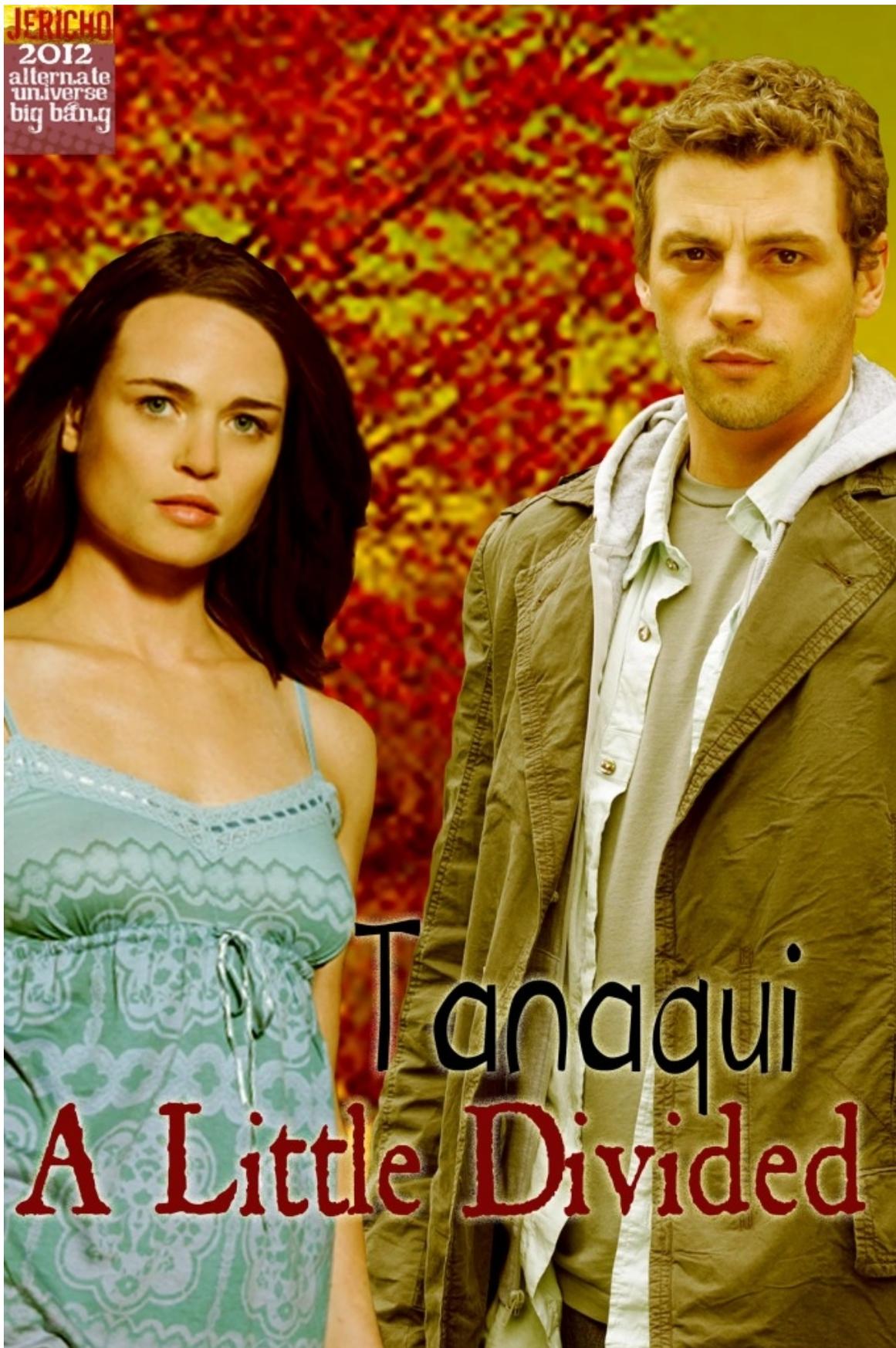


JERICHO
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Part One

Jake peered down at the familiar landscape as he brought the four-seater Mooney in to land at Jericho Municipal Airport. Somewhere below him, Heather was getting ready to celebrate Christmas—and, in a remarkably few short hours, he'd be seeing her again. The grin that had threatened to break out ever since he'd taken off in San Diego finally got the better of him, even as he forced himself to concentrate on setting the plane down safely on the tarmac.

His father's car was parked by the row of hangars and airport buildings as Jake taxied the plane to its parking spot, but he didn't emerge to greet Jake until Jake had tied down the plane and was finishing his final checks. Jake couldn't blame him: a bitterly cold wind was gusting across the flat fields. He shivered a little inside his coat, remembering how very cold it had gotten this same year in that other life, and how it had seemed like they'd never be warm again. How he'd nearly frozen to death trapped under Stanley's truck and how icy the homes had felt when they'd gone in to check on the old and sick and find out which ones hadn't made it through the night.

His father pulled him into a brief hug, before he stepped back, his eyes twinkling as he looked Jake over. "Good trip?" When Jake nodded, he tipped his head toward the row of buildings. "I've got something to show you. If you're done?"

"Uh-huh." Jake grabbed his bag from the cockpit and locked the door, before following his father. He realized where they were heading when they were half-way there. Hurrying for a few steps to draw level with his father, he asked, only half a question, "Grandpa's cropduster?"

His father confirmed it with a grunt. With a sideways glance at Jake, he added, "Thought you'd want to see her. Since you didn't get much of a chance last time you were in town, and we're out at the airfield already."

"Sure." Jake shrugged a shoulder as his father reached into his pocket for the key and began unlocking the padlock securing the hangar doors. "I thought you would have sold her already."

"She's your plane." His father's words were half lost in the screech of the doors as he slid them wide enough to let them step inside. "The old man left her to you."

"Yes, but—" The word's died on Jake's lips as he caught sight of the plane. Without being fully aware of what he was doing, he stepped forward and put a hand on her lower left wing, relishing its wholeness. Last time he'd seen her had been when he'd been salvaging what he could from her battered carcass a few days after the two of them had crashed into a field on Stanley's farm. It hadn't been her fault: he'd been trying to get some aerial intelligence for Beck at the time, and a couple of Hoffman's Apaches had shot him down.

Trying, if truth be told, to show Beck up and impress Heather, though he hadn't understood that until much later: only after he'd rescued her from Constantino's thugs and understood his feelings for her.

The plane's red, white and blue paintwork suddenly sprang to life, bringing him out of his memories, as his father flicked on the overhead lights. "Thought maybe you'd need her to start that business you were talking about," his father offered by way of answer to Jake's earlier remark.

Jake huffed a wry laugh as he ran his hand over the biplane's wing. If only that were the case. She was beautiful, in her tough, serviceable, old-fashioned way, but she wasn't the right plane to make his dreams come true. "I wish." He shook his head. "Reckon it'd cause quite a stir if I flew this back home. But people these days want something a bit more... modern to learn on. And I'm

going to need that if I want to offer anything more than the basics.”

“You’ve been looking into it?” His father had taken his hat off and was turning it in his hands.

Jake nodded, giving the plane a last regretful pat. “Been talking to some of the guys at the field I’m based at. Trying to work out some figures. If I should get my own plane or hire one. How much business I’m likely to get. What I can charge.”

“And...?” His father raised his eyebrows expectantly

Jake stuck his hands into his pockets, not sure he wanted to share too much detail with his father. Especially as the sums were hard to make come out the way he’d have liked. Though he wasn’t going to fudge them: this was too important for him to start with hoping for the best rather than planning for the worst. “I’d be better off getting my own plane. Or a long-term lease, anyway. Either way,” Jake shrugged, “it’s going to be expensive.”

“Be cheaper here in Jericho.”

Jake stared at his father in surprise. “Sure.” He ran a hand over his head. “But there isn’t the business here. There’s, what, ten planes registered here? There’d maybe be a couple of guys a year want to learn. And you know Grandpa never made any real money from the cropdusting. Just enough to keep the plane in the air and have some fun with her. Besides, Jim Schofield’s still in business over in Goodland, right?” His father nodded to confirm it. “And he picked up all the cropdusting once Grandpa gave it up.” He shrugged. “I’m thinking I should look at some of the airfields a little further out from San Diego. There may be more opportunities there and the costs’ll be lower.

His father nodded. “Fair enough. And I know you’re not much interested in coming home. Can’t say I blame you....”

There was an undercurrent in his father’s voice that belied his light tone and caught at Jake, bringing a lump to his throat. “It’s not that, Dad,” he croaked. He swallowed. God, he’d love nothing more than to be able to come back to Jericho and start the business and woo Heather back and settle down with her. But—. “I don’t want to run this like a hobby, like Grandpa did. I want it to be a real business. The kind a man could... could support a family on.”

His father’s eyes crinkled in a smile. “I hear you.” He dipped his head toward the plane. “So I reckon you should sell her and buy something more suitable.”

“I guess.” Jake turned and took another look at the plane. “It feels kinda wrong.”

“Because she was your grandfather’s?” His father snorted. “I think the old man would’ve wanted you to sell her and buy the plane you need. Even if he was a sentimental old fool sometimes.”

Jake chuckled, still not feeling comfortable with the idea, though he knew he’d get a good price for the Stearman from the right buyer and it’d go a long way toward helping him get his own business off the ground.

His father gestured for him to step back outside into the growing dusk. “Well, that’s for another time, maybe. Come on. Your mother’s waiting and she’s been cooking up a storm all day, so you’d better come home and help me eat it.”

The smell of fresh baking filled the Green house the following morning as Jake hung around helping his mom with last-minute preparations for Christmas Day. In between the slew of questions she'd fired at him over dinner the previous evening and her own lengthy run-down of the news from Jericho, he'd gathered that Heather had promised to drop by some time during the day to thank him for his quick actions after the accident on Main Street a few weeks back. He didn't want to miss her.

He was sitting at the dining table, polishing wine glasses while his mother kneaded bread dough for tomorrow's cinnamon rolls, when there was a tentative-sounding knock at the door. "I'll get it," he told his mother hurriedly, dropping the cloth he was using and getting to his feet. But when he opened the door, he found his brother, hands full with a stack of boxes.

"Couldn't use my key," Eric explained, gesturing with box.

Jake hoped the disappointment he'd felt hadn't been evident on his face; his relationship with his brother was already rocky enough.

"Come on, Eric." April was coming up the path behind him, carrying another box. "We don't have time to stand around talking. There's the rest of the car to unload."

Eric rolled his eyes at Jake and shoved the boxes into his hands, before turning round and heading back down toward their SUV parked in the street.

"Hello, Jake." April turned her head to present her cheek to him for a kiss as she stepped through the door. Awkwardly juggling the boxes, he obliged. As he pulled back, she nodded at the boxes he carried. "Put those by the Christmas tree, would you?" Watching her sweep on past him to greet his mother, Jake suspected Eric had already been subjected to a morning of such half orders and had resented it—and that April had needed to repeatedly marshal him, like a recalcitrant toddler, in order to make any progress with what needed doing, and she wasn't happy about that either. Looked like things weren't any better between them than they had been in November, even if they were no worse. Setting the boxes down as directed, Jake wondered if Eric was still seeing Mary.

It was after lunch before Heather arrived. Eric and April were in the middle of an argument about—well, Jake wasn't entirely sure what it was about and he wasn't sure they really knew either—as he opened the door and found her hovering uncertainly on the stoop.

"Hey." She gave him a nervous smile.

"Hey." He grinned back at her, his heart beating a little faster as he drank in the sight of her. Her hair was a little shorter than he remembered, but her eyes were just as blue. They were filled with some anxiety—he supposed she was nervous—but she otherwise resembled the fresh-faced schoolteacher he'd first met a year or so ago in his personal timeline. Before he'd hurt her and let her go to New Bern—where Constantino and his thugs had done even more harm. Before Beck had locked her up. Before he'd realized that he'd fallen in love with her almost from the moment he'd met her.

She twisted her hands together, and he guessed he was probably making her uncomfortable with his scrutiny, but he couldn't stop looking. She cleared her throat. "So, umm, I just wanted to thank you for—"

Behind Jake, there was the sound of something slamming and an exasperated cry of "For goodness sake, Eric!"

Jake glanced over his shoulder and then turned back to Heather. "D'you want to go for a walk? I'd

invite you in, but it's a bit—." He flapped a hand helplessly toward the house. Barely waiting for her answering nod, he added, "I'll just grab my coat."

A few moments later, having hastily told his mom where he was going, he was back outside with Heather, wrapping his scarf more tightly around his neck and shoving his hands into his gloves. Gesturing for Heather to lead the way back down the path, he turned them away from Main Street.

He went on looking at her as they walked along, still not quite able to believe he was here, that they were together at last. She glanced up at him, blushing when she met his gaze, her expression turning flustered. After they'd walked on another hundred yards, she clasped her hands together. "So, uh, I was saying. Thank you. For saving Stacey. And...." She trailed off, shooting him another nervous glance.

He shrugged. "You're welcome. But I only did what anyone else would've done."

She gave a slight chuckle. "You kept your head? Everyone else was...." She squeezed her hands together. "If you hadn't stopped them moving things, Stacey wouldn't have made it. And I don't know how I would've lived with myself if...." She lifted on shoulder, leaving the sentence unfinished but making her meaning clear.

Jake shook his head. "It wasn't your fault."

She bit her lip, her head tilted slightly, the gesture so familiar—so much a part of what he'd fallen in love with in that other Heather—that it took his breath away. "I was in charge."

"But you told them to keep in close," he pointed out. If the little girl who'd skipped out into the road and into the path of Carl's truck had been following her directions, none of it would have happened.

"Yes, well." She took a deep breath. "It turned out all right and Stacey's fine, thanks to you. So, thank you."

She seemed content to drop the subject after that. It was something else he remembered about her, loved about her: her ability to put the past behind her and get on with life. Even when that had included dealing with him pretending she'd never kissed him and ignoring her for a month, because the kiss had been glorious and frightening in equal measure.

They walked on in silence for a while longer, taking a turning that would lead them around the edge of town and toward the East Woods. There were a hundred things Jake wanted to ask, but all of them presumed a familiarity with her that didn't exist yet, and he didn't know where to start. Never will get familiar if you don't talk to her, he pointed out silently to himself. Perhaps start with things he knew the answers to already. "How long have you lived in Jericho?"

"Three and a bit years." She smiled up at him, shyly. "But I think you'd left before I arrived."

He returned the smile, thinking she likely already knew the answer to that as well. "A year or two before that, yes. But I suspect you've heard all about me by now, huh?" He twisted his mouth into a wry grin and quirked an eyebrow at her.

She blushed, but seemed to catch that he wasn't mad about the gossip. "Uh-huh. No one had mentioned so much as a peep about you before. After the accident, seemed like no one could talk about anything else."

"None of it good, I'm sure." He turned his head away, gazing out over the fields that spread out to

one side of them, wishing he'd time traveled far enough back to be able to convince his younger self that one day he'd need to impress a respectable Kansas schoolmistress. As it was, most people probably still blamed him for Chris's death, especially after the way he'd skipped town, no matter what had come out later—and there'd been plenty enough grist for the gossip mill even before that.

The way it took Heather a while to answer confirmed his suspicion that she was searching for something good to say, so he was a bit surprised when she commented cautiously, almost as if afraid of contradicting or embarrassing him, "Some of it was." He sensed her shrug. "Deputy Taylor said you could be a bit wild, but that you always took care of people. Looked after them and tried to make sure they didn't get hurt. And people are saying you helped Stanley keep his farm. And you helped Stacey, of course. And me."

