn.”

The Southerner reached out to surrender the Maglite.

“Stay close,” he warned, a tired smile briefly crossing his face, “Don’t want to have to come looking for you.”

Vin took the torch with a grin and put his hand on the door catch.

“Don’t worry, pard. You can time me, this is gonna be the fastest freakin’ comfort stop in history.”

The rain was still falling, nowhere near the torrential downpour it had been when he had closed his eyes to sleep but the icy wind sliced easily through his misnamed windbreaker like a knife and he involuntarily sucked in his breath at the shock of it. If he had thought Massachusetts a climatic challenge for his Texas blood, he had not counted on the savagery of the raw Canadian Fall. The wind lashed at him, tugging at his jacket and snatching away his breath as he hurriedly relieved himself in the lea of the aircraft, hunching his back against the driving rain and suddenly smiling as he remembered his foster-father once telling him that the greatest beauty of the big outdoors was that it was really just one enormous toilet. Ironic really considering their current situation which, in his opinion, already had them at least half-way down the sewer. Forced to wait for nature to take its frustratingly sluggish course, he finally finished, shivered and hastily adjusted his clothing before turning back towards the front of the Cessna and the welcome nearness of shelter and at least the illusion of warmth.

Sliding into the passenger seat again, the Texan cast a quick glance at Ezra, briefly allowing the torch to illuminate the Southerner’s face before moving the beam aside. Standish had pulled the blanket over him and had hunched himself up into an uncomfortable looking side-facing position, with his eyes closed, his face having taken on the relaxed expression only found in sleep. Good luck to him if he could manage to snatch a little more shuteye, he looked bushed. Vin sighed, brushing back his own wet hair as he settled back into his seat and tried to get reasonably comfortable. If the back seats hadn’t been taken out to make room for cargo space one of them at least could have rested in some degree of comfort but behind him there was just bare floor. He debated the advantage of crawling over the seat and into the back to stretch out there and decided against it. The seat, albeit cramped, was at least cushioned leather.

Vin saw the sun come up, or rather he became increasingly aware of the subtle changing light that signalled the dawn of a new day. There was no sun to see. He had not closed his eyes again. Instead, stretching his lean frame out as much as he was able, he drifted into a semi-trance that he had perfected on long stake-outs, listening to the rain on the aircraft’s aluminium shell and the slow and regular rhythm of Ezra’s breathing no more than a few inches from his left ear. He turned his head towards the pilot and for several minutes thoughtfully watched the Southerner as he slept.

Ezra was not an easy man to get to know but in the eight months since Vin had first seen the urbane Federal agent -- correction, former Federal agent with a tarnished history -- across the conference table at InterSept he had discovered a few things about the Georgian,

not the least of which had been that under the carefully cultivated façade of hard-edged cynicism Ezra was an okay guy, but he worked hard at presenting a very different image. And sometimes it worked. There were times when even Vin had seen the Southerner as a self-centred, grasping son-of-a-bitch seriously lacking in the morals department, but at some point in their professional association they had developed a mutual respect recognising, Vin believed, a universal element in their makeup. He had yet to determine exactly what that particular ingredient was but whichever way he looked at it, they had inexplicably found more in common than either one of them would ever have imagined. And surprising them both, they had become friends. Not great back-slapping buddies like Buck with Chris, but two guys who at least shared an understanding of each other.

Stiffly, he stretched and, twisting, reached behind the seats for the nylon rucksack that contained their meagre supplies. Hoping that the daylight would raise the ambient temperature at least a few degrees, he rubbed his palms together, breathing warmed air into his cupped hands before fumbling with the plastic clips to open the flap. He gently shook the thermos, estimating there was about a cup of coffee each remaining and no doubt that would have cooled somewhat by now. He made a mental note to refill the insulated flask with rainwater as soon as he could.

He nudged the sleeping Southerner with his elbow. "Want some coffee, Ezra?" Standish slept on. *Hell, the man could sleep through anything!* He gently shook the pilot's shoulder. "Ezra!" The response was slow, a slight shifting of his head as he gave a soft sigh but his eyes, after the briefest flicker, slid closed again. Uneasy, Tanner shook the pilot with more force. "Come on, Ezra. Anybody home in there? Talk to me."

With a deep intake of breath Standish opened sluggish eyelids to stare blankly ahead, not fully responding until the Texan gave another quick jerk of his shoulder snapping Ezra's head back with a jolt. The green eyes finally focused and the Southerner groaned as he shoved aside the blanket.

"Tell me I'm dreaming," he mumbled thickly then, grunting, pushed himself up in the seat and groaned.

"Okay, you're dreaming." Vin agreed flatly, pouring a cup of coffee and holding it out to the other man. "Now dream this." After a beat with no response he wedged the thermos flask between his thighs and reached across to put the cup in Standish's hand himself. "Here. It's not much but it's warm -- I hope."

Finally Ezra nodded and, again pulling the blanket around him, drank. The coffee seemed to revive the Southerner a little, and as he passed the empty cup to Tanner he gave a flickering smile. "Thanks. Needed that."

"You okay?"

“Sure. Just feel like I slept in an ice box. A very small ice box.”

Vin emptied the last of the coffee from the thermos into the cup, hesitating for just a split second before shoving it back at Ezra. “Go on, you have it. Might just be enough to get a thaw going and I sure as hell don’t need it.”

Distractedly, the chilled pilot took it, his hand shaking with another tremor as his body tried to generate some internal heat and the Texan found himself watching the Southerner and thinking that if the rain would stop even for just a little while, he could get a fire going. Heat was the thing they both needed; but Ezra more than him right now by both the look of him and the icy feel of his blanched fingers. Realistically they could manage without food for a number of days but the all-pervading cold was something that neither one of them could afford to ignore.

The coffee, while a far cry from his usual morning shot of espresso, was greatly appreciated by the still drowsy Southerner as much because it smacked of familiar ritual as for its caffeine boost. True, it had lost some of its heat overnight, although it had been insulated in the thermos, and tasted faintly of plastic but by the end of the second cup the strong brew had bolstered his flagging system. In spite of the welcome infusion of the mild stimulant, it still took him several moments to respond when Vin offered him something to eat. Looking blankly at the coloured wrappers, he knew he was expected to answer but for a moment was unable to either process the information or make any kind of coherent response. Eventually he frowned and shook his head. The very idea of eating candy for breakfast did little for him except make him feel slightly nauseous, but Tanner’s quietly forceful urging finally persuaded him that he should eat at least some of the sickly sweet caramel and chocolate offering, and once the sugar filtered into his bloodstream giving him a sudden energy boost he finally understood the reasons behind Vin’s persistence. *Damnit, what the hell was wrong with him?*

Tucking his hands into his armpits, he hugged his arms to his chest in a vain effort to warm himself and trying to control a sudden burst of shivering. This was not going to be a fun day, of that he could be reasonably certain. His clothes still clung damply to him and as he looked out of the window at the rain that continued unabated, he knew that he could not avoid going out into the wind and rain again. He needed to make sure that the strobe had not yet drained the battery and recheck the tie-downs. He thought ruefully of the array of safety gear he routinely kept in the King Air and cursed Artie Slater to hell and back. A bright fluorescent orange See/Rescue streamer and an emergency strobe were hardly hi-tech equipment. Knowing Slater as he did he should have realised that any craft in his stable would be flying to minimum FAA spec. He shivered again and angrily threw aside the blanket as a small voice in the back of his head nagged that as the pilot in charge it was his

responsibility to ensure the safety of the craft and its passengers -- and whichever way he looked at it he had failed to do that.

"Ezra?"

"I'm okay!" He had not intended to snarl at the Texan, but he was tired and cold, and suddenly Vin's solicitous concern irritated him.

"Yeah, sure you are." Tanner's own voice was sharply sarcastic. "I can see you're just fine."

The Southerner sighed wearily and rubbed his hands together hoping to generate some heat into his icy fingers. "Sorry. Didn't get much sleep." He gave a tired and apologetic smile. "You know I'm an asshole when I'm tired."

Tanner's answering smile at Ezra's admission did not quite reach his eyes. "Yeah, I noticed." After a few moments of awkward silence in which neither man spoke, Vin ventured a hesitant: "So what now?"

"Check the plane now it's light. Make sure..." He paused as a shuddering tremor shook him. "...we can be seen. Maybe see if I can do something with the radio...try the cell phones again."

Vin looked away from the Southerner before he spoke again. "Ezra, I don't want to rain on your parade but before you do anything else you have to try and get warm. If you let yourself get any colder, you're gonna be in deep shit."

The Southerner looked oddly at Vin. "What the hell are you talking about? It'll take me ten minutes to secure the tie-downs and check the strobe."

"Ezra, just listen! Haven't you noticed that you can't stop shivering? Doesn't that tell you anything?"

"Yes," snapped the Southerner, irritably, "That it's fucking cold!"

Vin impulsively reached out to restrain Standish as the pilot's hand fumbled with the door catch, the simple task of opening the door causing him no small amount of difficulty.

"No! It's *you* that's cold. Too damned cold. Go out in that wind and I guarantee with the chill factor you're going bottom out real soon."

"Really, I'm okay," insisted the Southerner, impatiently freeing his arm from Vin's grip, "I'm fine! Getting wet is hardly going to be a new experience for me after all." He pushed the door open with his foot and jumped out, stumbling as he landed before slamming the door behind him.