He turned to look back at her and found her smiling up at him again. He remembered the way she'd reached out and touched him on the arm and told him they were going to be okay when he'd been worrying about getting the patients from the hospital to the mine. How she'd had faith in him even then, less than a day after they'd met. He had no real clue what he'd done to win her trust back then, but apparently she was willing to give it to him again, now. His heart beat a little faster at the thought that maybe he stood a chance with her after all.

Not that it was helping him figure out what to say to her just at the moment. They carried walking along, Jake racking his brains to remember what he *had* said to her before, back in that other life.

"You're living in San Diego now?"

Heather's question startled him from his memories, though he'd been aware of her—of her warmth, of the reality of her at his side—even as he'd delved into the past in his mind. He nodded. "Flew in yesterday."

"Oh yes, that's right. You're a pilot, aren't you?" She shot him a quick grin. "That sounds pretty exciting."

He laughed. "That's what everyone thinks. Mostly it's a job, like anything else. But it's all I've wanted to do, ever since I started working on my grandpa's cropduster when I was ten. Well, that and open a flight school."

"In San Diego?" She had her head tilted sideways again, as if she was trying to make sense of him.

"Maybe. Still trying to figure it out. Make some plans. Get some money together." To his surprise, he found himself adding, "Maybe here in Kansas though."

"In Wichita?"

"You know Wichita?" He raised his eyebrows in surprise. He'd considered Wichita as a possible base, but it'd still mean uprooting Heather from her friends and family here in Jericho and New Bern, and he didn't have the contacts there that he was currently building in San Diego. On the other hand, if she knew the place....

She shook her head. "Not really." She laughed. "I just know they build a lot of planes there. We talk about it in class when we're studying Kansas. At school, I mean."

"Ah." Still, Wichita was a lot closer to her friends than San Diego would be.

They walked on a little further, while Jake wondered what to say to her *now*. Somehow, this had

all been so much easier the first time. When it hadn't seemed to matter nearly so much. "You teach third grade, don't you? Do you like it?"

"Uh-huh." She smiled to herself. "It's a nice age. They're still... filled with wonder, you know? She shot him an embarrassed grin and he gave her a reassuring smile in return. He knew exactly what she meant; it was one of the reasons he wanted to teach people to fly: that sense of wonder, of discovering a new world you couldn't begin to imagine with your feet on the ground.

"Did you always wanted to be a teacher?" He shoved his hands into his pockets, resisting the urge to reach out and take her hand in his as they walked.

"Pretty much." She tucked a lock of hair behind her ear as she spoke. The gesture was so characteristic, so much *her*, that—between one breath and the next—Jake was once more taken back in time. Back to those long, hot summer days when he'd first returned from Texas and they'd worked together to keep Jericho safe. He remembered helping her fix Charlotte on the road out to Beck's camp, finding excuses to stay and watch her work instead of heading back home to Emily. Too blind to see what was in front of him or to understand his own heart.

"Didn't you want to be an engineer, once?" he asked, still smelling the dusty road and the metallic tang of engine oil and her own warm scent as she'd leaned closer to him from time to time, and remembering what they'd talked about.

"What?" Her startled question jerked him back to the present. He saw she was frowning at him. "What makes you say that?"

He swallowed, fighting down a surge of panic. Because *You told me that one time* really wasn't going to cut it as an answer. "I, uh—" He swallowed again as her expression turned puzzled. "I heard you're pretty good with old cars? That you've got a, uh, an old Dodge you're fixing up."

"Oh, right." She was still looking at him a little suspiciously. Then, after a moment, she relaxed and gave a low chuckle. "Though it's not so much 'fixing up' as pretty much swapping out every single part and replacing most of the bodywork."

"That bad, huh?" That chimed with his recollection of Charlotte—though Heather had kept her running pretty well, all things considered. He laughed. "And there was me thinking I was having a hard time with the heap of rust I bought." Truth was, he'd more than once wished he'd had access to Heather's magic touch when he'd been trying to coax a little more life out of the battered old Toyota he'd bought to replace the Roadrunner.

"What's the problem?" Heather tipped her head toward him, sounding like she was genuinely interested in the car.

Jake gave her another wry grin. "Just too old and too many miles. But it'll do." He shook his head, dismissing the Toyota from his thoughts. "So what are you working on right now?"

"On Charlotte?" She shrugged. "Trying to get the transmission sorted. Would be nice to change gear without having to put her into neutral half the time."

She went on talking as they continued their circuit of the town, making their way along the edge of the East Woods and passing by the end of The Pines. Jake prompted her with the occasional question, more than happy to listen to her describing the work she was carrying out, or had already done, or was planning to do, while he took in how beautiful she was as she spoke passionately about the car.

They'd were heading back into the center of town when she broke off from discussing the electrics

and gave him a puzzled look.

He lifted his eyebrows. "What?"

Red spots colored her cheeks. "I was just thinking. Most guys.... Well, they'd have wanted to talk to me about *their* cars. Not listen to me babbling on about mine."

Jake grinned at her. "I'm not most guys."

"No, I guess, you're not. Oh—!" They'd slowed to a halt and turned to face each other, and now she was looking over his shoulder. Her frown deepened a little. "This is—." She turned her gaze back on to him, eyes narrowed suspiciously. "How did you know where I live?"

"Uh...." Jake realized that he'd unconsciously led them back to her house. He lifted a hand and scratched the back of his neck while he quickly searched for an excuse. "Mom must've told me."

Heather still looked a little uncertain but seemed willing to accept the lie. She clasped her hands in front her. "Well, I enjoyed the walk. Thank you. And thank you again for... before." She gave him a half smile to go with the oblique reference to his 'heroics'.

He smiled back, thinking he should probably say goodbye and head back home. The light was fading fast, and his family would be expecting him back. But he didn't want to leave. Heather looked like she wasn't quite sure what to do next, either. Was she wondering if he expected her to invite him in? He'd seen that the low house behind him was dark, the curtains still open, and it looked lonely and empty, though Jake supposed it would look homey enough once she'd turned on the lights and put a match to the fire. He remembered that she'd told him she had no family, her parents having passed a few years before, and he wondered whether she'd be spending Christmas on her own.

"Would you—?" He checked, thinking that an invitation to join his family for dinner that evening or on Christmas Day itself would be too much, too fast. He didn't think his mom would mind another mouth at the table, but he suspected Heather would feel out of place and uncomfortable. And yet he was only here for another day before he'd have to fly back to San Diego—and it would be months before he had a chance to see her again. He cleared his throat and amended his question to, "Could I see you again tomorrow?" When her eyes opened wide in surprise, he hastily added, "If you don't have other plans, of course. We could go for another walk, if you like."

"I—." She seemed lost for words.

"Please." He stepped forward and put his hand over hers. "I'm only in Jericho for another day and... and I'd really like to see you again."

She took a deep breath and then nodded.

"After lunch? Say... three o'clock? I'll come pick you up...."

She nodded again. "Sure." She sounded a little hoarse.

He gazed down at her, aware of her hands under his, aware of how close she was. He fought the urge to lean closer still and kiss her. Definitely too soon for that. But, oh God, how he wanted to....

She cleared her throat and pulled her hands away, taking a step back. "Tomorrow, then."

He nodded, shoving his own hands into his coat pockets to stop him catching at her as she brushed past him and headed up the path toward the house. He turned around so he could watch

her go inside, wanting to keep sight of her for as long as possible. She glanced back over her shoulder at him as she reached the stoop, and her face broke out into a smile when she saw he was looking. She shyly half-raised a hand, before she turned away and disappeared inside. A moment later, he saw a light come on.

Reluctantly he swung away—standing there watching her draw the curtains would be altogether too creepy—and began making his way back toward his parents' house. He felt breathless and a little dizzy, and happier than he had done in months.

oOo

"Jake!" Stanley, a half-eaten Christmas cookie in his hand, bobbed out of the kitchen as Jake was hanging up his coat. "Where've you been?"

Jake scrubbed a hand through his hair. "Umm. Out for a walk with Heather."

"Yeah, your mom said." Stanley had crammed the rest of the cookie into his mouth and the words came out muted. He swallowed. "But *two hours*?"

Jake shrugged. "I guess." Peering past Stanley, he caught sight of Bonnie hovering behind him. He signed hello to her. She returned the greeting with a shy smile.

"What on earth did you talk about for two hours?" Stanley was still frowning at Jake.

"Uh..." Jake hesitated, realizing his father, Eric and April, sitting by the fire, had broken off their conversation and were also looking at him with curiosity. "Cars, mostly, I guess."

"Huh." Stanley gave him a bemused look, before he shook his head, clearly dismissing any thought of Heather, and enveloped Jake in a bear hug. "So, any more celebrity clients gotten you into trouble this month?"

Jake laughed and shook his head. "Not since last time, no." On his last visit, he'd told Stanley about the baseball players he'd flown down to the Caribbean, who'd gotten drunk and out of hand with some of the local girls and made the evening news.

Disinclined to rehash the conversations about his job that he'd already had over lunch with his family, Jake quickly turned the talk to Stanley's farm and how Bonnie was doing at school; he'd had quite enough of Eric's disdainful sniffs and contemptuous expressions—and, once, even a pointed question about when Jake was going to get a job with a real airline flying real planes—to last him all Christmas.

An hour later saw the whole group—his parents, Eric and April, Stanley, Bonnie and Jake—heading to Bailey's for dinner. It was a Christmas tradition: giving his mom a break from feeding them before the onslaught of Christmas Day. In past years, Emily would have been with them, too, her hand in Jake's as they ambled toward Main Street. He wondered if he'd still find her in Bailey's, with Roger: creating their own family traditions now they were married. He hoped that, whatever they were doing, Emily was happy.

Although Bailey's was surprisingly busy, they were still plenty early enough to find a booth. As they settled themselves in, Mary came over to take their order. "What can I get you folks?" She swept her hostess's smile around the group, although Jake noticed her gaze lingered a little longer on Eric than anyone else. His expression had also grown more eager when he caught sight of her. Looked like they were still carrying on together.

"A glass of white wine for me, please, dear." Gail took the lead. She glanced at April, sitting next

to her. "April?"

"Oh, no, not for me." April let out a girlish giggle, raising her hands defensively for a moment. "Just a club soda." She folded her hands on the table in front of her and beamed smugly at Stanley and Bonnie, seated across from her. "I can't, you see. We haven't told anyone but family before, but Eric and I, we're expecting."

Jake was dimly aware that Bonnie was saying, "A baby? You're going to have a baby?", her hands shaping the words as well, confirming she'd read April's lips correctly. But he wasn't paying much attention to her. Instead, his gaze had been drawn back to Mary. He thought she'd maybe made some noise: a sharply drawn-in breath or a small gasp of pain, perhaps. By the time Jake looked at her, though, her lips were pressed tightly together and there was no longer any sparkle in her eyes as she stared at Eric. Jake saw him meet her gaze for a moment, before he quickly turned away.

Apparently whatever Eric *had* been sharing with Mary, it hadn't been the full picture when it came to his domestic situation.

"I'll have a beer please, Mary," Jake called over the bubble of congratulations and explanations that had sprung up between April and Bonnie. He elbowed Stanley gently in the ribs. "Stanley?"

"Oh, a beer, please, Mary," Stanley threw the order distractedly in her direction, apparently more interested in April's pregnancy than Jake would have expected.

"Two beers." Mary had found her voice again.

"Make that three, would you, darlin'?" His father smiled up at her briefly, before turning back to beam proudly at his son and daughter-in-law.

"Bonnie?" Jake leaned past Stanley and touched her wrist, jerking his head in Mary's direction to indicate she should give her order. He caught Mary's eye as he sat back and she gave him a look and the briefest nod of the head that said she knew what he'd done, that she knew he maybe knew.

Having taken Bonnie's order, Mary headed back to the bar; Jake noticed she hadn't bothered to ask Eric what he wanted. He guessed it was probably just as well she didn't keep cyanide in the back—although he supposed there might be a box of rat poison somewhere on the premises....

oOo

Two hours or so later, Jake was propping up the bar, chatting with Bill and saying hi to whoever else happened to wander past. Jake would have preferred Jimmy's company, or Bill's company diluted by Jimmy, but apparently Jimmy was helping his kids with the usual Christmas Eve preparations for Santa.

The place had filled up considerably and Bill's rather fantastical description of how he and Jimmy had rounded up a couple of convicts who'd given their escorts the slip at a truck stop on I-70 was being regularly interrupted by people who, as far as they were concerned, hadn't laid eyes on Jake in five years. For Jake, it had been far less than that: he was trying to forget what he'd learned about some of them in the year after the bombs; in other cases, he was trying to ignore his recollections that they'd been dead for a large part of it. Most of them, at any rate, seemed pleased to see him: news of his actions on Main Street a month earlier had clearly spread far and wide.

Jake was also doing his best not to catch Mary's eye as she glowered over at him or, more often,

at where Eric sat next to April. She might be putting on a good enough front for the rest of the world, so that Jake suspected only he and Eric were aware of what was going on just under the surface, but it was clear to him how upset she still was: after she'd sent another waitress over with the family's first order, she'd disappeared for a while, presumably finding an excuse to step out while she composed herself, before staying behind the bar once she reappeared.

Bill was, finally, breathlessly recounting the climax of his adventure, a tense standoff with the convicts out on the edge of Stanley's farm (or at least, so he claimed), when Jake felt a touch on his arm and heard his name spoken by a familiar voice.

"Hey, Emily." He turned and smiled at her, thinking she looked well. In fact, for reasons he couldn't quite place, she looked almost too well: somehow too glossy and a little unreal.

Roger loomed solidly behind her, a slightly doubtful look on his face as Emily drew Jake into a hug. Returning the embrace awkwardly, Jake remembered another occasion when she'd greeted him in Bailey's, with the place in an equal uproar after the arrival of the "Marines" who were going to save them all and get things back to normal. That time, Emily had held on to him for a little too long for comfort, and Jake had seen the expression on Roger's face dim. This time, though, Emily stepped back almost immediately and, turning to Roger, quickly introduced the two of them to each other.

Roger shook his hand. "Ah, the man of the moment. I've heard a lot about you."

Jake huffed a wry laugh. "I'll bet." He shot a glance in Emily's direction, wondering what she'd said about him.

She gave a laugh and tossed her head. "Well, I had to counteract the general impression you were some kind of hero." She turned back toward Roger as she spoke, looking up at him from under her eyelashes.

Apparently that look had the same effect on Roger as it used to have on Jake once. Roger slipped his arm around Emily's waist and drew her to him with a smirk. "Even if it did mean ruining your reputation as Miss Goody Two-Shoes Schoolteacher?"

"Oh, I think you already knew I was a Bad, Bad Girl." Emily returned the smirk, before pulling herself up on tiptoe to kiss him on the lips. Just before she did so, Jake caught her looking at him out of the corner of his eye, clearly trying to gauge his reaction. Shaking his head, he turned away and picked up his beer to take another drink.

After a moment, Bill—still leaning against the bar next to Jake—sighed heavily and slapped his beer bottle down on the bar with an audible thump. "Jeez, guys. Get a room! Or go back to that fancy big house of yours."

Jake heard Emily give a girlish giggle; when he looked at her again, he saw she was once more covertly watching him, while Roger gazed down at her with an adoring look on his face. Jake suddenly felt very sorry for the other man, wishing there was something more he could do to create a happy outcome for them than simply hoping Emily would learn to forget about Jake and appreciate what she did have.

Clearing his throat, he stuck out his hand toward Roger. "By the way, congratulations. You're a lucky man. And I'm glad Emily's found someone worthy of her." He tried to fill his tone with the right mix of affection and indifference—after all, while he didn't want to give Emily false hope, he didn't want to hurt her either. He reckoned he'd managed it when, glancing across at her as he and Roger shook hands a second time, he saw her expression turn a little more resigned.

The two of them drifted off a few moments later to say hello to some other friends. Not long after that, Jake returned to his own family. Bill had at last completed his story, giving Jake a chance to politely disengage from him—and from witnessing Mary’s misery close up.

When Jake got back to the booth, he found Stanley and Bonnie had already left: they’d mentioned earlier that they’d need to get back to the farm and check on the animals before they turned in. Eric sounded like he maybe should have headed home as well: he seemed to have had one drink too many—though he’d always been a lightweight when it came to booze—and was holding forth about something to do with City Hall politics. Jake could see Dad wasn’t looking very happy about it.

Nor was his mother: she gave Jake a tight smile as he approached. He rested his hand on her shoulder and bent to drop a kiss on her head. “I thought we didn’t discuss politics at the dinner table,” he commented to the table at large. He tried to make the rebuke as he reminded everyone of the old family rule as mild as possible, but Eric still gave him a glare. He did shut up, though, earning Jake a grateful smile from his mother as he slid into a seat at the end of the curved leather bench.

“Well, anyway,” his father drew in a deep breath and straightened, “we should all be thinking about heading over to the church for the service.” That had been a long-standing family tradition, too, although in latter years, Jake had preferred to stay in Bailey’s with his friends. His father looked across at Jake. “Are you—?”

Jake nodded. “I think I’ll come this year.” He wasn’t much of one for religion these days, but after having a run-in with a being claiming to be an archangel—while wearing Bill’s body, Jake remembered, casting a wry look to where the deputy was still propping up the bar—who had certainly performed the miracle of sending Jake back through time to change history, Jake felt he owed it to God to at least make the Christmas Eve service. Besides, there was reward enough in the way his mother’s face lit up at his declaration.

A flurry of gathering up coats and saying goodnight to people in passing saw them all outside fifteen or so minutes later. His mother and April were walking in front, heading toward where light was spilling out from the porch of the Main Street Church, with his father a pace behind. There had been a moment just before they reached the door when Jake thought his brother was about to find some excuse to stay, but Jake had managed to successfully hurry him out with a tug on the arm. He couldn’t imagine Mary would be in the mood to talk to Eric just now, or that Eric would find the right words to say in his current less-than-sober state, and the last thing anyone needed was someone making a scene.

Once they were outside, the cold air seemed to sober Eric up a little. He slapped his arms in an effort to ward off the chill, before stumping along crossly behind his parents and wife. Jake walked next to him, eyeing him warily.

“You know, Eric,” he said quietly, when they were just past Gracie’s, “it makes no difference to me which way you choose, but you need to decide what you want out of your life.”

Eric gave him a startled look, before his expression closed down. “What are you talking about, Jake?” He shoved his hands into his coat pockets, hunching his shoulders and deliberately turning his face away.

Jake pressed his lips together for a moment, still unsure if he was right to involve himself in his brother’s affairs. But now that he’d started this conversation—. “I’m talking about how you can have April and the baby and appearance of a happy family life—and maybe even the reality of it, if you work at it properly—or you can have Mary and still try to be a good father when the baby’s born. But if you carry on the way you are, then everyone’s going to get hurt.”

Eric hunched his shoulders further. "I have no idea what you're talking about."

"Yes, you do." Jake suppressed his irritation—Eric could be quite as stubborn as Dad, or Jake himself, when he wanted—and tried to stay calm as he added, "You wouldn't be the first guy to leave his wife. And you wouldn't be the first guy to stay with his wife for the sake of the children. But what you're doing now? It's just cruel for everyone. And if Mary means that much to you that you can't give her up, maybe you should think about what that really means for you and April."

Eric snorted, though whether in disapproval of the specifics of Jake's advice or in disbelief that it was being offered at all, Jake couldn't tell. Eric didn't have a chance to elaborate, though: they'd reached the bottom of the church steps and their parents and April were waiting for them at the top. Watching Eric head up the steps in front of him, letting April take his arm and lead him inside, Jake shook his head. He'd said his piece and it was up to Eric now. He had his own love life to put to rights.

oOo

Jake surreptitiously took a look at his watch as his mother began gathering in the dessert plates. Christmas dinner had been the usual feast and the conversation had been mostly noisy and cheerful, though Jake had noticed that Eric had spoken scarcely three words together to him since he and April had arrived in the middle of the morning. Jake wasn't much surprised. He'd also observed that Eric and April didn't seem to be on speaking terms either, though at least they were keeping whatever grievances they had to themselves today; the few sniping remarks they'd exchanged were too low for anyone else to hear. Jake supposed there'd been plenty worse Christmas Days in the Green household.

"Coffee, everyone?" his mother inquired of the table at large as she finished gathering the plates and heaped the silverware on top.

"Yes please." Stanley patted his stomach. "That was wonderful, Mrs Green. A real feast. As always."

"Thank you, Stanley, honey." She beamed down at him. "I'm glad you and Bonnie came." They came every year, of course, and had done since the death of their parents, though Jake supposed one day they'd do things differently, if Stanley or Bonnie married and started a family of their own.

"No coffee for me, thanks." Jake scraped back his chair, preparing to stand up. It would take him around ten minutes to walk to Heather's place, and the glance at his watch had told him he needed to leave soon if he wasn't going to be late. "I, uh, I made arrangements to meet someone."

He saw a shadow of disappointment cross his mother's face, though it wasn't as if he hadn't spent most of the past two days at home, before she gave him an understanding smile. "Yes, of course. You should take the chance to catch up with everyone."

"Who're you meeting?" Stanley asked, raising an inquiring eyebrow and looking like he was thinking of inviting himself along.

"Umm." Jake got to his feet. "Heather."

"Again?" Stanley peered up at him. "What is it with you and her?"

"I, uh—." Jake paused uncertainly, suddenly aware that he was the focus of everyone's attention.

Stanley's eyes widened. "Good God! You've got the hots for her, haven't you?"

Jake bridled—*Don't talk about her like that!*—but it was his mom who said, "Stanley, please!"

"Sorry, Mrs Green." Stanley shot her an apologetic look before he turned back to Jake. "You're serious about this?"

Jake rested his hand on the back of his chair and nodded. "I'd like to get to know her better, yes."

Stanley shook his head disbelievingly. "You've only known her five minutes."

Jake shrugged, pushing away from the chair. "Sometimes that's all it takes." That had been all it had taken the first time, really, when he'd seen how she'd kept her head after the bus had crashed. He'd been lost even before he'd asked her name.

Ignoring the surprised looks from the rest of the table—and even a quiet snort from his father—he headed off to find his coat. His mother joined him as he was putting it on and checking his gloves were in his pockets.

Straightening his collar, she said softly, "Heather's a sweet girl." He didn't miss the warning in her voice.

"I know, Mom." He wound his scarf around his neck. "I have no intention of doing anything to hurt her. I promise." Not this time, he added silently to himself.

"Okay." His mother patted him on the shoulder as she peered up at him. Something about her face as she scrutinized him told him she had more to say. After a moment, she gave a brisk nod, apparently satisfied by whatever she'd read in his expression, and added, "She a fine young woman. The elementary school's been lucky to have her."

Jake suppressed a smile. He suspected that was as close as his mother was going to get at this point to letting him know Heather met her high standards for getting involved with her son.

Ten minutes later, Jake was standing on Heather's stoop, his stomach churning while he waited for her to answer his knock. The wind was blowing fiercely, driving along the low, gray clouds that scudded overhead, and he'd gotten chilled during the short walk across town. Heather's shy smile as she opened the door was enough to warm him up, though.

"Hi." He returned the smile.

"Hi." She peered past him. "Oh dear. It's not such a nice day today, is it?" She turned her attention back to him. "Would you like to come in for coffee instead?"

"Sure. Sounds good."

Stepping across the threshold, Jake remembered another occasion when he'd come inside for coffee, and fallen asleep on her couch while she darned his disreputable sock with a smiley face. Right before they'd gone to Black Jack, and met up with Ted and Russell, and she'd left for New Bern. Where she'd fallen into Constantino's clutches and nearly been executed and only escaped through sheer good luck.

He cleared his throat, dismissing the memories: none of that had happened to this Heather. "Would you like me to take my shoes off?" he asked, as she took his coat and hung it up.

"If you wouldn't mind." She gave him a nervous smile. "I'll just start the coffee brewing."

With his shoes placed neatly by the door, he settled himself on the couch and took a look around. There was a cheerful fire burning and Christmas cards hung on strings above the fireplace. He recalled there'd also been a somewhat inexpertly crafted wreath hanging on the door which he guessed had been made for her by her class at school. Otherwise, there were few signs of festivities. He guessed she didn't make a big deal of Christmas, not having much in the way of family.

Twisting to look at where Heather had disappeared into the kitchen, wondering how soon she'd be back, he caught sight of a collection of family photographs on the bookshelves that he hadn't noticed on the few occasions he'd visited previously. He got up and padded over to take a closer look. In pride of place in the center was a large studio portrait showing her parents holding her as a small baby. She took after her father more than her mother, though he could see both of them in her. To one side was a slightly faded photograph of her parents' wedding day; on the other, Heather and her mother stood side by side at what must have been her high-school graduation, both of them beaming proudly. For college graduation, she was in the center of a group of girls of around the same age, likely her classmates and college friends. Another frame held a snap of a teenaged Heather and her father grinning up from under the tilted-up hood of an old Ford convertible—a Falcon, Jake thought—that they were working on.

He was disturbed from his inspection by the sound of the kitchen door swinging open.

"I forgot to ask. How do you like your—? Oh!" Heather pulled up short, clearly not having expected to find Jake standing so close.

"Black, please." He gave her an embarrassed grin and gestured at the photographs. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to pry."

She smiled back at him. "You're not." Her smile turned a little sad and she reached out and touched the nearest picture frame briefly, before turning her attention back to him. "I'll be right out with the coffee."

Jake nodded, watching her disappear into the kitchen again before he headed back to the couch. Although she'd said she didn't mind, it felt rude to go on looking at the photographs. Instead, he took another look around the room from where he sat, recognizing with a smile the afghan she'd once draped over him when he'd fallen asleep on the couch, now folded over the back of the armchair.

Heather was back a moment later, carrying a tray with two cups and a plate of cinnamon cookies. She gave a slight shrug as she set it down on the table in front of the couch. "You're probably full up with Christmas dinner...."

"I'm sure I can manage one or two." Jake picked up one of the cups and settled himself back in his seat. He smiled across the edge of the cup at her as he breathed in the aroma, before taking a sip and confirming that Heather did indeed make a mean brew.

Heather had picked up the other cup and perched herself on the edge of the armchair, looking a little nervous. Jake wasn't sure if that was a good or a bad thing. She cleared her throat. "So... are you enjoying spending Christmas with your family again after all these years?"

"Mostly." He huffed a wry laugh and she chuckled in response, apparently understanding something of what he meant. Taking a deep breath, he asked carefully, knowing the answer, knowing the question might upset her, yet sensing from the way she'd touched the picture earlier that she might want to talk about it, "You don't have any family round these parts?"

She shook her head. "My dad died about ten years ago and my mom while I was in college. I have some cousins up in Nebraska and South Dakota, but I haven't seen them in a few years."

"I'm sorry. About your parents." He wrapped his hands about his cup and took another sip.

"Thanks." She gave him a slightly strained smile and took a sip of her own coffee. Silence fell over the room, each of them looking up and catching the other one's eye and looking away. Jake thought of a half dozen things to say and rejected each of them in turn: too personal, too trite, too knowing. When did it become this hard to talk to her? When did he get so tongue-tied?

Glancing at the pictures again, inspiration struck. "Your dad was the one who taught you about cars?" He dipped his head in the direction of the photographs by way of explanation.

"Uh-huh. He was always working on something." She leaned back in the chair, the tension easing out of her face as she went on talking. "Bought me that Falcon when I got my learner's permit. We spent the next year fixing her up."

"But you don't have her now?" Jake had picked up a cookie and he made an appreciative noise as he bit into it: apparently Heather could bake as well, something there hadn't been much opportunity to find out the first time he'd made her acquaintance.

She shook her head as she took another sip of coffee. "Sold her when my mom got sick. Doctor's bills, you know?"

They went on talking: about cars, and Emporia, where she'd gone to college, and Prescott in Arizona, where he'd studied, about San Diego and whether he liked it there, and Jericho and whether she liked it here. At last, when they'd drunk a second cup of coffee each, he'd suggested she show him Charlotte.

Dusk was falling rapidly under the overcast sky as they walked to the garage where Heather kept the truck. Jake blinked when she switched on the overhead lights as they stepped inside and Charlotte sprang into view in all her beaten-up glory. A little less beaten up than Jake remembered, though, especially when Heather opened up the hood and started showing him the engine. She'd had nearly three more months of care lavished on her compared with when Jake had first seen her, along with several new parts.

Watching Heather as she talked about the work she'd done on the car, Jake was reminded even more strongly of the Heather in that other life: the one who'd nearly fixed the ventilation system in the fallout shelter, figured out how to get gas from the tanks at Murthy's, built wind turbines that turned the power back on for everyone....

Not really thinking about what he was doing, just knowing that it was well past time to be doing it, he reached out and cupped her cheek in his palm, tipping her face up toward him. She broke off between one word and the next, her expression turning a little confused. Moving closer, scarcely breathing, afraid she'd move away, he bent his head and touched his lips to hers.

Her mouth was uncertain under his for a moment, and then she accepted the kiss and began to return it, her lips parting under his. He deepened the kiss, sliding his arm around her to draw her against him, reveling in the feel and scent and taste of her while he went on kissing her, wanting this moment to never end. She had snaked her arm around his neck to hold him close, and he in turn pulled her tighter against him, wanting her, aching for her so badly.

Too much, perhaps. She broke the kiss, pushing away from him slightly—though not too far, he noticed, even though he relaxed the arm around her so she could have easily stepped back

further if she'd wanted. She gave a low, nervous chuckle and a shiver ran through him in response as he remembered that chuckle, remembered what it had been like to hold her and kiss her, back in that other life.... He wanted so badly to sweep her back into his arms and make love to her right now, but he could feel her trembling as they stood frozen for a moment, both of them seemingly unsure what came next.

Finally, after what seemed an age, when there'd been time for Jake to wonder if he'd blown it completely by rushing things, she tipped her head back. Her eyes were dark and wide and her expression uncertain.

"Sorry." His mouth was dry and he licked his lips, tasting her still. "I—."

"It's all right." She shook her head slightly. Again, she chuckled nervously. "I just—." He saw her swallow. "This is just moving a bit fast, you know?"

"Yeah." He went on looking down at her, aware that although she was still tense, she was looking back at him steadily enough, her face filled with the quiet strength he'd grown to love in her. He licked his lips again. "Heather, I really like you...." He broke off, conscious he was standing with his arm around her and had just kissed her hard enough to scare her a little. He guessed she knew how he felt.