Chewing the inside of his lip, Tanner stared for a long time at the empty seat. He suppressed his first urge to follow Standish, knowing it was both a waste of time and empty gesture that would only put him in a position not too different to the one Ezra was presently in and for both of them to end up succumbing to the elements was not a scenario he wanted

to think too much about. Ezra was fully half-way there and the reality was that Ezra was not going to listen to reason. His co-ordination was off and he was already getting snaky. Vin glanced at his watch. He would give him just fifteen minutes. After that, rain, wind or hail, he would go out and he would drag him back; even if he had to fight him every inch of the way to do it. Vin was less surprised than he was concerned that Ezra seemed to be showing an uncharacteristic lack of judgement for someone who was not only a qualified pilot but a highly trained professional law enforcement agent. Exposure to extreme cold did that. And given a chance it would quietly creep up and kill you without you even knowing that anything was wrong.

Fifteen minutes, decided Vin, was maybe ten minutes too long. He pulled the collar of his windbreaker up and looked quickly around, relieved to find that in the gusting wind, the cloud was breaking up and the rain had lessened from an all out storm to a steady drizzle. For the first time perhaps, he truly appreciated Ezra's skill in getting the plane down without killing them both. In fact, judging the dimensions of the clearing in which the Centurion had been forced to land, the Texan considered their survival to be a minor miracle. What's more he had no memory of the landing. All he knew was that as they had been rapidly descending, his main thought had been that they were going to die in a remote part of Canada and he still owed Chris five hundred dollars. The damage the craft had sustained seemed to be mainly in the landing gear and the left wing, he noticed, was badly out of shape. One wheel was firmly embedded in soft mud and Vin could see the gouges in the ground where the wheels had torn up the earth as Ezra had brought the stricken craft in hard and fought to bring the plane to a stop before it could plough into the dense line of firs that marked treeline of the forest not twenty feet away. A miracle indeed.

An icy blast of wind snapped him out of his moment of reflection and he broke into a jog. Whatever Ezra had found to do that was so goddamn important he could forget about it!

"Ezra!" The wind snatched his voice away, and he tried again fighting the wind for every breath. "Ezra!"

He found the Southerner struggling with the tie down for the port wing, one knee on the ground as he fumbled with the nylon rope, his jacket discarded on the ground beside him. With a sensation in the pit of his stomach that equalled anything he had experienced in the air, he ran forward and dropped into a crouch, resting his hand on the pilot's shoulder.

"Come on, Ezra! Time's up. Leave that."

"No! I'm fine. Jus' got...got to get...just...lemme go!"

Vin ignored the Southerner's protests, taking a firm grip on Ezra's arm. Short of force he was at a loss as to what he should do with the disorientated pilot. Ezra was kneeling but his balance was off and he swayed alarmingly as he tried to shrug Tanner's hand off his sleeve.

“Listen to me. Dammit Ezra! Just listen! You gotta get inside now and get out of that gear. You can’t even think straight any more! Look!” He held up Ezra’s jacket. “It’s fucking twenty degrees and you pull a dumb stunt like this!”

“I’m okay,” he finally shrugged off Tanner’s arm, almost losing his balance completely as he did so, “jus’ gimme a min...minute. Gotta tie this down,” He fumbled again, his coordination almost non-existent as his fingers slipped repeatedly from the rope until finally he muttered impatiently: “Too goddamn cold.”

The Texan shook his head and grabbed Ezra’s sleeve again. Standish was slurring his words, sounding like a belligerent drunk as he fought with the knots.

“I know! Come on, man, let me help...”

“S’alright. Can do it...”

“Ezra...”

The Southerner finally shoved the Texan away, green eyes flashing anger as he finally abandoned the tie-down and staggered to his feet.

“Get the fuck away from me!”

Wary of the abrupt change in temperament Tanner quickly rose and stepped back in one smooth motion holding up a hand in submission, immediately recognising the danger in trying to argue or even reason with him. He was not sure how Ezra was going to react next but of one thing he was certain, he was in the worst kind of trouble. The fact was that if his body temperature had dropped enough for him to be showing physical signs of deterioration then he had gone beyond just being cold and was probably already hypothermic. Vin had seen it happen before on climbing expeditions and his concern now was that Ezra had overshot rational and was instead rapidly racing towards uncontrolled aggression.

“Okay, okay, take it easy,” he soothed, backing off just enough so as not to antagonise him further. “Just tryin’ to help. You do it your way. If you want to freeze your ass off then go right ahead but I’m sick of standing here in the rain and I’m too goddamn cold to wait here while you dick around. I’m going back inside, you do what the fuck you want!”

Standish didn’t see it coming. Slowly, as he had been talking, Vin had moved in close once again and the right jab blind-sided the unsuspecting Southerner; a beautifully executed short, sharp, economical tap to the jaw that connected solidly enough to drop him like a stone, his eyes rolling up in his head as he folded bonelessly and fell forward onto the Texan.

“Goddamn it, man. Can’t you ever do anythin’ the easy way?” he muttered, as he struggled to maintain a grip on Ezra’s dead weight and keep him upright. With a grunt he bent his knees and levered the unconscious Southerner over his shoulder. “Sorry, pal, but there just wasn’t any time for a debate.”

Getting an unconscious man into a small airplane posed a definite challenge; getting an unconscious man out of wet clothes posed one almost as difficult. Mind racing he tried to remember the drill for dealing with a hypothermia victim, vaguely recalling that he should not handle Ezra too roughly, but conscious of the fact that he needed to get him stripped and dry as quickly as he could. The waterlogged fabric was heavy and stuck not only to itself but to skin, making the task of undressing the Southerner gently almost an impossibility. Convincing himself that in this instance speed was more important, he finally ripped each and every one of the saturated articles off, using the scissors from the first aid kit to cut them where he had to, and tossed them in a soggy pile at the far rear of the plane. That done, he roughly dried Ezra's frightening bloodless skin with one of the damp shirts from his duffel bag, reminding himself that it didn't matter if the outside was freezing as long as the inside -- the major organs -- were still warm. He cursed the confined space of the cargo deck as he fully opened up the sleeping bag and, unfolding it into a single rectangle, struggled to roll the Southerner into it. Quickly zipping it up again, he reached for the blanket and tucked it around the unconscious man's head and shoulders, leaving only his eyes exposed. Finally he wrapped the already cocooned Southerner in the aluminium space blanket that he had taken from the survival kit, hoping that the added insulation would arrest any further heat loss.

With a tired sigh, panting from both the exertion and the sudden infusion of adrenaline, he slumped against the back of the seat and crossed his arms over his heaving chest. Damn. Damn! Damn! Why hadn't he done something sooner? The minute he had realised Ezra was on the downhill slide of losing more heat than he could realistically generate he should have at least tried to do something. Anything. Instead he had let the Southerner go on fighting what was always going to be a losing battle. And sure enough he had lost.

The plane rocked gently as the wind gusted beneath its wings and, suddenly overcome with a profound sense of despair, the Texan closed his eyes. What the hell was he supposed to do now? Ezra had said that all they could do was wait. As pilot the Southerner had done what he had to; set the emergency beacon, secured the Centurion to the ground and marked their position with a bright orange strip of what seemed to be nothing more than plastic. Something Ezra had assured him that in spite of its simplicity was a valuable rescue beacon which could be detected even at by infra-red. He looked morosely out of the window and sighed. How many more nights?

Tanner was a patient man. As a sniper he had learned a degree of self-discipline to which few men could aspire and now he sat quite still, with his face tucked into his jacket utilising the heat from his own exhalations to provide warmth, waiting for some sign -- any

sign -- of movement from the Southerner. So far there had been none. Leaning forward and taking his hand out of his pocket, Vin touched the back of his fingers to Ezra's cheek -- still so cold -- then dipped his hand into the sleeping bag, and tried to gauge the Southerner's body heat by feeling the temperature in his armpit. A little warmer maybe, but still cool. Moving his fingers to the Southerner's neck he felt for a pulse, finding it slow but reassuringly regular and at that moment Ezra shivered, a spasm that shook his whole body, and Vin took the intermittent tremors as a good sign. At least his body was still trying to generate heat. He would start to worry in earnest if the shivering stopped.

He had been checking Ezra's responses at twenty minute intervals and had found if he persisted long enough that he would slowly respond to his name and if he pinched his earlobe he would pull away, murmuring fretfully, but other than that he had made no spontaneous efforts to move. Tanner was not sure how much his punch to the jaw had to do with the Southerner's state of consciousness and how much was attributable to hypothermia, but whichever it was the Texan's concern was that he would slowly continue to deteriorate until he quietly slid into a coma.

Tanner was cold enough himself, but the difference between the two of them was that Ezra was not just cold, he was suffering from exposure, and the reality was that he was going to need medical attention -- and soon. He might be a Texan but he had been climbing mountains long enough to know that he needed to find some other way of warming him before his temperature totally bottomed out. If he was honest with himself he also knew that the only thing he had to offer that generated any form of heat was himself. He stared for a long time at the motionless pilot. Hell, the decision wasn't that hard was it? What it came down to was that he had something Ezra needed. What other justification was he waiting for? With a resigned sigh he slowly took off his jacket and started to unbutton his shirt.

"Jesus, man," he muttered under his breath, "This is a real test of friendship, you know?"