She confirmed it when her cheeks dimpled and her mouth twitched in a half smile. "I kinda got that, yes."

He huffed a laugh, bending his head and feeling a blush spread across his cheeks, but discovering he rather liked it when she teased him. Still not looking at her, he said quietly, trying to explain, "It's just, I'm leaving in the morning and I don't know when I'll make it back to Jericho and—." He lifted his head and met her gaze again. "—I wish I could stay and get to know you better. Properly. Slowly. But I can't. So I'm sorry if I'm rushing things now."

"It's okay." She gave a slight shrug. "But if you're in San Diego and I'm in Jericho...."

"Maybe we could write each other? Email?" He lifted his eyebrows hopefully.

"Sure." She sounded a little doubtful, perhaps unsure if he really meant it, or if he'd follow through.

"Okay." He gave her an encouraging smile. "Guess I'll need to get myself an email address then."

He felt her whole body shake as she snorted a laugh. "It kinda helps, yes."

He laughed as well, before he sobered, aware once more of how good it felt to have her in his arms. Catching her eye again, he asked, his voice hoarse, "Can I kiss you again?"

Her smile also faded, but she nodded, already moving towards him as he bent to capture her mouth with his once more.

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Eric and April's car was gone from outside his parents' house when Jake got back, so he was a little surprised to find his brother still there when he stepped inside. He didn't have much chance to wonder about that before Stanley pounced, smirking up at him from among the group gathered in the living room playing cards. "Didn't go so well, huh?"

"What?" Jake shrugged his coat and hung it up.

"Didn't expect you back so soon." Stanley made a show of turning away to study his cards. "Thought we might not see you until New Year, the way you went chasing off after her." He stole another sly glance up at Jake, clearly looking for a reaction.

"It went fine." Jake smiled to himself, in too good a mood to let Stanley's attempts to rile him up succeed. It had gone more than fine, in fact. He and Heather had kissed for a while longer, standing next to Charlotte: gentle kisses during which Jake rediscovered the full extent of how sweet it was to hold her and kiss her, while Heather seemed to grow more used to him. Perhaps also more used to the idea of them being together and of him wanting to be with her. Then they'd walked back to her house, hand in hand. He'd said goodbye to her on the stoop, sensing she wasn't comfortable inviting him back inside just then, perhaps afraid he'd take that as a signal to once more start moving too quickly. He'd left her with a decorous kiss on the cheek and another promise to write her and send her his email address when he got one.

Seeing Stanley was still looking at him, a puzzled expression on his face, Jake added, "I don't want to rush things."

"Stanley..." Bonnie tapped him on the arm, indicating it was his turn to play.

Stanley drew a card from the deck and frowned at it, but clearly his mind wasn't much on the game because a moment later he said, his tone acerbic, "Not much chance of that, with you in San Diego and her here." With an annoyed grunt, he discarded the card he'd just picked up.

It occurred to Jake that Stanley might be feeling a little jealous. Somehow, he'd never met the right girl, the one he wanted to settle down with. Well, he had—but it had taken the end of the world as they knew it to actually bring the two of them together. And here was Jake, scarcely back in Jericho for more than a day and already hooking up with Heather. Jake didn't think Stanley was interested in Heather herself. Just envious that Jake had so easily found something that Stanley, for all his apparent indifference and bluster where women were concerned, clearly wanted for himself.

"We'll figure it out." Jake shoved his hands into his pockets, suddenly doubtful about whether he could keep Heather interested from a thousand miles away. "If it's meant to be."

His mom rearranged her cards, looking at Jake over the top of them. "Long-distance relationships aren't easy."

"You and Dad managed," Jake reminded her. His parents hadn't really settled down together until Dad had left the Army, when Jake was already two and a half. Jake hunched his shoulders still further, trying to reassure himself that the distance wouldn't matter where he and Heather were concerned. That he could win her over with his words. That there wouldn't be any rivals around with the advantage of home turf. Not with Heather in Jericho.

His mother looked at him for a moment longer, her expression thoughtful, before she gave a small nod and a faint smile warmed her face. Jake wasn't sure quite what she was thinking, or why she was apparently bestowing her approval on him, but it felt good to see her happy.

"After we got to know each other," his father pointed out, in the tone he'd always used when he thought Jake was taking things too lightly and he wanted to bring him back down to earth. He didn't look at Jake, though, but instead glanced over at Eric, who was sitting on the edge of the group, not involved in the card game but apparently sunk in thought. Or sulking; it was hard to tell.

Keen not to get into an argument with his father, because he was taking this anything but lightly,

but he didn't feel like laying out his feelings to prove that, Jake cautiously asked the question that had been bothering him since he walked in. "So, uh, where's April?"

His mother cast a nervous look in Eric's direction. "She didn't feel so well, so she went home."

His father sniffed derisively as he took a card from the deck, looked at it and then discarded it. "You mean she and Eric had a blazing row and she went home without him."

Jake turned and looked at his brother. Eric lifted his head and looked back at him. To Jake's surprise, there was none of the bluster or self-justification in his face that he'd expected to see. Then Eric leaned forward and set down the glass of whiskey he'd been nursing—though he didn't seem to have drunk much of it, if it was the usual kind of measure Dad poured—and said, "Maybe Jake'd be willing to run me home in Mom's car. April should've calmed down by now, and even if she hasn't..."

He left the sentence unfinished as he went on looking up at Jake. Jake caught the silent appeal in his eyes. "Sure," he nodded. "If Mom doesn't mind me borrowing the car."

"No, of course not, honey." His mother was looking between her two sons, a slightly surprised expression on her face. "The keys are where they usually are."

Eric didn't speak again until Jake had reversed the car out of the drive and they were heading along the street. Then he said abruptly, with no preamble, "I'm in love with Mary Bailey." Jake caught him casting a sideways glance in Jake's direction before he added, "But you knew that, didn't you?"

"I knew there was something going on, yes." Jake hesitated at the end of the street, before turning in the opposite direction to Eric and April's house.

"This isn't the way home." It was more of a statement than an objection, as if Eric already understood the reason for it.

Jake nodded. "I reckoned you need to talk more than you need to get home right now."

"Yeah." Eric puffed out a breath. He was silent again while Jake, resisting the temptation to drive past Heather's house, steered them through town. At last, when Jake was wondering if he needed to prompt Eric to start speaking again, Eric said, "It's not just an affair. I know that's what it looks like, but I think I really do love Mary. And I don't think I ever really loved April."

"But you care about her?" Jake took a meandering route out west, remembering when he and Heather had driven out this way, hunting for giant irradiated ants—or rather, hunting down wild rumors, intending to scotch them—a few days after the bombs.

"Yes." There was something about Eric's quiet affirmation that was more convincing than any more elaborate protest could have been. "And I hate that I keep hurting her. But I just don't how to stop." Before Jake could voice the obvious suggestion, he added, "And, yes, I've tried giving up Mary. I stopped seeing her after Dad asked me to stand for Mayor and April told me she was pregnant. Until a week after the election. I was miserable the whole time. Couldn't stop thinking about her. And it didn't fix anything between me and April. We put a good enough front on in public, but when we were alone, it was... bad. Really bad. At least when I'm with Mary I don't seem to... get into it as much with April." He huffed a bitter laugh. "Not that I haven't most likely completely screwed things up there as well."

Jake wasn't sure whether Eric was right about that or not: Mary had seemed willing to forgive a lot in that other life, though she'd found out about the baby the previous time only after Eric had

made his choice. "When were you planning on telling Mary about the baby?"

Eric swallowed another pained laugh. "When I couldn't pretend it wasn't happening, I guess."

He lapsed back into silence while Jake drove on, making a large circle to the north. They drove past the edge of his parents' ranch: it reminded him of the months he'd spent living out there, after he'd split up with Emily. How much he'd hurt *her* by letting himself get involved with her again, because it was easy and familiar and what everyone else expected. Hurt Heather, too, likely enough. He'd certainly hurt her when he'd denied his feelings for her and ignored her for a month after they'd kissed on Main Street.

"You were right," Eric said at last, jerking Jake out of his own memories. "I need to make a choice. Things can't carry on the way they are." He drew in a deep breath. "I guess I'm ready to go home and talk to my wife."

Ten minutes later, driving away from Eric's place and back to his parents' house, Jake thought about the web of lies and deceptions his brother had spun, and how that was no basis on which to build lasting happiness. About how lying to those he cared about had been eating him up, because Eric might have been *behaving* like a complete bastard, but he was a fundamentally a decent man.

A better man than his brother now: Jake's stomach lurched as he considered the ways *he* was deceiving Heather. In the past two days, he'd had to watch every word he said to her to make sure he didn't slip up by knowing more than he should—while using what he did know to say the right things and ask the right questions, all to try and make her fall in love with him more quickly. He had a feeling that wasn't exactly right and proper—any more than Eric lying to April and Mary had been—and he didn't want to think about what might happen if she ever found out what he was hiding from her. But the truth was so unbelievable that honesty would surely only have her thinking he was a fantasist and a liar. Then there would be no chance of winning her back. He just had to hope that the reality of what he felt about her, and that he was lying to her for the best of reasons, would be enough to carry them through.

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Part Two

Jake poured himself another cup of coffee and then sat down again to finish re-reading Heather's letter. He'd found it waiting for him the previous evening when he'd arrived home from work, his heart skipping a beat as he'd opened the mailbox and seen the half-familiar handwriting on the envelope.

He hadn't really been expecting a reply so soon, even assuming the US Postal Service would be kind to him. Such a speedy response meant she must have written him back almost immediately. Hoped had flared inside him that she *did* feel a little of what he felt, and that it could grow to more....

He'd thought about what he was going to say in his own first letter the entire flight back to San Diego. Once he'd arrived home, he'd sat down and worked through a dozen drafts before he had a version ready to be copied carefully, straining his chicken-scratch scrawl into something readable. He'd wanted to say so much, yet not so much he'd scare her. He'd also wanted to be himself as far as possible, because he needed to make her fall in love with *him*—and spouting love poetry had never really been his style....

In the end, he'd described his flight home: the view over the mountains and how he'd wished he could have shared it with her. He'd talked about how Jericho had changed and how things had stayed the same, and asked her to tell him about her life at school and how she was getting on with fixing up Charlotte. He'd haltingly told her how much he'd enjoyed their walk together and their visit to see Charlotte.

She'd written back almost as long a letter, recounting funny stories from school and telling him about how she was waiting on a part she'd ordered, so she was tackling more of Charlotte's endless rust. She'd asked him about the Roadrunner—someone had mentioned he used to own one—and how she'd have liked to see it. Reading that, he'd regretted again that he'd had to sell the car—but he knew that the Heather he'd fallen in love with wouldn't be impressed by the car alone, but by the man who drove her. That she could be just as impressed by that same man even if he was sputtering around in an old Toyota. And, as he'd asked, she'd also sent him her email address.

He wasn't working today—he'd worked over last weekend—so he was planning in a while to head to an internet cafe and write her a long email. This time, he reckoned, he wouldn't be lost for words: he'd been scribbling down ideas for the last two weeks, half afraid he was jinxing her reply and yet sure she'd write him back. She'd warned him not to expect an immediate reply by email: she'd only be able to check her account around once a week, at the Cyberjolt Cafe. But at least he wouldn't have to depend on the whims of the postal service. Though maybe he'd write her, too: there were things he wanted to say to her that she probably wouldn't want to read with the clatter of coffee cups around her and the chance of someone looking over her shoulder.

He was still so absorbed in her letter, and in thinking about his reply, that he only half-heard the soft knock at the door. It was only when it came again a moment later, more loudly and more impatiently, that he started up. Opening the door, he expected Freddy or Anna to be hovering outside. Instead, he found himself blinking disbelievingly at Hawkins.

"Hey." He automatically stepped back to let the other man in, noticing as he did so that Hawkins looked surprisingly rough. He had a few days' growth of stubble; his skin had an unhealthy tinge to it, much like it had after he'd taken a bullet in the gut in Cheyenne; and his clothes were rumpled, almost as if he'd slept in them. Given Jake had seen Hawkins come through a whole winter of hardship and the only time he'd looked anything like this ruffled had been after he'd lost the bomb to Cheyenne and barely escaped Beck's clutches himself, Jake had to wonder what was going on.

Hawkins peered suspiciously around the tiny apartment as he stepped inside and dropped the bag he was carrying by the door. "You alone? Went by the airfield and they said you weren't working today."

"Yeah." Jake closed the door behind him and gestured to the table and chairs. "You want some coffee?" He couldn't help wondering what his employers had made of Hawkins, but he reckoned that after he himself had turned up half-drunk at Hawkins' apartment a month ago, expecting to be let in, the least he could do was return the favor now. He was finding it hard to imagine what had happened to get Hawkins into this state, though.

"Yeah, sure." Hawkins sounded distracted as he headed toward the table—and then bypassed it so he could squint out through the window, checking the street below without making himself visible to anyone who might be down there watching.

Jake frowned, pausing as he headed for the kitchen area and the coffee pot. He'd be the first to agree Hawkins was always a little jumpy and hyper-vigilant, apparently unable to switch off the habits of a lifetime spent half undercover, but he seemed overly twitchy even by his usual standards. Or maybe whatever had him looking so out of sorts meant he wasn't hiding it the way he normally did. Whatever the reason for it, Hawkins' behavior was making Jake nervous. He glanced toward where the gun the CIA had given him was still stashed in its case under his bed. "What's going on, Hawkins? Are you in trouble?"

Hawkins turned to look at him, his brow furrowed, almost like he didn't understand the question. He went on staring at Jake for a long moment, before he drew in a sharp sniff, his face twitching. He still didn't answer Jake, though— just sank down on the nearest chair and put his hands to his head, rubbing his temples.

Jake shook his head and went back to making a fresh brew of coffee. He reckoned that if bad guys were about to come bursting through the doors waving guns, Hawkins would've mentioned it. Which meant his troubles were less immediate, if apparently no less real.

He heard another sniff from Hawkins as he finished setting up the coffee to brew. "So you're picking things up again with that girl you liked? The one you got to steal the report?"

Turning, Jake saw Hawkins was staring at the letter he'd left spread on the table. He must have been scanning it. Feeling a little annoyed—did Hawkins have no understanding at all of the concept of *private*?—Jake crossed to the table and gathered up the sheets. "Yeah. Yeah, I am."

Hawkins looked up at him again for another long moment and then gave a small shake of the head, letting out another soft snort. Jake was suddenly tired of his cryptic games. "What do you want, Hawkins? What's going on?"

Again, Hawkins crinkled his nose, his lips twitching. Then, just when Jake thought he still wasn't going to answer, he said curtly. "I talked to Darcy. Tried to, anyway.... It didn't go well." Abruptly he put his head in his hands, leaning forward, his shoulders slumped in weary defeat.

The whole story came out slowly, over a first cup of coffee and then a second. Hawkins had gone round to Darcy's apartment the week before Christmas and attempted to talk to her, to tell her he was finally done with the CIA. She'd only let him inside the house to avoid a scene outside, but she hadn't really wanted to listen. *Why should I believe you?* she'd asked. *Why is this different to last time?* And then she'd asked him to leave before the kids got home, before they saw him and got upset. Except, even as he'd been protesting, he'd heard a key in the lock, and Alison and Sam had walked in.

"Alison tried to talk to me, but Darcy wouldn't let her. Ordered me out. Ordered the kids to their rooms when Alison objected." Hawkins scrubbed his hands over his face. "I thought I'd better go."