It was probably as well, he decided, that the Southerner was in no position to answer otherwise Vin doubted that he would have the courage to go through with it. Instead, the silence was oddly reassuring, if anything stressing the absolute necessity of his actions, and as he stripped down to his shorts he kept a close eye on the motionless pilot. He hesitated for just a moment, then as his skin erupted in goose-flesh he shivered and quickly peeled back the layers surrounding the sleeping man. *Well, Tanner, here goes nothing.*

He was unprepared for the shock of Ezra's icy skin against his own and, with a soft gasp, he hastily drew back. *God, this was going to be even harder than he imagined.* Taking a deep breath, he grasped the open edges of the sleeping bag and space blanket, and awkwardly drawing the unresponsive Standish towards him, pulled the layers close around them both. He shivered violently as own body heat leached rapidly away on contact with the

other man's marbled flesh and he rested his forehead against Ezra's back trying to stabilise his own ragged breathing, as his body adjusted to the change and tried to cope with the sudden shift in temperature. Holy hell! He shivered again and clenched his teeth to stop them chattering, welcoming the gust of his own warm breath on his chest as he noisily exhaled. *Relax. Relax.* Self-consciously, he inched closer, bracing himself for the contact of Ezra's cold skin against his own, as he moulded himself to Ezra's body, finally surrendering his last reservation and curving his arm around the Southerner's chest in a parody of an embrace. *Relax.* Christ, he thought angrily, if the stubborn son-of-a-bitch hadn't kept going out in the rain so many fucking times, he would have been fine. Everything would have been just fine! *Damn you Ezra!* Except he knew that it really wouldn't have been fine at all. Quickly, he pulled the sleeping bag up over both their heads, trapping the heat from his own breath and gradually his tremors subsided, along with his anger. *Don't you go dying on me now you dumb bastard.* He squeezed his eyes shut, barely managing to keep a cap on his emotions and tentatively pressed his hand over the Southerner's sternum, feeling the slow but reassuringly steady thump of his heart under his palm. *Just hold on, Ezra. Don't you even think about leaving me here on my own and maybe -- just maybe -- if we come out of this thing alive, I'll be able to tell you just why we're friends.*

He woke in a panic with his heart thudding against his ribs, barely able to catch his breath. The sensation of falling had been overwhelming and so real, that the involuntary jerking of his muscles had snapped him into instant wakefulness. Now he lay perfectly still, waiting for his pulse to return to normal as he tried to orientate himself once again. Damn it! He had never intended to fall asleep. He struggled to free his left arm, feeling suddenly claustrophobic with Ezra's dead weight resting against him, quelling the urge to hyperventilate as the enveloping shroud of the sleeping bag suddenly threatened to stifle him. Slowly, and with great effort, he brought his wildly careering thoughts and disordered emotions under control; blanketing the moment of blind panic with an overlay of reason, until he was finally able to regulate his breathing again. *Easy, Vin. Don't let it run away with you. Take control. Breathe easy.*

He pushed himself away from Ezra, giving himself a little space, some air; some room to maintain his separateness from the man beside him. Feeling incredibly foolish, he gradually worked his arm from under the Southerner and sighed heavily, finally bringing his wrist, and his watch, in front of his face and focusing on the hands. He stared for a long time at the dial until it dawned on him that it meant absolutely nothing to him. He could read off the time -- 3 o'clock -- but what eluded him was the passage of that time. He could no longer remember how long it had been since he had cast aside any reservations he might have had and

crawled into the sack with Ezra. Allowing his arm to relax he closed his eyes again. *God, he was so tired.* He just needed to sleep. *No! To sleep is to die.* He forced his eyes open and hesitantly touched a hand to the Southerner's skin; back, flank, chest. Was he any warmer? Vin could no longer tell, he just knew that he had done all he could but it didn't seem to be enough. Ezra was still out cold.

Vin was unable to prevent the insane giggle that bubbled up inside him. Good one Vin. Out cold. Yes indeed. That's exactly what he was. Cold. Like a goddamn corpse. He couldn't say exactly when or even why it happened but suddenly he was crying; tears oozing traitorously from beneath tightly closed lids, to slide unchecked down his face. He covered his eyes with his arm, more ashamed of himself than he had ever been in his life yet unable to stop. The tears were still wet on his cheeks as he slipped effortlessly into the darkness that was waiting to welcome him with open arms. *So sorry Ezra.*

oooOOOooo

"That's it! Seven-niner-niner Victor Bravo. ID confirmed."

"When did this one go down?"

"Late Friday by all accounts. One of those that got swallowed by that freak storm front. How does it look?"

The pilot of the SAR helicopter banked and circled.

"Aircraft appears to be intact. Looks like someone did a pretty neat job of a forced landing. No movement down there now though."

"No bodies either, thank Christ."

"None visible at least."

"Right."

"How many on board again?"

"Two listed on the flight plan."

"Okay, let's take a look then. See just what we got here."

The spotter leaned back to shout through the hatch. "Going down."

oooOOOooo

The still shaking Texan gathered the cellular blanket in his right fist and held it more tightly around his shoulders, breathing in humidified oxygen through the mask that covered his face, and keeping a tight rein on his emotions. His left arm was the only part of him, other than his face, that was exposed and he looked again at the narrow tube leading from a vein

in his forearm to a bag of clear fluid suspended from a hanger above his head. He still couldn't understand why they had needed to start an IV. He kept telling them was just fine. Ezra was the one needing help, not him. Yet he had succumbed to a curious lethargy that robbed him of any inclination to question what anyone was doing to him. He had also been afraid that if he tried to say too much that he might just lose what little control he felt he still had. His gaze travelled to the portable cardiac monitor beside him and he stared for a long moment at the alternating peaks and troughs that travelled across the oscilloscope with reassuring regularity, without it really registering that he was watching his own heart beat. One of the EMTs touched him on the shoulder -- Angela he thought her name was...Nice eyes -- and once again she took his temperature, sliding an electronic probe into his ear. A few feet away he could hear the other members of the rescue team talking softly and urgently as they worked on Ezra. Closing his eyes, he shut out the voices and listened to the hiss of the oxygen and the video-game blip of the ECG. None of this was real. Because he didn't want it to be real. He wanted it to be over.

Fragments of conversation continued to filter down through his awareness like water percolating through limestone and finally, he forced himself to turn his head and look across the small distance that separated him from the activity surrounding the comatose Southerner.

"...pulse twenty... resps 5...airway's okay, he's doing fine on his own..."

"Got a temp yet?"

"Ninety point five rectal."

"Okay, give it another coupla minutes. How much d'you reckon he weighs? One fifty?"

"Close enough..."

"...saline at sixty five...700 mil push then..."

"...got a few ectopics going here, so slow down and go gentle. Just take it easy folks. No good getting his core temp up if he arrests on us."

"Sure thing...damn, vein's collapsed..."

"I got one..."

Vin quickly looked away then. He had seen enough. Instead he shuddered again, the tremor that shook his body this time having nothing at all to do with his body temperature.

He had lost all sense of time as he drifted in and out of a twilight sleep while in the helicopter, then in the hospital ER he tried telling everyone he was alright and felt foolish because he couldn't even answer the most basic questions without screwing up. At least he remembered his name, but the notion that it was 1989 came right out of left field. After that he had been wary of saying anything without a great deal of forethought. Then they had

totally freaked him out taking his blood because they had stuck a needle into an artery in his groin to get the sample. Something to do with oxygen levels he thought. There had been the usual intrusive physical exam and more questions than he knew the answers to, but finally he had been transferred to a bed and, warmed by a couple of heat packs and reassured that Ezra was doing just fine, he had again slept.

Vin wakened a number of hours later, ravenous and desperate to use the bathroom but completely lucid and, with his immediate physical needs satisfied, he had quickly sought news of Ezra. He had only three questions. Was he okay, was he conscious and could he see him? Now Tanner self consciously looked down at the blue surgical scrubs he had been obliged to wear and reminded himself that at least it was a step above one of those embarrassingly revealing, open-backed hospital gowns that had you forever struggling to cover your bare ass to maintain a shred of dignity. There was also the small detail that he in fact had nothing of his own to wear. He had been airlifted from the crash site in only his shorts and then, somewhere in the whole process, he had eventually been separated from those too and he had no intention of chasing all over the goddamn hospital looking for a pair of boxers. Hell, he wasn't that sentimental about underwear.

He sighed, feeling more like he'd just run a marathon than spent the last few hours asleep but at least he was functioning again. The final verdict from the medical profession had been mild concussion, exposure and dehydration and it still surprised him how confused and exhausted he had been but after a couple of litres of intravenously administered fluid and nine hours of solid sleep he was feeling somewhere close to being the Vin Tanner who had left Boston more than forty eight hours before -- at least physically. He glanced again at his watch. Three in the morning. He really should call Larabee. Looking back up he realised that he'd been standing in the hall outside Ezra's room for several minutes already and with a guilty start he hastily glanced around to make sure no one had noticed his momentary lapse in concentration before hesitantly pushing open the door.

The Southerner was facing away from the Texan, lying on his side with one knee drawn up in the traditional recovery position and his right arm resting on top of the covers. He was very still and there was no indication that he was even aware of anyone having come through the door. Walking slowly forward, Vin rounded the foot of the bed and stood for a full minute looking down at the relaxed features before moving the single chair closer to the bed and sitting down to wait. He watched the screen of the monitor for a few moments almost mesmerised by the continuous line that dipped and peaked at regular intervals confirming that E. Standish's heart was beating at a rate of 72 a minute. An improvement on the 20 it had been. His eyes wandered to the two flasks of intravenous solution, following the tubing to where it joined at a Y connector and ran on through an electronic sensor that delivered

the exact amount keyed into the machine, fascinated by the regulated movement of fluid into the twin chambers. He had been staring for some time at the droplets forming, gathering into a trembling globule and falling with unvarying precision before a prickling at the back of his neck warned him that he was being watched.

Ezra had not moved but his eyes were open, their irises almost luminescent in the subdued light as he stared unwaveringly in the Texan's direction. For a moment Vin was taken aback by the intense scrutiny, then the Southerner blinked and the pupils seemed to contract and bring the eyes into proper focus; no less green but somehow less feral.

"What the fuck happened?" So quietly spoken that Vin had to strain to even hear, Ezra's confusion was summed up in those four words.

"You don't remember?"

Standish carefully moved his right arm trying not to disturb the IV and shifted the upper part of his body to bring his left shoulder out from under him, then took a deep breath as if he needed the extra oxygen to boost his thought processes.

"No. Not much. But -- and feel free to correct me if I'm wrong -- I have a feeling I must have done something really stupid to end up like this."

Vin was not quite sure why he felt such a profound sense of relief at the admission.

"Well, what's the last thing you do remember?"

Ezra squeezed his eyes shut, frowning in concentration.

"Tie downs," he ventured finally, "I remember saying I had to go out and check the tie downs again...the wind was getting up...starboard wing was lifting."

"That's it? You don't remember what you did after that?"

"What I did?" Ezra's eyes narrowed suspiciously as he picked up on the subtle inflection in Vin's voice before he sighed and looked at the lean Texan sitting at his bedside. "You're going to tell me I was a complete jerk, right?"

Vin gave a quick smile that vanished almost as soon as it had appeared.

"Let's just say you got a little crazy."

"How crazy's 'a little' crazy?"

The Southerner's tone was both uncertain and apprehensive and Vin suddenly realised how disturbed Ezra was by the thought that he may have been out of line, even though the circumstances were far from normal.

"Drop it, Ezra. It's really not that important." Vin decided it might be easier to dismiss the events than get deeper into a discussion that would almost certainly lead where he didn't particularly want to go.

"How crazy?" His voice had sharpened, and Tanner thought he detected a hint of panic underlying his persistence. Sighing, he leaned back and looked evenly at the man in the bed

before answering. Ezra was not going to be satisfied with anything less than the truth and he would know for sure if he tried to pull a snow job on him; even below par he was quite capable of seeing straight through any attempt at deceit and Vin had never been any good at lying.

“Crazy enough to want to fight,” he admitted reluctantly.

Ezra let his head drop back onto the pillow and stared at the ceiling with a groan.

“Nooo. Did I...?”

“Nah, I did. You didn’t even see it coming. Dropped you like a stone with the sweetest...”

He stopped abruptly as the Southerner levered himself up on one elbow with surprising speed, his expression a picture of confused indignation.

“You hit me?” In response, Tanner tapped his own jaw and Ezra slowly raised his hand to finger the same spot on his own face, wincing as he touched the dusky bruise shadowing his chin. “Son of a bitch,” he exclaimed softly, “You did!”

Vin shrugged but his contrition was genuine.

“Hell, Ezra, you didn’t give me much choice!” He made eye contact and gave Ezra an even look. “Course, I could’ve left you out in the rain, and just let you go on taking more of your clothes off.”

Ezra’s eyes widened slightly, and the Texan was forced to laugh at the almost panic-stricken expression that fleetingly appeared, although he knew the other man was finding the entire scenario far from amusing.

“Don’t worry,” he continued quickly, “It was only your jacket, but you weren’t exactly listening to reason. When I tried to do something about it, you told me to get the fuck off you.”

“Jesus!” Standish rubbed a hand over his eyes, obviously disconcerted and Vin’s own smiled slipped a little. If Ezra was so fazed by the fact that he had not been in control of his actions then he would hardly be comfortable with what came later. Any more than Vin had been comfortable with it at the time. Or even now for that matter. Ezra taking his jacket off was small potatoes by comparison. He leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees.

“Ezra. It doesn’t matter now. The thing is we made it. You’re okay, I’m okay.”

The Southerner was quiet for a moment then he waved a dismissive hand as he regained a little of his customary aplomb.

“Forget it. You’re right. It doesn’t matter.”

But Tanner knew it did. It mattered a lot.

Vin had the cell phone in his hand ready to dial. He had been ready to dial for the last ten minutes but he was having difficulty coming up with a way to tell Chris that not only had he

been crazy enough to fly with Ezra to Canada for a hockey game, but that they had never even made it. In fact they had been stranded for two days in the wilds of Saskatchewan and had very nearly died as a result. Finally with no better idea on how he was going to phrase the news than he had been ten minutes earlier, he speed-dialled Larabee's home number. He checked his watch again. Chris should be up by now...

"Larabee."

"Uh, Chris..." The quick response had thrown him and anything he been considering saying flew straight out of his mind, leaving him momentarily speechless.

"Vin? Hey, how was the game? So, when did you get back? And where the hell were you all weekend anyway? I've been trying to call you and getting nothing but an out of service message."

Great. Chris thought they were back already. Probably thought he'd sacked out at Ezra's place.

"Well, you see, fact is...we were."

"Come again?"

"I mean, we were out of service."

A lengthy pause.

"You wanna run that by me again? And maybe this time say something I'll understand. Geez, did you and Ezra tie one on?"

Vin took a deep breath. "Chris, I'm...we're still in Canada. In Saskatchewan."

A brief pause as Chris digested the information. "Go on."

"A place called Regina." He swallowed hard, not trusting himself to keep his voice on an even keel. "The plane went down in a storm."

This time the silence stretched out and Vin could almost hear Chris' brain working overtime trying to fit the pieces together.

"You crashed?" Shocked, hesitant. "What about Ezra?"

"He's here. We're...okay. We're both okay. Really."

He heard a sigh. He hoped it was one of relief and not irritation.

"When? When did this happen? Why didn't you call..."

"Friday..."

"Jesus Christ, Vin, it's Monday! What the hell...?"

"I know, I know, just hold on there, Cowboy. Settle down. I'm calling now, okay? You think I just maybe couldn't be bothered or somethin'..." He was aware that his voice was steadily rising and he bit down on his next words, forcing himself to breathe slowly before he started again. "Hell, Chris, just listen, will ya? We were forced down in a motherfucker of a

storm...middle of nowhere...just about froze our butts off. SAR team finally found us about twelve hours ago and medevac-ed us out.

“Medevac? This just gets better....! But you’re okay, right?”

“No damage. Well, nothing ‘bout a gallon of fluid, a warm bed and some sleep didn’t cure.”

“Ezra?”

“Not so good. Hypothermia. He was in a coma.”

“Fuck!” Vin had never realised how emotive just one word could be. In a single syllable Chris managed to convey a wealth of feeling.

“No word of a lie, Chris. I thought we were gonna die out there.” The confession came out in a rush and he realised with some surprise that his hand was shaking. Larabee must have heard something in his voice because his next words were calmly supportive.

“You need me to come up there?”

“No.” He smiled, secure in the knowledge that if he had said yes, Chris would have been on the next flight. “It’s okay. Ezra’s doin’ alright now. He’s awake. They’re just making sure his heart’s keeping beat to the right tune.”

“You mean Ezra’s got a heart?”

The Texan laughed, his mood lightened a little by Larabee’s ready sarcasm. “So they tell me.”

There was a moment of silence then Chris’ voice came back over the line.

“Keep me posted. And Vin...if you need anything...”

“Sure thing,” answered Tanner, quietly, “I’ll call when I know more, okay?”

“You do that. Oh, and tell Ezra that he’s not getting out of the Donetti job that easily.”

“I’ll be sure and give him the message.” Vin grinned and hit the END button before pocketing the phone and shaking his head. Larabee had been unusually restrained although it had been obvious that he wanted to know the details but he had backed off, not wanting to push too hard. Had he sounded that rattled? He shrugged and walked back towards Ezra’s room. He guessed maybe he had.

“Hey there! Gotta say you’re looking way better than the last time I saw you.”

“Excuse me?” Ezra lowered the magazine he had been trying to pass the time with and frowned at the easy familiarity of the man who had just breezed, uninvited, into his room in the early hours of the morning.

“Sorry.” The man, bundled up in a thick parka, took off his glove and offered his hand. “Matt Denning. SAR EMT from the evac chopper.”

The Southerner nodded, understanding the acronymic verbal shorthand and, restricted by his IV line, awkwardly returned the handshake.

“My thanks.”

The EMT waved a hand.

“Just doing my job. You were pretty flat when we pulled you out, but I reckon your friend had done some of the work for us anyway.” He smiled. “When there’s no other choice the old skin-to-skin, full body contact trick still works pretty well at conserving some body heat. Not great but better than nothing. Truth is, he probably did himself a big favour too. Getting you both into that sleeping bag was probably the best move he could’ve made under the circumstances.”

Ezra managed to keep his face neutral. *Skin-to-skin.*

“Quite. Mr. Tanner is nothing if not an enterprising individual.”