"I'm sorry." Jake refilled his cup again. "Here."

Hawkins took the cup, cradling it between his hands while he stared gloomily into its black depths. "I thought, after what you told me.... About how Darcy and I patched things up...."

"I'm sorry," Jake repeated. He didn't know what else to say. Apparently saving the world had broken more than he'd known.

"All those years undercover...." Hawkins shook his head. "They were what kept me going, you know? Even though Darcy told me that last time that if I took the job, I shouldn't bother coming back. But I thought, when I was done... when they knew...." He lifted his gaze to Jake, his expression bleak. "I thought they'd still be there at the end of it."

Jake nodded in understanding. The thought that he could one day maybe build a life with Heather again had helped sustain him through the ache of losing her in those first weeks in this other world.

Glancing surreptitiously at his watch, he was surprised to see more than an hour had passed since Hawkins had arrived. He cleared his throat. "So, are you in San Diego for work? Or—?" Much as Jake sympathized with the other man's plight and wanted to help, he wasn't sure what he was supposed to *do* with him. He couldn't babysit him for however long it took for Hawkins to get himself back together. And, frankly, he was a little freaked out at seeing Hawkins so out of control.

Hawkins drained half the cup of coffee before setting it down. "I'm supposed to be 'on leave'. They told me to go get some rest, enjoy myself, get my life back together. They'll call me back in if they've got any questions, but I'm pretty much done until the trial. I guess I just needed to—." He gestured helplessly, leaving the sentence unfinished. Tipping his head back, he looked up at Jake and added, "You're the only one who understands, Jake. Really understands." He gave another self-deprecating sniff. "And this is all your fault, anyway. Telling me I stood a chance with Darcy."

Jake thought that was overstating things a little. All he'd told Hawkins was that he'd managed to rebuild his family. Apparently, like Stanley and Mimi, that was another of those things that was only possible if the world ended first.

"Tell me about them," Hawkins said abruptly, startling Jake out of his thoughts. "Tell me what it was like. Before."

"You sure?" Jake eyed him cautiously, wondering if hearing about playing happy families, or at least giving the appearance of it, was going to help or simply drive Hawkins further down.

"Yeah." The corner of Hawkins' mouth twitched in a wry smile. "Maybe I can figure out what I did right last time." For the first time since he'd arrived, Jake saw some of the tension leave him. "Come on, Jake. I think you owe me that."

With a regretful glance at the letter from Heather, stashed for safekeeping on top of the television, now likely to go unanswered today, Jake began to dredge up what he could remember of Hawkins' family back in that other Jericho.

Two hours later, Jake was leading Hawkins into the beach bar that belonged to Anna and Freddy. Hawkins had been less than enthusiastic about Jake's suggestion they head out there, but Jake had pointed out that his bosses had told him to get some rest and enjoy himself. When Hawkins continued to frown, Jake quickly invented a prior commitment to drop in at the bar that he couldn't break and offered Hawkins the chance to come with him or stay where he was.

Truth was, Jake was at a loss what more to say after racking his brains to dredge up the little he could remember about Hawkins' family back in Jericho. He was also coming up blank with suggestions for how Hawkins could possibly fix things. Not that he had much of a track record as a matchmaker; he winced at the memory of how badly he'd failed in his efforts to get Stanley and Mimi together. The only comfort was that neither of them seemed in the least aware of what they'd missed out on: when he'd mentioned Mimi to Stanley over Christmas, Stanley had first given him a blank look and then shrugged his shoulders and taken the topic—plans for the farm for the coming year—in an entirely different direction.

At least things had worked out for Anna and Freddy, Jake thought, catching sight of Freddy desultorily bussing tables and Anna perched on a stool at one of the end of bar with a pile of paperwork in front of her. Anna's pregnancy seemed to be progressing well; Freddy had managed to stay out of trouble since they'd bought the bar and he'd started working there full time; and the bar itself seemed to be doing well, even if it currently exhibited the typical quietness of a weekday afternoon.

"Hey, hey, hey!" Freddy abandoned his tray when he spotted Jake. "How're you doing, man?"

"I'm good." Jake accepted Freddy's brief embrace. When Freddy stepped back and raised an inquiring eyebrow in Hawkins' direction, Jake added, "This is Hawkins. We... worked together. Hawkins, this is Freddy."

Freddy took a long, calculating look at Hawkins, who stared back at him silently, apparently unfazed. Eventually, Freddy gave a quiet "Hmmp" and shot a look in Jake's direction that indicated he'd worked out how Jake knew Hawkins—that he was somehow connected to Jake's involvement with the CIA, Ravenwood and the scandal around J&R—if not the specifics. Jerking his head toward the bar, Freddy asked, "You two want a beer?"

"Sure." Jake let Freddy lead them toward where Anna sat. She started to get up from the stool, but Jake waved for her to stay where she was. Freddy headed around the bar to set up the drinks, while Jake introduced Hawkins. "How are you doing?" Jake nodded toward Anna's stomach.

She puffed out a breath, blowing a few strands of hair out of her face. "Okay. Though my feet have been killing me."

Seeing the slightly puzzled expression on Hawkins' face, Jake explained, "Anna's expecting. Another three months, right?"

Hawkins, accepting the beer Freddy slid across the bar toward him as Anna nodded her confirmation, offered a "Congratulations." He just about managed to make the word not sound like a condemnation of everyone everywhere who ever decided to have children, though it was a close-run thing to Jake's ear.

Anna lifted her eyebrows, apparently thinking so too. Jake wondered if he could explain Hawkins' own family troubles, but Freddy beat him to it, as usual managing to miss the undercurrents in the conversation. "You got children?" he asked Hawkins as he handed Jake his beer.

"Uh-huh." Hawkins took a drink. "One of each." He paused again and then unexpectedly added, "Haven't really seen them in a while."

Freddy barked a laugh. "You're not their mom's favorite person, right?"

"Right." Hawkins compressed his lips into a thin line that indicated he considered the conversation closed.

"You don't see them at all?" Anna asked softly. She had her head on one side, her earlier startled expression replaced by a sympathetic one.

Hawkins gave her a slightly confused look, before he shook his head. "I've been away a lot and Darcy, my wife, she says it 'too confusing'."

"Man, that sucks." Freddy shook his head. "How old are they?"

"Alison's fifteen. Sam's eight." To Jake's surprise, Hawkins went on, "I think Alison'd—." He broke off, shaking his head. "Not that it matters what she wants if her mom says no."

"You think she might want to get in touch with you?" Jake saw that Anna had put her hand on her stomach, perhaps if feeling some kinship between Alison and how she'd feel about her baby in the same circumstances.

Hawkins shrugged and took another drink. "Maybe."

"But you don't want her to get in trouble going behind her mom's back." Anna nodded in understanding.

"Yeah." Hawkins was looking like he wanted to change the conversation, but he didn't quite know how. "I just want to know what's going on with them."

"Hey, maybe you could wait outside her school." Freddy leaned forward on the bar, arms crossed. "You know, with your job and—."

"Freddy!" Jake cut him off before he could say more. Before he started worrying Hawkins with what he might know about Hawkins' work. Jake had seen what could happen to anyone that Hawkins viewed as a threat to him or his family.

Fortunately, Hawkins' only response was to grimace a little.

"Maybe you could see if she uses one of those friending websites?" Anna had sat up straighter and was rubbing the small of her back with one hand. When Jake looked at her blankly—he saw the other two looked equally lost—she said, "You know? The college kids that come in here use them. They arrange meetups with their friends and put up stuff about what's going on with them. Which parties they went to or how much their professors suck, that kind of thing. But I think kids in High School have them as well." She creased her brow in thought. "It's called... MySpace, I think? Something like that?"

"Huh." Hawkins gave her a sharp nod. "I might just try that. Thanks."

Jake shifted his beer bottle along the bar a little, considering Hawkins thoughtfully. "You know, there's an internet cafe just down the street from my place. Maybe we could swing by there in a while and you could check it out?" And maybe Jake would be able to reply to Heather's letter today after all, if only with something short.

The internet cafe had proved a success, with Hawkins managing to track Alison down on MySpace and Jake finding time to send a quick email to Heather. However, over the following weeks, once Jake and Heather had started emailing each other regularly, Jake had quickly realized that using the cafe was going to drive him a little crazy: he could only make it there a few times a week to see if Heather had replied, and he never felt like he had enough time to re-read her messages or compose his own responses. Not to mention it had been costing him quite a bit to spend so much time there. So he'd splashed out on a laptop, reasoning that it would prove cheaper in the long run, even if it did eat into the money he'd begun saving toward the flight school. Besides, he'd need a computer to get the business off the ground, wouldn't he?

Now, on a Saturday afternoon at the beginning of March, he sat staring impatiently at the laptop screen while it slowly booted, his heart racing a little in anticipation of the new email from Heather that he hoped was waiting for him. His frown changed to a grin when he saw there *was* a new email from her: she'd told him she'd gotten into the habit over the last couple of months of stopping by the Cyberjolt Cafe on Saturday mornings, after she'd done her grocery shopping at Gracie's. He'd learned to keep himself busy until lunchtime so he wouldn't sit obsessively checking for her reply until it arrived. There was also an email from his mom—she and Dad were halfway through their six-week trip to Europe; somewhere in Italy at the moment, he thought—but he ignored that for the present.

Today's email from Heather was typical: fairly short and a little hurried-sounding, mostly answering his questions—*yes, the part for Charlotte's gearbox arrived, finally!*—and letting him know she'd gotten his last letter in the mail and would send him a proper reply soon. As she often did, she told him a bit about what her class had been studying that week and recounted a funny anecdote about something that had happened. Sometimes she would also provide snippets of gossip about things that had happened outside school; this time, all she said was that *Mrs Leigh was fit to burst with something Mrs Olsen had told her about your brother and April, but I said I had to get along...*

Jake drew in a deep breath, appreciating Heather's tactfulness in letting him know there was gossip while neither encouraging it nor foisting it on him. Eric and April had agreed to separate on a trial basis in the middle of January: Eric had moved back in with their parents, while April remained in their house near the East Woods. Jake had heard all about it from his mother, of course, when it first happened. He'd also spoken to his brother once, after Eric had picked up the phone when Jake had been calling his parents. Eric had told him that things had actually improved since he'd moved out: he was no longer a constant disappointment to April, no longer mentally somewhere else most of the time when he was with her. And though the town had gossiped, as it always did about everything, and more than a few people had been a little chilly toward him, people had largely taken it in their stride.

"And that other thing," Eric had added hastily. "It's over, for now. I apologized for the hurt, for handling things the way I did. Said I needed to get my head straight and it wasn't right of me to go on hurting her and—oh, here's Mom." With that, he'd handed the phone over, but Jake had understood that Eric had made some kind of peace with Mary and hadn't gone running straight from April to be with her.

Jake made a mental note to ask Heather to write him what was being said about Eric, if that wouldn't make her uncomfortable. He also needed to figure out how to find out, without scaring her off, whether she'd be willing to move away from Jericho, to follow him wherever his own business eventually took him. While he'd already ruled out Jericho as too small, he'd come to the conclusion since Christmas that he didn't much want to stay in San Diego either, despite the contacts he'd developed at the airfield. He liked the anonymity of passing people on the street who didn't know who he was or what he'd done—and didn't care—but the flipside was that it was a lonely place, and the friendliness in shops and diners and bars was forced and automatic. He hated the traffic, too, and the way the place sprawled on forever as you crawled nose-to-tail along

packed roads. It might be a better city to live in than most other big cities, but it wasn't somewhere he wanted to raise a family and build a life. He missed having horses and the wide open skies above him and driving along empty roads with only the occasional car coming the other way. He guessed it had taken going out into the world and being even more miserable out there to make him appreciate the good parts of home.

It occurred to him that he should write about all that—not just about San Diego but also the other cities he flew to, and what he liked and what he didn't—and see if he could get Heather talking about it too, about big cities and small towns and whether she wanted to stay in Jericho for a few years or her whole life. After all, even Wichita, from what he knew of the place, was circled by a half dozen smaller towns the size of New Bern or Emporia: plenty close enough to get to an airfield without needing to live in the hustle and bustle of the city itself.

He re-read Heather's email, trying this time to decipher what she wasn't saying or only half-saying. She sounded happy to be writing him, pleased to be hearing from him, amused by his anecdotes. Was it enough to make her fall in love with him? The kisses they'd shared had seemed proof enough at the time that the attraction that had existed between them in that other life was still present in this one. And goodness knows, he'd somehow done enough before, without making any real effort, that she'd thrown herself at him on Main Street—and then still gone on loving him, without any real hope of return, after he'd ignored her and even gotten back with Emily. He suspected his own misery and uncertainty now was simply the universe justifiably paying him back for what he'd put her through before.

What was it he'd said to his mom at Christmas? That they'd figure it out if it was meant to be? He had to believe, from the way the universe had thrown them back together, that she was his destiny and he was hers. That surely had to be the truth of it. He just needed to not scare her away before she decided that as well.

Grabbing himself a beer from the fridge, he opening up a new blank document and began pecking away at the keys, slowly getting his thoughts down, with much changing of his mind and backspacing. Not forgetting, when he was done, to read the whole thing over and check he hadn't let slip something he shouldn't already know....

oOo

"Green house. Johnston speaking." His father's gruff tones were a little unexpected; Jake had been expecting his mother to pick up the phone. His parents had gotten back from Europe two weeks earlier, and he'd dropped back into the familiar pattern of calling them late Sunday afternoons. Not that he minded a chance to speak to his father—and how things had changed for *that* to be the case!

Making the mental adjustment that he'd likely have to do more talking and less listening, Jake said, "Hey, Dad. It's Jake."

"Hello, son." As if he knew what Jake had been thinking, his father added, "Your mom's not back yet. Still over at April's."

Jake frowned as he settled himself in a chair. "Is everything all right?" April had experienced some complications—something to do with the way the baby was lying or growing—but her physician had caught it early and she was getting the best care. There shouldn't be a repeat of what had happened last time.

"Everything's fine. Least, as far as I know." Jake could almost hear his father shaking his head. "They never tell me anything. There was some nonsense about going to New Bern to buy maternity clothes, I think."

"Ah." Jake wasn't surprised his father had kept well out of that. "So, how did you enjoy Europe?" He hadn't spoken to his father since the vacation.

"All the better for being back home." His father didn't sound like he really meant it. "Your mom enjoyed herself, though. Still fussing over all the photos she took. Although I'll give those French and Italian guys their due: they sure know how to cook."

Jake laughed, suspecting any photo album his dad put together would likely consist of pictures of plates of pasta and filet mignon.

There was a moment's silence before his father asked, "So how are things with you?"

Jake scrubbed a hand across his hair "Same as usual, I guess. Work's still good."

"Not been fired yet, huh?" His father chuckled—and that was different, too. Once there'd been real bite in comments like that: too close to the truth to be funny. "How're the plans for the flight school coming along?"

"Slowly." Jake puffed out a breath. "There was a business came up for sale at the airfield just the other week, so I guess there's opportunities out there. But I'll need a few more months of savings before I'd be anywhere near being able to put in a bid for something like that." More than a few months, to be honest, even though Jake was doing his best to save every cent he could.

"Hmm." His father was silent again for a few seconds, before he drew in a breath that was audible even down the phone line. "You know, if something like that comes up, your mom and I could help you get the money together."