Denning smiled again, obviously pleased to find his former patient in good health. “Well, just dropped in to say hi; always gives me a kick to follow up on a success story. You take care now.”

Ezra nodded slowly as the technician waved and left, barely noticing his departure. *Skin-to-skin.*

“Thanks. I will.”

The Southerner slowly let the magazine slip from his grasp, no longer interested in the ten best performing blue chip stock options, and turned onto his side again, staring thoughtfully at the array of biomedical equipment stationed at his bedside, unfailingly monitoring his vital signs and transmitting them to the nurse’s station in the hall. He closed his eyes and rubbed his temples, recalling waking up to the discomfort of invasive interventions, immediately aware of the familiarly unpleasant sensation of an indwelling catheter and the inconvenience of intravenous lines in both arms. Such things he could cope with. He had experienced the same -- no, much worse -- before and he had learned to endure the indignity that went hand in glove with lifesaving intensive medical care. He had come to tolerate what amounted to unrestricted access to his body, and to cast all sense of modesty aside but the idea of someone getting so physically close to him as Vin had obviously done made his skin crawl. He was at a loss to understand why he should be so affected, after all Tanner had probably saved his life, but instead of feeling relief and gratitude, the only emotion he could summon was an awful dread that left a cold and empty hollow in his gut. Goddamn it! If only he could remember some of what had gone down between him and Vin. Any of it. Exactly what had he done? His mind darted back to the EMT’s revelation. Skin-to-skin for God’s sake! Full body contact. What the hell did that mean? Just how much skin? Had they nestled together like lovers? He suddenly felt sick, his

imagination taking over to try and complete the gaps in his memory that he now felt a desperate urge to have filled. Rolling over onto his back, he stared blankly at the ceiling above his head, making a conscious effort to slow his breathing and regain a little control. How was he supposed to ask Vin something like that?

“Chris says you’re not getting out of the Donetti job that easily.” Tanner spun the straight-backed chair around with a twist of his wrist and sat astride it with his arms resting across the back and his chin resting on his forearms. The Southerner turned his head in response but he looked tired and drawn. Worse, in fact, than when Vin had spoken to him earlier.

“You called Chris at four in the morning?”

“Six in Boston.”

Ezra frowned, obviously annoyed with himself for not having remembered the time difference. “Of course.” Uncharacteristically, he showed no interest in what Larabee might have had to say, instead seemingly distracted and preoccupied.

Vin tilted his head to one side watching the Southerner, aware of a subtle change in his manner and wondering if he was still brooding on the fact that he had gone a little nuts. Hell, the man really knew how to beat himself up over the smallest slip. Even the ones that he could do nothing about.

“You okay, Ezra?”

“Vin, it’s late...early...whatever...and, unlike you, my reserves of energy seem to be somewhat compromised.” He closed his eyes. “No, I am not ‘okay’.”

Tanner got the terrible impression that Standish wanted to add that he might never be okay again and he felt a cold chill run down his spine. He could sympathise with the Southerner, whose metabolism had ground almost to a standstill and then after lying almost dormant had been aggressively kick started again. Vin guessed Ezra had more than enough reasons to be snaky given what he’d been through, but he also had a strong feeling that there was something other than the physical response troubling him.

“Sorry. That was a dumb question.” He rubbed the back of his neck. “I guess I’m still a little sideways myself.”

Ezra opened his eyes and raised himself on one elbow. “No, Vin,” he sighed, tiredly, “it wasn’t dumb a dumb question and I was unforgivable rude.”

Vin gave a brief, embarrassed, laugh. Now Ezra was apologising. “Christ! Just listen to us, will you?” He straightened and gripped the back of the chair, his fingers flexing nervously before he spoke again. “Look, Ezra, I reckon maybe we should talk.”

“Talk? What is there to talk about?” Ezra said it in such a way that Viin wondered if it was wise to press on. Standish could really play the haughty Southerner to the hilt when he felt like it.

“Come on, Ezra,” argued the Texan, “I can see you got something on your mind.”

“On my mind? The only thing that’s on my mind is getting the hell out of here and putting all this...this nightmare behind me.”

Vin was not put off. “I guess it is like some sort of bad dream. You know, when you remember bits and pieces but just can’t seem to put together the whole picture?”

Ezra smiled and lowered his eyes.

“Do I detect a rather misguided attempt at amateur psychology here?” It was not said unkindly.

“Me? Shit, Ezra I can’t even spell it.”

The Southerner seemed to relax a little and carefully pulled one of his pillows further under his shoulder, making himself more comfortable.

“Look, Vin, I appreciate the sentiment but you said it before: it doesn’t matter.”

Tanner stood abruptly and made a circuit of the chair before standing uneasily beside it.

“I hear what you’re saying, man, I just don’t believe you. You ain’t ready to let it go that easily.”

Ezra remained silent for several beats then glanced away, his slim fingers gently rubbing at the bedding before he made eye contact again.

“So are you saying that there’s something I should know? Something I’m not remembering that’s going to come back and haunt me?”

This time it was Vin’s turn to look away.

“Hell, no! I’m not saying that at all. What I’m saying is...” He sighed in exasperation and began to pace distractedly. “Goddamn it, what am I saying?”

Standish tilted his head to one side and raised a questioning eyebrow at Vin’s loss of composure.

“I don’t know, Vin. You started it. What are you saying?”

The challenge was right there. Tell me. Vin stopped in his tracks. There it was, laid on the line. Put up, or shut up. He moved the chair again, as much because he needed something to do with his hands, and sat down.

“I’m just trying to get through to you that, so what? You acted a little wacko. Cold does strange things to a man, you know? I’ve seen experienced climbers do a lot of weird shit. So, you were doing dumb things that normally you wouldn’t. You think I’m going to think any less of you for it? If it hadn’t been for you, we’d still be out there right now, because I know squat about planes and emergency drill.” He paused to take a breath and ran a hand over a

face darkened by three day's worth of stubble. "Hell, do you think I'd've known to tie down the goddamn plane?"

The Southerner frowned. "That's supposed to make me feel better? That I acted "a little wacko"?"

"Ezra, you're not listening to me! Okay, so your ego takes a beating because you lost some of that legendary control you work so hard at maintaining. Big deal. There was just you and me, man. Do you think I give a flying fuck? I was thinking about staying alive - about keeping you alive - not passing judgement on the fact that you'd lost it!"

Ezra's green eyes hardened and for a moment the Texan thought he'd lost him, that the shutters were going to come down and close him out, but after a moment of tension the Southerner sighed.

"I can't believe I could've been so stupid." He looked away. "You tried to warn me about being wet -- about the cold -- didn't you? I remember that much."

"I wasn't thinking that you were in any kind of trouble at the time, Ezra, believe me. I was just thinking how cold and miserable you were. Hell, I let it creep up just the same as you did and I've seen hypothermia happen before." The Texan moved forward but checked his first instinct to sit on the edge of the bed when Ezra drew back, a barely perceptible tensing of his muscles but enough to warn Vin to take things a little slower. Standish was obviously feeling vulnerable and Vin could see no purpose in going on with a post-mortem that would ultimately do neither of them any good. Time to make a tactical retreat. He sighed. "Look, Ezra, I think maybe I should go now. You look done in and the doc said I shouldn't stay too long." He started to leave, but paused as he reached the foot of the bed. "Better get some rest now, sleep on it, but just remember one thing; whatever happened, you need to look at the big picture instead of getting hung up on little details."

Ezra's eyes were very bright as he stared long and hard at the Texan. "And just what is the big picture, Vin?"

Vin ducked his head for a moment, suddenly sombre as he met Standish's gaze unwaveringly. "That we're still here."

He didn't sleep. Instead he shifted restlessly as he repeatedly relived every moment that he could recall of events after the storm had forced the Cessna down, each time hoping that he would be able to remember just one step further but each time his memory failed at precisely the same point. He was outside in the rain and he thought he remembered telling Vin that he would not be long but he was having trouble with the rope slipping out of his fingers and he had tried over and over again to secure it. He now knew that what he had blamed on the rain and the clumsiness of cold hands was part of the mental confusion and

unco-ordination that went with the later stages of hypothermia. *So stupid.* He wondered again just what he could have done to make Vin hit him, and once again he had no answer except Tanner's word that he had been too far gone to listen to reason. He tried to imagine just how it might have gone down but instead his mind kept jumping to a scene from his not too distant past in which he had been pushed way beyond his limits by a former colleague. There had been a fight. Short, brutal and bloody, and his colleague had ended up in hospital. He had ended up on a disciplinary charge. He thrust the unpleasant memory aside, realising that his greatest concern was that Vin might have witnessed the darker side of him that he preferred not to think about and certainly tried never to display. He was reassured to some extent by the fact that he had been sucker punched with such apparent ease and with any luck he had just been performing like a prize asshole. Vin had not said anything to the contrary but then, the Texan seemed to be quite adept at keeping secrets.