"What?" Jake sat up straighter, startled by the offer. While he'd thought he'd re-built some of his dad's faith, he'd never expected to hear anything like that.

"Well, I'd hate for you to pass up a good thing..." His father sounded almost as uncomfortable making the offer as Jake was hearing it, and yet it clearly wasn't a mistake.

"I—." Jake swallowed, struggling to frame a reply. "Thanks, Dad. But, umm, I'm not really looking to stay in San Diego." He'd more been interested in seeing that businesses *did* come up for sale from time to time, and what they cost; it'd be a lot easier to take over an established school—as long as it wasn't half-run into the ground—than start something from scratch, even if it might take a little more cash upfront.

"You're not, huh?" He could hear his father's surprise.

"Not really." Jake shrugged. "I was thinking maybe of coming back to Kansas. Wichita or Topeka." Stringing together various hints and comments in Heather's emails had confirmed his suspicion that she'd hate big city life even more than he did, but that she'd be willing to settle in another small town somewhere else in the state. "And anyway," he hurried on, because that wasn't the only reason he'd rejected the business in San Diego after taking a quick look at it, "it wasn't a good fit in a lot of ways."

"Well, I guess you know best what you're looking for." His father almost sounded disappointed he couldn't invest in Jake's future.

"Yeah. And, Dad...?" Now that Jake had overcome his surprise and gotten his thoughts together a little better, he realized he needed to make something clear. "I appreciate the offer. I really do. It means a lot to me that you'd—." He struggled to find the right words. "I appreciate the vote of

confidence. But... I reckon this is something I need to do myself. Even if it takes me longer."

There was silence from his father, long enough that Jake began to worry he'd taken the rejection of his tentative overture a little too hard. Jake knew it must have cost him something to make the offer, after all that had happened between them. But, Jake reminded himself, his father often took a while to reply, weighing his words. Jake had been misinterpreting that and jumping to the wrong conclusions about it his whole life—and that had been one of the reasons there'd been so much friction between them in the past. Things had gone much better ever since Jake had understood that and learned to wait to hear his father out.

His father cleared his throat. "I can respect that. Man needs to stand on his own two feet."

Jake breathed out, a sense of relief sweeping over him. His father still sounded a little disappointed that Jake didn't want his help, but there was also respect mixed in there. Before he could say anything, though, his father said hurriedly, "Oh, here's your mother." His voice grew distant, indicating he must be holding the receiver away from him. "Gail, sweetheart, it's Jake."

In the seconds before his mother came on the line and swept him up in her chatter, Jake wished he'd had a chance to thank his father again, to say all the things that remained unsaid between them. But he reckoned he'd only embarrass the old man if he tried—and that his father already knew.

oOo

The chilly April wind was stirring up sand devils on the boardwalk as Jake hurried into the beach bar, trying to spot Freddy as he pushed his way through the crowd. There'd been a half-garbled message on his cellphone when he'd landed at Montgomery Field a little earlier, but he'd understood it well enough to know Freddy would be at the bar—and that he wanted Jake to come and help him wet the baby's head: Anna had given birth that morning, and all was well.

He caught a glimpse of Freddy behind the bar, handing over a pitcher of beer to a customer. Freddy must have seen him a moment later, because he waved in Jake's direction, and then headed along the bar. Jake changed tack. They met a moment later, Jake slapping Freddy on the back as Freddy pulled him into a hug.

"Congratulations." Jake pulled back and, still with his hands on Freddy's shoulders, raised his eyebrows. "Everything went okay?"

"Yeah, they're both doing great." Freddy looked like he'd never be able to wipe the grin off his face. "She's— she's just *perfect*, Jake."

Jake knew he meant the baby, though he reckoned Freddy probably meant Anna too. He was filled with a sense of satisfaction as he watched Freddy wave to one of the other bartenders to bring them some beers. It had never sat well with him that he'd let Anna get on that bus to Houston alone. He'd tried hard to convince himself that he'd done what Freddy had asked, as best he could at the time: getting her out of San Diego, giving her the money from Ravenwood, and getting the hell out of her life and whatever trouble he might still be dragging behind himself. Yet a part of him had simply wanted to get away from her, from being reminded, every time he looked at her, that Freddy was dead and that it was his fault. After the bombs had gone off, he'd tried not to think about her at all, likely stranded somewhere in Texas, without friends or family....

It was moments like this—seeing Freddy's proud grin and knowing Anna had given birth somewhere safe, with people around her who care about her to support her—that confirmed that leaving Heather behind in that other world had been the right choice. Maybe even made it bearable. Especially as things seemed to be progressing well with the Heather in this world.

Freddy handed Jake his beer and clinked bottles with him. "Let's party, man!"

Jake hoisted his bottle. "To—you picked a name yet?" Though Anna and Freddy had revealed they were most likely expecting a girl, they'd been tight lipped about what they were going to call her.

Freddy nodded. If anything, his grin grew wider. "Miranda."

"To Anna and Miranda." Jake completed the toast. He took another look round the bar, thinking that the place also seemed to be thriving. In fact, it was pretty lively for a Thursday night. A worrying thought crossed his mind. He turning back to Freddy, who was quietly beaming to himself. "You didn't offer free drinks all round, did you?"

"What?" Freddy gave him a startled look, before laughing and punching Jake on the arm. "No way man. I may be dumb but I'm not that dumb. Anna'd kill me." His expression turned more serious. "You'll be godfather, right?"

Jake hesitated, wondering if he was really the right person to ask: he wasn't Catholic or even particularly religious.

Freddy's face fell a little. "I know you're going to be a real uncle soon, but I thought—."

"Freddy, I'd be honored." Jake reached out and gave his arm a reassuring squeeze. "I just wasn't sure I was the right person..."

"You're always the right person, Jake." Freddy's voice dropped a little as he added, "I know that if anything happened to me, you'd take care of Anna and the baby. That's all I'm asking."

"Yeah." Jake drew in a deep breath, pushing away the memory of the last time Freddy had asked him that, while his life bubbled away from the gunshot wound in his stomach.

One of the other bartenders called Freddy's name. He gave Jake a rueful grin. "Duty calls. You'll stick around? Celebrate properly later?"

"Sure."

Jake leaned on the bar, watching as Freddy went back to work. He hoped he'd be celebrating just as hard in another two months when April had her baby: another child that was going to have a better life than in that other world, even if its parents were still separated. And, according to his mom, apparently getting on better now than they had for a long while.

He'd be back to see for himself in August: he'd booked a week's vacation, planning to inspect his new niece or nephew, get the cropduster ready to sell—and see Heather again. See if all the emails and letters they'd exchanged had worked on her the way they'd worked on him: making him fall even more deeply in love with her as he got to know her better. See if he'd get his happy ending too.

oOo

Jake folded back the newspaper and tilted it to catch the dim light in the corner of the hotel bar in Georgetown. The first stages of various trials relating to the bomb plot, to Ravenwood's weapons smuggling, and to the kickbacks that had been paid out by J&R to various government officials both inside and outside the US, had all begun during the last couple of weeks, as April turned into May. The courts were mostly occupied at this point with technical arguments or preliminary

hearings, so the newspapers were largely rehashing the stories that had come out back in September and October. However, the occasional new snippet of information was emerging.

Today's paper was picking over a few details that had emerged in court during the previous day about the covert CIA team which had helped expose the bomb plot. The front page showed photographs of the defendants entering or leaving the court building: Tomarchio, still protesting his innocence and claiming he had no idea anyone was planning to make him 'President' after the bombs went off, looking even waxier and more unhealthy than Jake remembered; Valente, a smug smirk on his plump face, as if he believed he was still untouchable.

"Catching up?"

Jake looked up, startled to find Hawkins looming over him. He huffed a laugh to himself: looked like he was finally losing some of the wariness he'd gathered in the year only he had lived through. Or Hawkins really just was very good at sneaking around. He nodded at the paper as he put it down on the table. "You going to be giving evidence?"

"At some point, yes." Hawkins spoke abruptly, looking toward the waitress who was making her way over toward them, and then back at Jake. Jake got the message and kept silent until after the woman had taken their order and left.

"Everything okay with you? Nobody been bothering you?" Hawkins was still keeping an eye on the waitress, watching for her return.

"No. I'm good." Jake was grateful that, because Hawkins wouldn't ever be able to properly explain to his superiors exactly how Jake had come by his information, he'd concocted a story that had kept Jake out of the investigation entirely once they got past those first few days when he and Jake frantically worked to put a stop to the bombs. At the end of it, before Jake had flown back to San Diego, he'd signed some carefully worded statements—and that had been it. There'd been plenty of other, more convincing evidence that had come to light once the initial arrests had been made.

When the waitress had brought their drinks and gone again, Jake said, "How about you? You're looking a bit better than last time I saw you." Which had been back in January; Hawkins had, mercifully, flown back to DC after just forty-eight hours, looking a little more together. Now he looked almost back to his usual self.

"Yeah." Hawkins gave one of his wry sniffs. "I appreciate what you did, Jake."

Jake shrugged. "Beats dragging you into the back of an ambulance with a gunshot wound and then trying to avoid getting shot down while crossing into Texan airspace," he pointed out dryly.

Hawkins' lips twitched. "I guess it does."

"So how are things going? With the family?" Jake wasn't sure he'd get much of an answer, but he reckoned Hawkins owed him something.

The other man shrugged. Picking up his coffee, he blew on it to cool it, before taking a sip. "They seem okay. From what Alison says to her friends on that... MySpace thing." He flapped a hand. "Sam's doing well in school; Alison's gotten herself a boyfriend."

Hawkins' face darkened as he mentioned the last fact and Jake took a moment to pity whatever unfortunate kid chose to date the girl. He suspected "overprotective father" didn't even begin to cover it where Hawkins was concerned.

Hawkins set his cup back down, leaning forward, his hands resting on his knees, not looking at Jake. "Alison also said she'd tried talking to her mom about seeing me again. Said Darcy told her no." He briefly scrubbed a hand across his face. "Said I'd only disappear off again, whenever the government decided it needed me. That I cared more about the job than I did about them."

"You can't explain?" Jake could sympathize, because it wasn't as if he could explain parts of his life to Heather, but what Hawkins had been doing had been a little less fantastical than that.

Hawkins shook his head. "Confidentiality clauses," he pointed out. "Besides, I already told her once that I quit. That I wasn't going undercover again and that they'd promised they wouldn't ask. And then—" A snort escaped him. "How do you say no when someone tells you they need you to help them track down a rogue nuclear warhead that's going to be used to take out 25 American cities?"

"You don't." Jake gave an understanding grimace. In a way, there'd never been a moment when he wasn't going to accept Bill's—Gabriel's—offer to send him back to prevent the attacks. It had just taken his heart a while to catch up with his head. "But she wouldn't trust you to mean it this time? If you made the same promise?"

Hawkins nodded. "I don't really blame her."

Something about his body language, about the way he spoke made Jake think he was going to say more. Jake waited, giving the other man the space to speak. He knew this kind of talk didn't come easily to Hawkins.

At last, Hawkins drew in a deep breath and then let it go. "Alison said... she said Darcy'd been seeing this guy. Doug his name was. That she'd introduced him to the kids. But she broke it off end of January. And then Alison caught her looking through some old photo albums. From back when we were at college together. When we got married...."

Jake raised his eyebrows. "You think she does want you back?"

Hawkins sat up straight again, a rueful expression in his face. "I think it doesn't matter what she wants or feels. She's just never gonna trust me again. Not sure if *I* trust me. If they asked me to do the same again. If the stakes were as high.... What else can you say to something like that?"

oOo

Jake glanced again at the half dozen baby photographs spread on the table next to his laptop, before turning back to the email he was writing to Heather. *Good thing he takes more after April than Eric! Can't wait to see him when I visit in August. Can't wait to see you again, either. Hope we can—.*

The buzz from his cellphone pulled Jake from what he'd been about to say next. Still with his eyes on the screen, he scrabbled for the phone, before peering at the display. He forgot the email completely as he saw Hawkins' name appear. His mouth went dry and his heart began to beat faster. Though at least Hawkins was phoning him—and not turning up outside Jake's door with a gun in his hand. Which had seemed all too likely after the last time he'd called.

That time, the call had punctured the sense of quiet satisfaction Jake had been feeling as he watched the evening news while preparing dinner: seemed like half the report was devoted to *The Man Who Stopped The Bombs*, as the ticker across the bottom of the image so vividly put it. The story had broken in the San Diego Union Tribune that morning—Jake's copy of the paper was spread out across the end of his bed—but it had gone national now. Hawkins' face looked up from the page and stared back at him from the TV screen.

Jake had answered the phone without checking first who was calling. Though ignoring Hawkins would probably have been a worse mistake. "Jake Green."

"Dammit, Jake! Are you completely insane?"

Jake's smile slipped as he heard the anger in Hawkins' voice. "Probably."

"Do you know how much trouble you've caused?" Jake could almost hear Hawkins pacing up and down.

"Me? What did I do?" Jake tried to sound innocent, though he suspected Hawkins wouldn't buy it. He was right.

"Come on, Jake." Hawkins snorted. "A paper in San Diego blows my cover? You could at least have *tried* to hide your tracks and gone to the LA Times."

Jake wasn't sure that would have helped much. There weren't many other people who knew Hawkins' secret, and none of them would want his covert work exposed. Besides, going to one of the reporters who sometimes put in an appearance at the airfield when they were chasing stories about celebrities and tycoons had seemed the simplest route: the easiest way to being believed and not finding himself simply dismissed as some conspiracy nut. Trying to find the guy from the Modesto Bee—the one he'd met in that other life, during Tomarchio's trip to Jericho, and helped put in a body bag—and then explaining why Jake had picked him, and what he knew, would have just *proved* he was crazy.

Still, Jake wasn't about to admit anything to Hawkins. "The story on the news? Is that where that came from?"

Hawkins snorted again. "Right. Well, you'll just have to hope that reporter doesn't cave and hand over your name during the investigation into the leak. Outing an undercover operative is serious business."

"Uh-huh." Jake hadn't paid much attention to it at the time, but there'd been a trial earlier in the year that was something to do with a diplomat's wife who'd been outed. Valerie something. It was what had put the idea into Jake's head. He cleared his throat. "Guess it's pretty serious for you, too? You won't be able to go undercover again. Not now your face is all over the news. Darcy might be pleased about that. Come to think of it, I guess she might quite like finding out what it is you've been doing as well."

There was a long silence from Hawkins. Finally he said, "Just be glad I'm the other side of the country and they've got me locked down in a safe house." He hung up without saying goodbye.

The media furore had died down after a couple of days, but Jake had spent the next week wondering if he'd wake up to discover Hawkins in his apartment, about to break his neck. Or if he'd find himself being run off the road on the way home from the airfield, or his brakes cut. As time went on, he'd slowly begun to relax, reckoning that if Hawkins had been going to turn him in or exact revenge, he would have done so by now. The reporter, too, had steadfastly refused to name his sources.

Now here was Hawkins calling again. Reluctantly, Jake answered. "Hawkins?"

"Jake." To Jake's surprise, Hawkins didn't launch into one of tirades but hesitated. Then, even more surprisingly, he said, "I guess I owe you an apology. And a thank you."

"You do?" Jake raised his eyebrows, wondering what had brought on such an unexpected change of heart.

"Yeah." He heard Hawkins draw in a breath. "The papers tracked down Darcy and the kids, started hounding them. My bosses swooped in, got them out and... I suggested taking them out to Jericho, until things quieted down. I've still got a house there, you know? Anyway, Darcy was mad as hell, but she calmed down after a while and.... Well, I guess she believes me now when I say I'm not going undercover again."

Jake grinned to himself, but he tried not to sound too smug as he asked, "She's forgiven you then?"

Hawkins laughed grimly. "I wouldn't go that far. But... she's letting me see the kids and she's talking to me. It's a start."

"Yeah. Yeah it is." Jake scrubbed a hand through his hair. "Word of advice? Talk back to her. Trust her. Tell her what you can. It'll help, I promise."

Hanging up the phone, Jake looked back at the email he was writing to Heather. He wished he could take his own advice where she was concerned. But he didn't just have a secret life to conceal. He had a whole shared past with her that she didn't share. And that wasn't just something you weren't supposed to talk about; it was something you simply couldn't.

oOo

Part Three

Jake thrummed with impatience as he waited for an answer to his knock. The early August evening air was sultry after the chill of his air-conditioned hire car, but it wasn't a desire to be out of the heat that was making the delay seem to last an eternity. The whole four hours' drive from Denver, the half an hour he'd spent dropping his bags at his parents' house and saying hello to his mom—and ignoring the slight look of disappointment on her face as he'd dashed out of the door again—and the five minutes it had taken to drive across town, he'd been anticipating this moment.

Just when he was beginning to wonder if there was anyone home, he heard the sound of the lock being turned, before the door swung open.

"Oh. Hey." Heather blinked uncertainly at him, her hand still resting on the door.

"Hey." Jake grinned back at her, drinking in the sight of her face. He reckoned she was even more beautiful than his memory had told him she was, though he seemed to have caught her in a moment of disarray. Her hair was pulled back in an untidy ponytail, escaped strands forming curls on her flushed cheeks that he longed to brush back with his fingertips. She was wearing a frayed T-shirt and jeans and, he realized, holding a dishtowel in her other hand. He brought his gaze back up to her face and saw her expression was a little wary. He rubbed a hand across the back of his neck. "Oh God. I've come at a bad time, haven't I?"

She looked at him for a moment longer, as if unsure what to say and then shook her head. "No. Not at all. I was just doing some chores." She gestured with the cloth as evidence and chuckled softly. "I just wasn't expecting you until tomorrow. Thought you'd be spending the evening with your family. You know, seeing the baby and...." She trailed off, her expression growing more unsure.

He became aware that he'd been staring at her intently, still taking in the fact they were together again. Feeling her presence in every fiber of his being, aware of the warm, living, breathing reality of her—not just her letters and her emails, but *her*—so close at last. Suddenly, it wasn't close enough. "Couldn't wait," he managed, his voice hoarse. He took a step nearer and caught her face in his hand, relishing the feel of her where he touched her, the electricity that sparked between them under his fingertips. She let out a slight gasp, her lips parting, and he pulled her toward him, bending his head to kiss her.

Then he stopped, his lips an inch from hers, suddenly unsure, sensing the tension in her as he gathered her into his arms. He drew back a little, seeking out her gaze, wondering if he had her permission. Wondering if—*Oh, God!*—she wanted this at all. She looked back at him, her eyes seeming very blue as they searched his. Then she was flinging an arm around his neck and pulling his mouth down on to hers for a long, deep, hungry kiss.

He wrapped his arms around her, pulling her tightly against him, feeling the heat of her body against him while he kissed her back just as greedily.

At last they pulled apart, both breathing deeply. She lifted her gaze to his, shyly. "Uh. Hi, there." She chuckled softly and he felt the laugh shake her body as he still held her close.

"Hi, there, yourself." He grinned down at her, brushing the hair back off her cheek with his fingertips. "God, it's good to see you again."

"Yeah." She smiled back at him, before she glanced over his shoulder. Her cheeks colored. "Umm. You wanna come in for a while? Before we embarrass the whole neighborhood, or the cops stop by and slap us with a public order violation?"

"Sure." He let her step out of his embrace, catching her hand as she turned away and twining his fingers in hers. She smiled back over her shoulder as she drew him inside.

oOo

Jake didn't spend long at Heather's. "I do need to get back to see the family," he admitted, once he got inside. "Just wanted to see you first." But they made plans, before he left, to meet again the next day for a picnic, once Heather had finished supervising summer camp activities and running errands, and after Jake had spent some time at the airfield working on the cropduster.

Now, the following afternoon, he regarded the cropduster with satisfaction. He'd made good progress, even if his back protested as he straightened and took a pace away to admire the plane. Breathing in the baked air—the hangar had grown hot as the sun beat down on it—he decided to call it a day. It was time to go home and grab a shower before heading back out to pick up Heather.

Tidying up and locking up the hangar took a little longer than he expected and it was another half hour before he hurried into his parents' home. His mother bobbed out of the kitchen as he closed the door and headed for the stairs.

"Oh, there you are!" She beamed happily at him.

"Hey, Mom." He paused, his hand on the end of the stairs.

"Everything going well with the cropduster?" She began to fold the dishtowel.

"Uh-huh. I just came back to grab a shower before I head out to...." He trailed off, recognizing the signs as his mother folded and refolded the dishtowel, apparently not entirely satisfied with how neatly matched together the edges were. But he knew it wasn't the dishtowel she was unhappy with. "Meet Heather," he finished a little lamely.

"That's nice." His mother was straightening the corners of the dishtowel, giving him half-glances from under her eyelashes. "We haven't really seen very much of you so far...."

Jake bit down on the urge to remind her that, once he'd returned from his visit to Heather the previous evening, he'd spent several hours with the family admiring his new nephew and catching up with the news. He supposed he had disappeared pretty early this morning: grabbing coffee and breakfast and fixing himself a sandwich for lunch before his mother had even come downstairs. "I know." He shrugged. "It's just... I came home to see Heather as well."

His mother's hands stilled on the dishtowel and she clasped it in front of her. She raised her gaze to meet Jake's directly. "You're serious about her?"

Jake nodded. "Very. I... I think we're supposed to be together."

His mother went on looking at him intently, her gaze sharp and questioning. Jack looked back at her steadily, enduring her scrutiny without embarrassment, because he was sure of this. More sure than about almost anything in his life so far. Only flying meant more to him. And there was the same feeling of 'rightness' to both of them. At last his mother gave a dip of the head, perhaps reading all of that in his expression and accepting it. "You'd better hurry up and get ready then," she said, patting his arm gently. "Don't want to keep her waiting."

Moved by a sudden impulse of gratitude—for what, he wasn't quite sure—Jake put his arm around her shoulders and gave them a quick squeeze, dropping a kiss on her forehead. "Thanks, Mom."

Turning away, he hurried away up the stairs. It was only a few minutes later, when he was sluicing away the dirt of the day under the shower, that he understood she'd given him her blessing, taking a step back in his life so that *he* could take a step forward, with another woman who'd likely supersede her in importance in his life.

Not long after that, he was standing on Heather's stoop again. This time when she answered the door, she was ready for him, smartly dressed in a pretty, strappy sundress patterned with yellow sunflowers that showed off her shoulders. He stepped forward and kissed her lightly, still feeling a shiver of desire as he slid his arm around her waist but none of the desperation he'd felt yesterday when he'd first seen her. "Hi. Ready to go?"

"Uh-huh." She tilted her head back and smiled up at him. "I'll just get the picnic."

She disappeared inside for a moment, before returning with an insulated bag in one hand and a large tote bag slung over her other shoulder. He took the bags to the car while she locked up and then followed him down the path.

"So where do you want to go?" he asked as she settled into the passenger seat and he started the engine.

"Oh..." She frowned a little, apparently not having expected to be consulted on the venue. "Umm... Bass Lake? It should be cool down by the water."

Jake's hands tightened on the steering wheel as an image flashed before his eyes of the last time he'd been out to Bass Lake with Heather: the sight of the bodies of Victor Miller's friends and family strewn around the lake shore and under the trees, dead from radiation sickness from Denver.

All of whom were likely alive and well right now, he reminded himself sharply. And he *had* asked Heather to choose the venue for their date, so he could hardly blame her for picking the place.

Drawing in a deep breath, he loosened his grip on the wheel. "Sure." He pulled away from the curb. Aware that Heather was giving him a curious look, he flashed her a reassuring glance. "That sounds like a great idea."

They made polite conversation about the weather on the drive out, still a little uncertain of each other despite the passionate kiss they'd shared the day before. Jake was glad of the neutral topic, a chance to regain his equilibrium before he was confronted with the reality of the lake. He was careful, though, to drive down the track and park further along from where they'd stopped the previous time. And as he and Heather walked down toward the lakeshore, her hand in his feeling so very right, the normality of the scene spread before him reassured him. Children were splashing around at the water's edge, shrieking with laughter; much further out, two fishermen were casting their lines from small boats that bobbed quietly on the slightly rippled surface.

Heather spread out the rug she'd stuffed into her tote bag and they sat down. "Are you hungry?" She placed her hands on the insulated bag that Jake had set down between them.

He shook his head. "Not just yet." Reaching out, he caught one of her hands and twined his fingers in hers, relishing the touch of her. She smiled shyly at him before turning to watch the children. He went on looking at her, not wanting to waste a moment of his time with her.

She glanced at him again, catching his eye for a moment, before she shifted a little, settling her hand more comfortably in his, giving his fingers a squeeze to reassure him she wasn't about to pull away. "So how did things go with the cropduster today? Get much done?"

"Uh-huh. She's still in pretty good shape, considering." He rubbed his thumb across the back of her hand, enjoying the spark of electricity that fizzed between them. He saw the color rise in her cheeks as she dipped her head, and an answering thrill tugged deep inside him as he received confirmation of the effect he was having on her—and she on him. Taking a deep breath, he carried on answering her question, even as his gaze slid over her, taking in the curve of her neck and shoulder. "Grandpa did a good job of laying her up for the winter, the last time."

She turned to look at him and drew in a breath herself as she met his gaze, her blush deepening. He supposed some of what he felt for her, what he longed to do with her, could be read in his gaze. He saw her swallow and he bent his own head, realizing it was probably too much, too quickly. That he needed to give her time to grow into this, the way Heather in that other life had done. But she gave his hand another quick, reassuring squeeze, and a brief glance upwards showed that now she was watching him, her expression suggesting she was liking what she saw.

"So you should be able to sell her soon and then you can start thinking seriously about the flight school?"

"Yeah." He'd already told her all this in letters and emails, but he guessed she was looking to hear him say it. To hear *how* he said it. How much it really mattered to him. He lifted his free hand and scrubbed it across the back of his neck. "Just need to find the right opportunity." He hesitated and then added carefully, "Been looking at some places in Wichita. That's not so far away...." He peered up from under his lashes to see how she'd react.

She looked at him seriously for a moment and then her lips twitched into a half smile. "No. No, it's not."

Dropping his gaze again, he cleared his throat. "So how did the summer camp thing go this morning?"

"Good." She chuckled and he felt a little of the tension leaving her hand. He realized they were both like coiled springs, nervous and excited, and he forced himself to relax a little as well. She shrugged her shoulder. "The kids seem to enjoy themselves."

"You want to go on teaching?" Another quick glance to judge her response while he waited for her reply.

"Uh-huh." She nodded to emphasize her answer.

"In Jericho?"

"For now." After a moment's hesitation, she added, "Though I guess I could teach third grade pretty much anywhere, couldn't I?"

Jake lifted his head quickly, meeting her gaze and holding it. "In Wichita?" he asked softly.

She gave a slight shrug. "I suppose so." Then she shook herself, pulling her hand out of his. "Why don't we have some of this food." Pulling the picnic bag toward her, she began to fumble with the zip.

"Sorry," Jake said, drawing his hand back and wrapping his arms around himself. "Sorry. I'm going too fast again, aren't I?"

Heather looked back up at him, meeting his gaze steadily. His breath caught in his throat as he looked backed at her, because, God, he loved that about her: the way she faced things head on. "A little," she admitted. She lifted her hands helplessly. "You just seem to be making plans and..."

and kinda including *me* in them....”

“I’d like to include you.” Jake’s voice was hoarse in his own ears as he went on looking at her.

“Yeah, I got that.” She tilted her head and smiled at him. “Let’s just see how the next few days go, shall we?”

Jake nodded, accepting that was fair.

Heather had clearly put a lot of effort into making the picnic as nice as possible: crisp bacon, lettuce and tomato sandwiches, potato salad cleverly packed into halved and hollowed-out tomatoes, home-made fruit salad, a large flask of iced tea that had been stashed in her tote bag. Last of all, she brought out cupcakes. Jake grinned when he saw they were decorated with smiley faces picked out in small silver balls. “Like the socks,” he murmured to himself, remembering that one of the other reasons he’d fallen in love with Heather was her quiet sense of fun.

“Hmm?” She was giving him another quizzical look and Jake realized she had no idea what he was talking about. This Heather had never darned a smiley face onto a sock for him.

“Uh, I like the faces,” he offered.

She gave a slightly embarrassed shrug. “They were left over from the craft this morning. Too silly?”

He shook his head. “No. They’re fun.” Picking up one of the cupcakes, he began peeling back the paper case. “Not chocolate?” he asked in surprise as he saw they seemed to be plain sponge inside.

“Umm, no.” Heather sounded a little worried. “Would you have preferred chocolate?”

“No, this is fine,” Jake reassured her, as he went on peeling back the paper. “I just thought you liked chocolate cake best.” Glancing up, he saw she was wearing a frown now. It took him a moment to remember he only knew about her preference for chocolate because the *other* Heather had told him: when he’d fetched dessert for her during the cook-out on Main Street just after the bombs fell. “You mentioned it in one of your letters,” he said quickly.

“Huh. I don’t remember that.” She gave a shrug, accepting the lie happily enough and tackling the paper on her own cupcake.

Jake breathed a silent sigh of relief and made a note to pay better attention to what he was saying. It was far easier to keep the lies straight in emails or on paper, when he had a chance to read back what he’d written.

oOo

Jake managed to stay out of further trouble for the rest of the evening. Once they’d finished eating and Heather had packed away the picnic things, she settled next to him, coming into the circle of his arm and resting her head against his shoulder. Mostly they were silent, Jake simply enjoying the feel of her leaning against him, turning his head from time to time to press his face into her hair and breathe in her scent. When they did talk, it was largely of small things: what Jake had made of his nephew, and whether Eric and April had liked the baby presents Heather had helped him decide on; something silly one of the children had said at summer camp that morning; a funny incident Jake had witnessed at the airport in Denver.

At last, when the light was almost gone and the children had long ago piled into their parents' cars, muddy and hungry and ready for home, and the fishermen had rowed back to shore, they made their way back to the car and he took her home. Reaching her house, he walked her to her door. She hesitated on the stoop, clearly unsure whether to ask him in. Aware he shouldn't rush her again, he suggested he should head home himself, spend some time with his parents. "Or they might forget who I am again." That raised a giggle from her. Then he stepped forward and kissed her, gently and quite sedately. The desperation of the previous evening had faded as he grew more secure in the knowledge that he'd see her again, kiss her again, though his heart was still beating faster as he stepped back.

They'd already made plans for the next day, as they drove back from the lake, when Heather had cautiously asked him what he'd been doing and told him she had the day free. He'd suggested she bring Charlotte out to the airfield and work on her while he carried on with the maintenance work on the cropduster. But it was mid-morning, and Jake had already been hard at work for a couple of hours, by the time he heard the once-familiar rattle of the Dodge approaching the hangar. Carefully finishing up with the control pushrod he'd been checking, he wiped his hands on a rag and strolled out to meet her.