His thoughts came full circle again. Why the hell had he pretended that there was nothing for the two of them to talk about? He knew perfectly well he was being irrational. He knew that Vin had been trying to make it easier for him to come to terms with what had happened to them both and that it was just as necessary for Tanner to make some sense out of the whole fiasco as it was for himself. He even knew that he had deliberately closed Vin out to avoid talking any more about it but deep down he also knew he could not go on keeping Tanner at arm's length without causing a rift between the two of them. A year ago, he mused, that would not have been a problem. He had been accustomed to using people insofar as they could further his needs, taking only what he wanted from a relationship and moving on. No ties, no anchors, no pain. It was his way of anaesthetising his emotions from the battering that was an inevitable part of his job and it had always worked well for him. Until he had met Chris Larabee and accepted his offer of a job. Only it had been much more than a job - it had been a lifeline. After that the ground rules had changed. Hell no, it was something more than that -- *he* had changed. Now it was not as easy as it had once been for him to turn his back, shrug his shoulders and move on. There were subtle ties that bound him to a group of men he not only respected as peers but, if he would only admit it, who he counted as friends. At times the concept was frightening but right now he found the burden of friendship almost too much to bear. One part of him wanted to do what he always did; to turn away, to draw back and to move on, while another, more recently awakened, part of him wanted to accept that it was no shame for him to share the load once in a while.

He turned onto his side and stared at the first pale slivers of daylight finding their way through the gaps in the blinds. No shame but no great dignity in it either, he reminded himself harshly. He had never needed anyone to lean on before and he was damn sure he didn't need anybody to lean on now. *Jesus, he was getting soft!* Then again, he considered

that the minor detail of having had the shit kicked out of him and being left for dead might have had something to do with altering his perceptions. It had certainly altered him in other ways. He slowly drew the sheet over his shoulder and pulled the pillow into the curve of his neck and, feeling suddenly very vulnerable and alone, he finally drifted into a restless and uneasy sleep.

Vin stretched out on his bed, watching the flickering images on the TV screen without taking any of it in, while the sound droned quietly in the background of his consciousness, a soothing murmur too low to even intrude on his thoughts. He had been unable to get the image of Ezra drawing back as he had moved towards him out of his head. He knew he had not imagined it; Ezra had not wanted him getting too close. Understandable, he supposed, given the Southerner's natural reserve and what he had just been through, but he could not rid himself of the uncomfortable feeling that the fragile trust that he had steadily worked to build had been lost. He squeezed his eyes shut and pinched the bridge of his nose, feeling the growing pressure of an imminent headache and telling himself that he was getting paranoid about it all. He was projecting his own feelings and reading something into Ezra's behaviour that probably had no grounding in fact.

He had told Ezra that the only thing that mattered was that they were both okay and he believed that without reservation but it did not prevent him agonising over what Ezra might think of him. No matter how many times he told himself that there had been no choice, no matter that the doctor had told him quite earnestly that he had probably saved his own life as well as Ezra's by his actions, he still felt a terrible sense of indignity about the whole affair. It wasn't something he wanted to think about. It certainly wasn't something he was going to feel comfortable talking about, and now Ezra seemed to be on the defensive and putting more distance between them than ever. Vin found it ironic that the Southerner was afraid of what he might have said or done without knowing; and wondered how he was going to feel about having spent a night spooned against Vin in a sleeping bag meant for one. For the first time the Texan found the thought more amusing than distressing. After all Ezra had nothing to worry about! He was the one who had made all the moves.

Smiling faintly, he swung his legs over the edge of the bed and looked ruefully down at the borrowed scrubs he wore. Aside from how he was going to deal with Ezra, there were other more mundane issues that needed his immediate attention, the first of which was that neither of them had any clothes. His belongings currently consisted of a watch and a wallet. Ezra had fared no better but Vin was hoping he had more money at his disposal or the trip home might prove to be an embarrassment. How much could you buy with fifty bucks? He thought about calling Chris again, then thought better of it. He would talk to Ezra first.

The Southerner was sitting up in bed, struggling to shave with a bright pink, plastic, disposable razor, acknowledging Vin's entrance with a quick sideways glance as he continued to scrape diligently at the stubble on his chin. Vin had never seen Ezra anything other than scrupulously clean shaven, so it didn't surprise him that he should make that a priority, then gave a half smile thinking that the first thing he had thought about when he had finally surfaced from sleep was getting something to eat. He still had not bothered to shave. Ezra cocked a questioning eyebrow at him.

"What's so funny?"

"Just thinking 'bout how different people are."

"Meaning?" He deftly switched hands, finding the intravenous line in his right arm somewhat of a hindrance to the proceedings.

"The first thing I thought of was getting some food, the first thing you think about is having a shave."

Ezra paused and, after a moment, smiled. "Believe me Vin it wasn't the first thing I thought about, it's just the first thing they'd let me do."

"So what...?"

"Don't even ask."

Tanner grinned, as usual not quite sure if Ezra was telling the truth or playing it for laughs. It didn't matter which it was, he just knew that they had quite naturally slipped back into familiar roles that instantly set them on more stable ground. The awkwardness of their earlier conversation seemed to have passed although he knew Ezra would not have forgotten the tension between them any more than he had.

"You know we have a problem..."

Ezra suddenly started to laugh and for a moment had to stop shaving or risk doing himself an injury with the blade.

"You mean more than having ditched a few hundred grand in aircraft, been rescued from almost certain death and the fact that we are now in..." he paused with a frown, "Just where are we?"

"Regina."

"...in Regina, with no readily available means of getting back to Boston, not to mention the tongue-lashing that Mr. Larabee will, without doubt, deliver once we do?"

"Ezra, what are you wearing right now?"

Standish started shaving again, unfazed by the apparent non sequitur. "This is a trick question, right?"

Vin shook his head. "No, but whatever it is, that's all you've got."

Ezra dropped the razor into the basin of water and slowly wiped his face with the hand towel.

“You’re joking?” He glanced across at the Texan, reading the truth in his expression. “You’re not joking.” The borrowed clothing hanging loosely on Vin’s lean frame finally registered. “Hence the scrubs?”

A nod. “I guess the SAR team had other things on their minds than looking around for clothes.”

For a moment the haunted look returned and Ezra glanced away for just a second. “There’s something I should probably ask at this point, but I’m not sure that I really want to hear the answer.”

With a heavy sigh Vin closed his eyes and steeled himself. *This was it.* “Ezra...let me explain...”

The Southerner smiled thinly. “What’s to explain, Vin? I’m told that you saved my life but then I already knew that,” he hesitated, then continued, his voice lower, “I just didn’t realise to what lengths you had to go.”

For several seconds the two men stared at each other. Vin could feel the blood drain from his face, and he suddenly felt light-headed as the instant took on an unreal quality and it seemed as if he had been instantly transported to the far side of the room and was looking at Ezra through the wrong end of a telescope. The moment collapsed in on itself and as Tanner breathed again, his vision cleared.

“You knew.” Not a question, not even an accusation, but a dull statement of fact, totally devoid of expression; a man who has just gambled his last possession on a bluff, and lost.

“Vin.” Ezra’s voice was quiet. “I’ve spent the last few hours thinking. Trying to figure out what I might have done or said, that would embarrass me. All the time wondering if I had somehow disgraced myself in any way. Notice I said thinking about myself. I didn’t stop to consider even once about what it might have been like for you.” He gave a short laugh. “Par for the course but pretty stupid under the circumstances, don’t you think?”

Tanner slowly lowered himself to sit at the foot of the bed. “No, not stupid. I should have told you how it went down right from the start. I just didn’t know how to say it.” He met Standish’s even gaze. “How’d you know?”

“One of the EMTs.”

Vin nodded. It made sense. He should have guessed that something like that might happen.

"I guess it was my turn to wonder what you might think of me," he confessed, uneasily, looking quickly away, "and don't take this the wrong way, Ezra, but it wasn't the most difficult thing I've ever had to do..."

"Vin, don't," the Southerner's voice was tight, as he smoothly interrupted, "you don't have to say any more..."

Tanner nodded; grateful. Neither of them was really ready to take it any further.

"Just one thing, Ezra." Standish visibly tensed, a small movement but revealing enough to the Texan. "You didn't do anything to embarrass yourself." He gave a sudden wry smile. "Not even when you were unconscious."

"Really?"

Vin was touched by the Southerner's unusual display of vulnerability, and his craving for reassurance.

"Really. Would I lie to you?"

Ezra's eyes narrowed suspiciously. "I don't know. Would you?"

"Trust me on this, Ezra. I swear you were the perfect gentleman."

Standish ducked his head, concealing a smile.

"Well then, I suppose the real question is, were you?"

Tanner's jaw dropped before he managed to recover his wits but he couldn't stop the blush that so quickly heated his face.

"Goddamn it, Ezra! What the hell are...?"

"Thank you, Mr. Tanner."

Vin stopped mid-sentence, the flash of indignation subsiding as quickly as it had flared, and he gave a sheepish grin.

"You're welcome."

There was a moment of awkward silence before Ezra self-consciously cleared his throat and with some effort, shifted back in the bed to lean against his pillows and assumed a suitably bored expression.

"Now what was that you were saying about clothes?"

Vin had decided that if he was going to be stranded in a remote part of Canada, or any other place on earth for that matter, then Ezra Standish was the man to be with when it happened. Give the man a telephone and a credit card and he was a veritable virtuoso. In fact he was beginning to believe that for the Southerner nothing was impossible, he just seemed to have a way of making things happen. They said that money talked, although he had never had enough of it himself to strike up a decent conversation, but now he had seen

the absolute and irrefutable truth of it the first hand. Ezra not only made money talk, he made it sing. And he made others dance to its tune.

The end result was that within fifteen minutes of determining exactly what they needed, Ezra was ordering from three different men's outfitters in Regina the way other people would order pizza. Vin would have settled for jeans, running shoes and a T-shirt, and said as much, but Ezra had given him a scathing look and said he didn't believe even he could induce Wal-Mart to deliver and had then asked him his shoe size. Tanner had decided at that moment that he should just keep quiet and accept the inevitable; Ezra was a man with a mission and he was not about to deviate from the course he had already plotted.

It took less time than Vin imagined, which was probably just as well because Ezra was starting to look tired, the deepening shadows under his eyes underscoring the fact that he had only recently surfaced from a coma and was by no means fully recovered. Vin had already been cleared for discharge later that day, but it was still uncertain when the Southerner would be released and one thing the Texan had already decided was that he was not about to leave Canada without him. Finally Ezra set the phone aside and gave a maddeningly superior smile that left Vin in no doubt that the various transactions had been completed to his satisfaction, but as he sank back against the mound of pillows behind him it was obvious that the burst of activity, although brief, had taken a lot of energy to sustain.

"Done," he declared, then with a deep sigh closed his eyes, not bothering to maintain any pretence that he was anything other than wasted.

"Yeah, done in," commented the Texan wryly as, sitting astride a straight-backed chair, he rested his arms along the cross brace and keenly watched the Southerner.

Ezra cautiously slid further down into the bed, mindful of the tubes that hindered his every movement, as he tried to find a more comfortable position. "You could say that."

"I just did."

"Any more smart ass remarks, Tanner, and you'll be wearing those scrubs all the way back to Boston."

Vin grinned and rested his chin on his arms. "Idle threat," he answered glibly, "I know for a fact you'd be too ashamed to be seen in public with me dressed like this."

Ezra cracked open one eye and stared evenly at the Texan.

"Really?" he drawled, "I thought in your case that was the status quo."

"Bastard!"

The Southerner finally laughed and Vin was sharply reminded of their first meeting. It had been no different then. Clothes. He had been wearing his usual jeans and leather jacket, boots that had seen better days and his hair had been much longer then, unkempt and hanging down to his shoulders. Ezra had been sitting across the table from him, looking like

some advertisement for Hugo Boss with his perfect haircut, thousand dollar suit, silk tie and a heavy gold watch weighing down his wrist. Hell, the guy even had a gold tooth. At first glance he had dismissed Standish as a pen-pusher; a desk man. It had not taken long for him to realise his mistake and somehow, the two of them had found a stretch of common ground, the boundaries of which were often ill defined and incredibly fluid. *Tell me again, Vin, why are we friends?* Vin's smile slid off his face as he suddenly remembered his intention to give Ezra an answer to that question. After all the Southerner had done as he asked; he had not died. Taking a deep breath, he shook off the sudden chill that enveloped him in spite of the controlled warmth of the room and shot a quick glance at the other man but Ezra had not opened his eyes.

The Texan coughed.

"Ezra?"

"Mmmm?"

"Have you ever broken a promise?"

Standish snorted a derisive laugh. "I was a Fed, remember?"

Vin shook his head. "No, I mean a real promise."

The response when it came was a quietly sombre: "I try not to make them. Life's less complicated that way." When Tanner glanced up again, Ezra's eyes were focused on him. "What's this all about, Vin?"

"You know, the first time I saw you I thought I had you pegged. Career path mapped out from the cradle, prep school, old money, fast tracking his way on family connections to the top..."

Ezra tilted his head to one side with a slight raising of his eyebrows, his interest piqued by the unexpected revelation from the Texan. "Go on."

"...and there I was, just about broke, everything I owned in the back of my truck, sleeping rough; not just down on my luck either, I'd fucked up big time with the Rangers and been canned but Larabee was giving me a chance. Then Chris introduced you and I thought: Hell, here's a guy who's fucked up even bigger than me - he pissed off the FBI!" He allowed himself a brief smile. "Reckon it was just about then that I started thinking of the two of us as the black sheep."

"Perfect analogy, with which my mother would agree totally," Ezra commented wryly, "But just where is this leading?"

Vin sighed.

"Remember back in the plane, you joked about why were we friends?"

A nod.

“Well, when I...when we...” He hesitated, then forced himself to go on. “...when we were in that sleeping bag, after I’d gotten through with just being plain mad at you, I made a promise, sort of a trade off...I don’t even know with who -- with you, myself, God; geez, I don’t know - but I told myself when I was so shit scared that you were gonna die, that if we made it, if you didn’t give up, I’d tell you.”

Ezra shook his head, with a puzzled frown creasing his forehead. “Tell me what?”

“Why we’re friends.”

The Southerner let out a long sigh and, tilting his head back, stared at the ceiling. “The sixty-four thousand dollar question, huh?”

Vin distractedly ran his hands through his hair. “God, it sounds really dumb now. Like some goddamn true confession. Just forget it!”

Standish sat up quickly, wincing as various unyielding tubes and wires tugged at tender flesh. “No!” He leaned forward, his head dropping forward to obscure his face before he repeated the word; softer but with as much feeling: “No.”

For a moment neither of them spoke, then Ezra looked up, his face a mask of undisguised pain. “I’ll tell you why, Vin. It’s because when the Buck’s and the Nathan’s of this world were weighing up my honesty, putting my life under the microscope and wondering if I really was on the take, pointing the finger and muttering about no smoke without fire, you didn’t once try to judge me. I’d spent three months in hospital and another two in therapy; I’d lost my job, my credibility and my nerve. By the time Larabee called me, I wasn’t sure I could even do that kind of work anymore. Wasn’t sure I had what it takes to come up against someone in a fight but I needed a job.” He shook his head as if he didn’t want to remember and his voice dropped in pitch. “Every day I was this far,” he held his thumb and forefinger a millimetre apart, “from walking away.” He gave a short, bitter, laugh. “Either walking away or losing myself in those fucking pills I was taking like candy...”

“Ezra, don’t do this.” A quiet, heartfelt, appeal.

The Southerner held up a hand, ignoring Vin’s interruption with a rueful smile. “You know, you always seemed to be in my face?” He laughed a little then, as if the memory was a fond one. “Didn’t matter what I did, how many times I shut the door on you or how high I built the wall, you came right back and found another way in. It really pissed me off at the time but it taught me something as well.” He looked down and covered his bottom lip with his tongue as if debating what he was going to say next, before finally raising his eyes again. “It taught me just what a friend really is.” The moment stretched, unbroken, and after a moment he added: “That, and the fact that you’re a kick ass *Eskrimador*.” He smiled and sketched a quick salute. “*Maraming Salamat Po.*”

Whatever Vin's response might have been was lost as the cardiac monitor alarmed, effectively putting an end to the conversation. Ezra, paling slightly as the insistent beep continued, instinctively put a hand to his chest, his face reflecting an equal measure of fear and confusion as understanding dawned that this was no false alarm but that something was wrong.

The doctor was a bearded bear of a man, about Ezra's own age but somehow giving the impression of being a much older. He sat on the edge of the bed and folded his stethoscope before slowly tucking it back in his pocket.

"It's nothing to worry about really," he began, "You see, a cold heart is a heart at risk. Your core temperature dropped to around thirty degrees Celsius, and that's getting into the range where the chance of developing cardiac problems increases. What's happened with you is that your heart's rhythm is a little out and you're getting what we call ectopics; extra beats. The alarm triggered because you had a sudden extended run of them, possibly related to increased stress. The good news is that this kind of dysrhythmia is rarely an indicator of permanent damage and there's no underlying pathology that we've been able to identify but..."

"There's always a but with your people isn't there?" interrupted Ezra, sharply, "Always,"

"But," Wheeler continued, unperturbed, "I'd like to keep you under observation until it settles down."

"I feel fine."

"I'm sure you do. You might notice a few palpitations at times but generally ectopics are benign. On its own it's not a big issue by any means but between that and the screwed up electrolytes, your body's taken a bit of a beating over the last 72 hours. Just give it a chance to recover, huh? Given what you've been through it's not unreasonable to allow yourself a couple of days rest."

"Is that an order?"

The doctor shook his head.

"No. I'm just giving you some advice," he gave the Southerner a knowing look, "which you are at liberty to ignore. It's your choice."

"So when can I leave?"

Wheeler sighed, understanding that he was fighting a losing battle.

"The IV can come out once the blood picture comes back normal and if you can maintain a decent fluid output for the next twelve hours then the IDC can go as well. Provided everything else checks out you should be free to go tomorrow morning."

Still lying down, Ezra shifted slightly and reached with his free arm for the phone on the bedside stand, deftly snaring it and resting it on his abdomen as he picked up the handset and began to dial.

“What are you doing?”

“Would it surprise you if I said I had a plane to catch?”

The doctor stood up with a brief shake of his head and started for the door, turning one last time as he reached for the handle.

“Remember what I said. Rest.”

But the Southerner was already engaged in making arrangements to fly back to Boston the next day and if he heard, he did not acknowledge the advice. It was time to go home.

oooOOOooo

“Vin, you really should think about breathing again.”

Tanner laughed nervously and slowly exhaled, suppressing the urge to hyperventilate.

“God, I didn’t think it would be like this.”

Flying again had not been an issue with him until he had arrived at the airport and seen the distinctively liveried Air Canada jets on the apron and parked at the terminal building, then the reality had hit home. He was expected to get on board, take to the air and sit for untold hours in one of them before he could set his feet firmly back on US soil. Massachusetts soil. Home. He had barely made it into the terminal before he was obliged to dash into the first rest room they had passed where he had immediately and distressingly parted company with his breakfast. Now he sat, pale and sweating, in the departure lounge, as the time approached for Air Canada flight 1126 to Toronto to board.

“Don’t think about it so much. You’ll be fine once we’re in the air.”

The Texan swallowed hard, his knuckles white with undisguised anxiety as he gripped the chair arms, knowing perfectly well that Ezra was right but unable to stop the rising tide of nausea that forced him once again to make a desperate sprint for the men’s room. Ezra was waiting for him when he finally reappeared and, wordlessly grabbing his upper arm, he steered him to a secluded corner of the lounge and pushed him gently into a chair. Vin briefly closed his eyes feeling slightly disorientated and greatly embarrassed, all too aware that his stomach still quivered uneasily and the fact that it was on a hair trigger.

“Vin?” Ezra dropped to a crouch in front of him and carefully tipped two tablets into his hand. He looked doubtfully from his open palm back to the Southerner.

“What’s this?”

“Dramamine.”

"You know nothing ever works."

"Maybe you'll get lucky this time." He stood up and walked across to a bank of vending machines offering snack foods and soda, returning with a bottle of plain mineral water. "Look at this way, it can't hurt, and it might just help."

Tanner dutifully swallowed the pills with a scant mouthful of water before turning a stricken gaze on the Southerner. "Ezra, I don't think I can do this."

Standish slowly eased into the seat next to him with a heavy sigh.

"Come on, Vin, don't let it beat you. Remember one thing, you were doing just fine in a plane that you said yourself was no bigger than your truck. This is an international airliner, an Airbus less than five years old, not some twenty five year old single-engined workhorse with avionics that came out of the ark!"

The Texan took another cautious sip of the water, not wanting to offer any further challenges to his stomach, then looked squarely at the man beside him, uncertain as to whether he could actually manage to articulate the reasons behind his fear.

"You're going to think this is really stupid..."

"So try me anyway."

"...but I think it's you." Ezra's expression fleetingly registered hurt confusion before he gained control and Vin, realising the Southerner had misunderstood his meaning, rushed on. "I don't mean...I mean it's not something you've done." He stopped abruptly, took a breath and continued: "It's...well, it's because you're not flying it. See, I've gotten used to being up front, knowing what's going on and being able to watch first hand what you're doing. Don't ask me why," he suddenly laughed, a little shakily, "especially since you just flew us into the goddamn ground, but when I'm flying with you I always feel that, no matter what happens, it's going to be okay." He gestured to one of the Airbuses sitting on the tarmac. "I get in there and I feel trapped. Just thinking about getting in there..." He took another deep breath and followed it with another drink. "...well, you know the story."

Ezra leaned forward and rested his elbows on his knees, absently turning the signet ring on his left hand as he stared at the floor.

"That's quite a commendation, you know, Vin." He gave a half smile. "And I'm not sure I deserve any kudos just for doing something that, quite simply, happens to give me a great deal of pleasure. My motives are purely selfish, believe me."

"Bullshit." Tanner straightened and recapped the water. "Otherwise you wouldn't bother to keep taking me along. Unless of course you get some sadistic pleasure out of watching your passengers turn green and barf at regular intervals."

The Southerner laughed at that and smoothly avoided having to respond by standing up as, at that moment, the noon flight to Toronto was announced. He aimed a knowing grin at the still seated Texan. "Speaking of which..."

Tanner slowly, almost reluctantly, pushed himself out of the seat and visibly braced himself, casting a quick glance at the rest room off to his right before mentally biting the bullet and starting forward towards the mass of passengers milling around the gate. Surprisingly, Ezra's hand on his arm held him back.

"Wait. Better if we board last."

Vin nodded. Trust Ezra to come up with that. He knew fifteen minutes on a flight that was going to take several hours was small potatoes but it was fifteen minutes less of hell he had to go through. Waiting patiently for Ezra's cue to move, he realised that an almost pleasant sense of detached drowsiness had crept up on him. The dramamine kicking in. A few minutes later, once the main body of passengers had disappeared through the boarding gate, he followed the Southerner's lead, barely thinking about what he was doing, concentrating only on keeping his breathing even and his gently roiling gut in check. Ezra delayed again at the gate, talking briefly to the ground crew, and by the time they crossed the walkway to the plane, the other passengers had already boarded. Without the claustrophobic press of people around him, Vin found the overwhelming anxiety that normally peaked at this point was little more than mild apprehension. That he could live with. He managed a wry smile as he showed his boarding pass although his fluttering stomach warned him that it still held all the aces.

Boston by night. The city lights proved a surprisingly welcome spectacle to the Southerner as the Airbus banked and turned to line up for the final approach to Logan. He was loathe to admit that he felt any sort of emotion on returning, but the truth was that he was experiencing a profound sense of homecoming. For now at least, the reality was that Boston was home and although he rarely became attached to places or property, in a relatively short time the city had managed to claim a little piece of him. He didn't care to analyse the mechanism behind it too deeply for fear of what he might discover but he suspected it might have less to do with geographical location than it had to do with people.

He had called Chris an hour ago to let him know they were en route and on time. The conversation had been brief but Larabee had seemed to understand that he wasn't ready to go into any kind of detail. He had also quickly vetoed the plan that they would catch a cab and Ezra knew beyond any doubt that Chris, either alone or in company, would be waiting when they finally landed and the flight was processed. It had taken some getting used to in the beginning -- that all for one and one for all mentality -- a credo which had been at odds

with any working relationship he had experienced in the past. In direct contrast he had been brought up with the attitude of every man for himself, and in his particular line of work it had served him well, giving him the skills to enable him to survive in the cut-throat, dog eat dog, underworld circles in which he was obliged to operate. Until his betrayal of course and even then those same uncompromising rules of survival had applied, only he had been the loser.

He turned from the window and let his gaze rest on the Texan beside him, safe in his open scrutiny as Tanner slept on, totally relaxed. He had barely stirred as the flight attendant had moved his seat into the upright position for landing and had been completely oblivious to the fact that she had adjusted his seat belt. Taking another look at the slender brunette, Ezra had decided he would have been perfectly willing for her to adjust his seat belt too, but she had smiled and moved on leaving the Southerner to indulge in a minor fantasy as he watched her move along the cabin.

“Forget it. Bet she’s already got a date lined up.”

The Southerner reluctantly let the moment go and his gaze slid back to the man beside him.

“I thought you were asleep.”

“I was,” A slow smile oozed across the Texan’s face as he followed the woman’s progress down the opposite aisle through half-closed eyes. “Until my friendly flight attendant so charmingly roused me.”

“Now, you’re sure that’s roused?”

“Ah, gimme a break, Ezra.” Tanner’s grin broadened. “That’s the closest I’ve been to gettin’ any for a month.”

“You don’t know how glad I am to hear that, Mr. Tanner,” drawled Standish wryly, as he shot a look of mock alarm in the Texan’s direction.

A second later both men finally succumbed to helpless laughter, the tension of the previous few days lifting like storm clouds broken up and blown away by a brisk cleansing wind. They were still having difficulty controlling themselves completely as, many minutes later, unhindered by any baggage, they passed straight out into the Arrivals lounge. For a moment they sobered, standing uncertainly as the familiar figure of Chris Larabee materialised from the crowd with Mary Travis in tow. Both men exchanged a quick, questioning glance. Chris they expected; Mary was a new development.

Larabee looked them both up and down, his glance lingering on the bruise and steri-strips at Vin’s temple and the dusky shadow along Ezra’s jawline, the only visible signs of their ordeal. As he completed his cursory visual inspection, Mary moved in front of him and spontaneously embraced each of the two men, the brief hug and quick kiss on the cheek an

unexpected welcome from the attractive blonde woman. Taking a step back she looked long and hard at the Southerner as if trying to read something from his face.

“You look tired,” she said gently, taking both his hands in hers, “you should get some rest. That’s an order from your doctor.”

Releasing a nonplussed Ezra she turned to give Vin the same eagle-eyed treatment. “And you need to get some fluid into you. How long since you had something to drink? And I don’t mean a scotch and soda!”

Chris shook his head. “Sorry, guys. Mary just can’t forget she’s a doctor, even when she’s off duty and if you take my advice you’ll plead the fifth anyway.” He took a step forward, countering the indignantly glacial stare from the woman with an affable grin, and casually draped his arm around her shoulders. “Now how about we get this show on the road and get you guys outta here?”

Without waiting for an answer, Chris moved off, still keeping Mary in the protective circle of his arm as they moved into the crowd, leaving Vin and Ezra to follow but instead the Southerner watched the pair navigate the airport concourse with a contemplative frown before turning to look at the equally baffled Texan standing beside him.

“Do you get the feeling that we missed more than just a hockey game this weekend, Vin?”

“Well, I don’t know about you but I sure as hell missed something,” Tanner confessed readily, “Last week Larabee hadn’t even made it up to bat, now he looks like he’s heading for a homer.” He started walking then swung his head to look sharply at his companion. “You know, Ezra, we went through all that to get to that goddamn game and I never did find out who won!”

The Southerner gave a short laugh, his eyes alight as he fell into step beside the lean Texan.

“Well, Vin, I can’t tell you who won but I can tell you one thing, I have a pretty good idea of who scored.”