She smiled through the open car window as he walked up to the driver's door. "Where should I put her?"

"Why don't you pull into the hangar a bit? Get yourself in the shade while you're working?" It was going to be another baking hot day. She nodded and did as he suggested. He followed her in, opening the car door as she turned off the engine and helping her out. She gave him an amused smile, but he didn't care. Keeping hold of her hand, he drew her to him for a welcoming kiss. "Hi there," he whispered, still holding her close.

She chuckled. "Missed me?"

"Uh-huh." He grinned down at her, thinking that right now, things couldn't be more perfect: the start of a long day working alongside each other, just like they'd done back in that other Jericho.

"So...." She pushed her hair back off her face with one hand. "I should probably let Charlotte cool down a bit. Show me what you're doing on the plane?"

"Sure." Stepping back but keeping hold of her hand, he led her over to the cropduster. "Started on the control systems this morning. See, these cables link the pedals to the rudder and those go to the elevator on the tail." He pointed to where the wires ran along the length of the plane. At his side, she was nodding. Letting go of her hand, he leaned forward and grasped the cable connected to the pushrod that he'd been checking just before she arrived. "Just need to make sure everything's connected properly, moves the way it should, isn't showing any signs of corrosion, doesn't need tensioning...." He pulled gently on the cable, turning his head to look down the plane's body so he could see the elevator moving up and down the way it should. He was aware of Heather leaning forward as well, peering over his shoulder at what he was doing.

"So I guess it's not really much different from an old car?" He sensed her nodding as he went on running his hand down the cable, twisting it gently to check visually for signs of wear. "Except the aerodynamics matter a bit more." She chuckled. "Probably just as well I don't have to worry about those with Charlotte. Not sure I could get my head around that stuff."

Jake had both hands on the cable now, leaning down closer. Was the loop where the cable connected to the turnbuckle looking a little worn? "You seemed to manage okay with the wind turbines," he said absently. "Or was that Ted? Don't get me wrong, I liked the guy, but he never seemed bright that way—."

He was suddenly aware that Heather had gone rigid, and his brain abruptly caught up with what his mouth had been saying. An icy finger of cold ran down his spine and coiled itself around his insides. There was a long moment of silence when neither of them moved. He could hear the quiet tick of Charlotte's engine still cooling and, beyond that, a car driving along the road that skirted the airfield. Then she said carefully, "What are you talking about?"

He straightened and turned to look at her. She looked back at him, her expression not puzzled or surprised or worried but—frightened. It was the same look she'd gotten when she caught sight of the shooter from New Bern in the Sheriff's office. Except this time it was directed at him.

"I—." He spread his hands helplessly, desperately trying to think of a lie that would cover the truth he'd blurted out. But what he'd said couldn't be explained away as a slip of the tongue or something she'd forgotten that she'd told him. It was something that had never happened to this Heather. He licked his lips. "I must be thinking of someone else."

She went on looking at him steadily and he tried to hold his own gaze steady, to convince her of the lie, while the silence stretched out again. At last, she shook her head slightly, the movement small but sure. "No. No, you're not," she said. "I do have a friend called Ted. And we used to mess about with cars together. And yes, he's a nice guy, but not that smart. Not with book stuff. Barely graduated High School. But I've never built a wind turbine with him... and I'm pretty sure you've never met him."

Jake stared back at her wordlessly, his mind racing, trying to find an explanation she'd accept. Yet none came. Because the only explanation that would make any sense was so fantastical that it would surely simply make things worse.

"What's going on, Jake?" Heather took her hand away from where she'd rested it on the edge of the cockpit earlier and wrapped her arms around herself. "This isn't the first time you've said something... weird. Known things about me you couldn't possibly know. Acted like you already knew me. Like we have this whole history together."

He swallowed hard, seeing no way out but the truth now, because everything was all smashed to pieces anyway. "We do," he croaked.

"No." She shook her head firmly. "We don't, Jake. I'd remember." She took a step back, a shiver running through her. "I think... I'm going to go home. I think... I think that's best." She took another step back, still facing him, and another, watching him warily for any sign he wasn't going to let her go, while she dug in her jeans pocket for the keys. She only turned her back on him when she reached the car, hastily climbing inside and starting the engine. She gave him another look through the windshield as she reversed out, her face taut with misery, like she was trying not to cry.

The whole time, Jake stood unmoving, not even following her outside to watch her drive away once she'd backed out the car and turned it around. Because there was nothing he could do or say that would make a lick of difference now.

Only when Charlotte's rumble had died away completely did he move, dropping to the floor and leaning back against the nearest wheel, gasping to draw breath against the feeling that his heart had been ripped out of his chest.

oOo

Jake wasn't sure how long he sat like that. Eventually, he dragged himself back to his feet and went back to working on the plane. She still needed fixing up ready to sell. He could still have that flight school one day. But the prospect of running his own business seemed dreary and joyless

now. Now he wouldn't have Heather to share it with.

He kept running the conversation over in his mind as he worked, wishing he'd been paying attention to what he'd been saying. Wishing he'd been able to come up with a lie to cover up his mistake. Wishing, above all, that he hadn't made her afraid. He might have hurt her in a half dozen different ways in that other life, but he reckoned he'd never scared her before.

At last, when the sun was dropping close to the horizon and his fingers were growing too tired to be sure of what they were doing, and he'd long ago emptied his water bottle and was getting dry-mouthed, he forced himself to go home. He'd gotten a lot done today, but he felt no sense of achievement.

Stepping inside the front door, he found his mom sitting in one of the easy chairs, reading a magazine. He guessed he'd missed dinner and that his father and brother were now out somewhere, probably at some civic event. His mom looked up at him as he came in, her appearance homey and reassuring, with the lamp casting its soft circle of light around her.

"Oh there you are, honey. Did you and—." She stopped, apparently taking in something in his expression. Then she said quietly, closing the magazine and setting it aside, "What happened?"

Jake turned and closed the door behind him, resting his hand on the familiar, warm wood for a moment, wondering whether to shrug off the question or plead tiredness. Then, with a sigh, he turned and made his way over to the couch. He'd been turning the thing over and over in his mind all day—and gotten nowhere. He doubted his mom could fix things for him either: apply a bandaid and distract him with a cookie like when he'd been six. But maybe talking about it would help him figure it out.

oOo

He thought about that conversation with his mom again the next day, while he carried on working on the cropduster and tried to figure out what to do. He'd dropped on to the couch, resting his elbows on his knees and rubbing his temples with his fingers. "I screwed up," he admitted. "I said something stupid. Really stupid. And... and now I think I've scared her off."

"Oh, honey." His mom got up and settled herself on the couch next to him, putting a hand on his back. Oddly enough, it *was* comforting. "Did you try saying you were sorry?"

"Didn't really get a chance." He scrubbed his hands over his face. "She was so spooked, she left before I could say anything."

"Hmm." Glancing over at his mom, he saw her expression had turned thoughtful. When she saw him looking, her expression turned a little sterner. "Well, maybe you should start there? Now she's had a chance to calm down."

Jake huffed a wry laugh. "Not sure that's gonna work. Not after—." He pressed his lips together for a moment, trying to work out how to explain to his mom without telling *her* the unbelievable truth. "There's been stuff I haven't been telling her and I... let slip something about it I shouldn't have."

His mother gave a slight sniff and sat back, folding her hands together in her lap. He could sense her disapproval and he couldn't really disagree that he deserved it. Except this was something he couldn't tell anyone. The only reason Hawkins had believed him was because he knew too much about the bombs for it not to be true. His mother still sounded like she was trying to be sympathetic though, when she asked, "About your time away? With that company?" She jerked her head toward the television and he guessed she was referring to the news coverage of J&R. "In

Iraq?"

"Something like that." Jake dropped his gaze, hoping she wouldn't press him about exactly what he'd been concealing.

Thinking about it the next day, Jake reckoned that talking to Heather about J&R—the topic had never really come up—and even what he'd done in Saffa would have been easy in comparison. At least that was normal and human and understandable. Not something which sounded like the plot of a science fiction movie or the ravings of a town eccentric like old Oliver Adams.

His mother had stayed silent, though Jake could sense she was watching him. He shifted nervously, running a hand over his hair. At last, she spoke. "You said, yesterday, that the two of you were—how did you put it?—meant to be together. You really mean that? I mean, I know you've been writing each other for six months, but you haven't spent much time together..."

Jake nodded, looking up at her. "I'm sure of it." He spread his hands. "There's only one thing I've ever been more sure of, and that's wanting to fly. She makes me...right."

He hadn't been able to explain it any more clearly at the time, but he worked it out as he overhauled the cropduster's engine the next day. Being with Heather in that other life had made him feel like who he was supposed to be. Not because she let him get away with being the "stupid little punk" he'd once been. But because she seemed to see who he really was when he was being his best self, and to like it—the bad and the good. She didn't heap expectations on him, like his parents had at times, to be someone fundamentally other than who he was: to not have a taste for adventure and danger and the wide open skies, as well as to be kind and caring and responsible when that was needed. And that made him want to be that best self, his true self, when he was around her. And he thought—he hoped—he'd made her feel the same way too.

Maybe his mother had understood him, though. She gave him an exasperated look. "And how right do you think things are going to be if you're hiding things from her?"

He snorted. "Not very," he conceded.

His mother had put her hand back on his shoulder, then, giving it a squeeze. "I know you're scared of telling her whatever it is you've been hiding. You're afraid you'll lose her. But you can't build a relationship around a lie. You just can't. It doesn't work."

As he fitted the engine cowling back in place, Jake realized he'd given much the same advice to Eric and Hawkins, months earlier. He'd told himself this was different, because it wasn't an ordinary lie or an ordinary secret. But he wasn't sure now how he'd ever thought he'd get away with pretending that his other life had never happened.

Maybe when he told her, Heather would think he was as crazy as old Oliver. Likely she would. But even if he somehow managed to patch things up with her without telling her, he'd spend his whole life watching his every word and action, trying not to slip up. And he'd still slip up, because the truth always has a way of coming out.

Cleaning off his hands, he knew he had only one option now.

oOo

This time, Jake didn't have to wait long for Heather to answer the door. Though when she did, she simply stood there looking at him, a wary expression on her face. There were dark smudges under her eyes; she looked like she hadn't slept well.

Jake swallowed, glad he'd taken a pace back after he'd knocked, so she wouldn't feel he was crowding her or trying to intimidate her. "Can we talk?" When she still didn't answer, her gaze raking over him, clearly trying to decide whether or not she still trusted him enough, he gestured at the bench on the porch. "We can stay out here. In public. I just want to say I'm sorry. And explain, if I can? Please?"

At last, she gave a silent nod and gestured toward the bench. He sat down at the far end, so he wouldn't be blocking her in if she wanted to leave, to go back inside. She perched at the other end of the bench, sitting up straight, her hands folded in her lap.

Jake took a deep breath. "I'm sorry that I upset you. Frightened you. It was never my intention to hurt you."

To his surprise, as he searched for his next words, she nodded her head and said softly, "I know."

His chest tightened a little as he was reminded again of her quiet strength and her capacity to forgive. Dropping his gaze, he leaned forward, resting his arms on his knees and linking his fingers together. "What I'm going to say is going to sound... fantastic. Unbelievable. I'm still not quite sure I believe it myself. But I promise you, it's true."

He stole a look up at her and saw she had her head tilted, listening, her face neutral. Taking another deep breath, he began talking again. "You said I was acting like we had a whole history together. We do." Out of the corner of his eye, he saw her begin to shake her head again and he stopped her with a shake of his own head. "But only one of us remembers it."

She gave a small, disbelieving snort. "You're saying we knew each other in another life?"

"Not exactly." He guessed she was talking about some kind of reincarnation. "More like... in another universe?" He twisted his head so could meet her gaze again. "A universe in which the CIA didn't manage to stop those terrorists who wanted to set off bombs in 25 American cities."

She blinked, her expression growing more disbelieving, but he saw her hands tighten on each other in her lap and he reckoned she was imagining what the world might have been like if the bombs had gone off.

He carried on, because at least she was still listening to him, prepared to hear him out, even if she didn't yet believe him. "A lot of things happened after that. Bad things and good things. And one of the things that happened was that you and I fell in love. And then another thing that happened was this... creature—." He huffed a laugh. "Pretending to be Bill Kohler, if you can believe it? Anyway, this creature said it could send me back in time so I could help the CIA to stop the attacks. And it did. And I did." He gestured around at the peaceful street in front of them, with the occasional car swishing past and the sound of children playing a few houses along.

He waited for her to say something, giving her time to think about it. At last she quirked an eyebrow at him. "You're from the future?" She sounded like she was quoting something, a faint edge of sarcasm to her voice, but he didn't get the reference until she added, "And there's this unstoppable cyborg killing machine after me, right?"

He choked out a laugh, half caught between the seriousness of the situation and realizing how ridiculous he must sound. He shook his head. "No. No Terminators. Just me. With a year of life that I lived and nobody else has now."

She sat looking at him, biting her lower lip. He was suddenly reminded strongly of Hawkins telling that other Heather about the bomb plot in his parents' living room. There was the same uncertain, fierce expression on her face that the other version of her had worn as she'd tried to decide

whether to believe *him*. So it wasn't much of a surprise when she asked, "Why should I believe you? Why should I believe any of it?"

Jake gave a slight shrug. "Because I know things about you I couldn't know any other way? Like those things I said about Ted."

She tilted her chin up a little, challenging him. "So what else do you know about Ted?"

He gave a slight nod, accepting the test. "That the two of you grew up together over in New Bern. His surname's Lewis. He lives in a trailer on the East Side." Jake racked his brains, trying to remember the rest of the address scribbled on the piece of paper Ted had shoved into his hand in the brake factory. "Lot... 24. He's a bit shorter than me, dark hair." He quirked his mouth in a rueful grin. "Still carrying a torch for you..."

A blush colored Heather's cheeks. She pushed up from the bench and crossed to the railing, staring out into the street for a moment before she turned and leaned against the rail, arms folded across her chest. "You could have found all that out by asking around," she pointed out quietly.

"I guess." Jake looked at her unhappily, wondering just what he could say to convince her.

Seemed she was wondering that too, eyeing him with a thoughtful expression. "So tell me about what happened. After the bombs went off."

He blinked at her. "All of it?"

She lifted one shoulder. "You said Ted and I were building wind turbines?"

"Uh-huh." He looked back down at his hands, trying to marshal his thoughts, figure out how to tell her the story. "We went to Black Jack Fairgrounds to try and buy a governor. You and me and Dad and Dale. There was a kind of trading post operating there. Ran into Ted and a couple of other guys from New Bern while we were there. We didn't manage to buy a governor, but you and Ted talked and reckoned you could build one. At the brake plant in New Bern. So you went back to New Bern with him. And—." He lifted his head and looked at her, unsure how much to tell her of what came next.

She raised her eyebrows. "And what?"

Jake took a deep breath, realizing that it was pointless to hide the truth from her. To go on hiding the truth. If he managed to persuade her he was sincere and win her back, there could be no more lies, no more pretense. He knew there'd probably be plenty of things he'd only get round to telling her when he said something that made her ask, but at least she'd know he wasn't intentionally holding anything back.

"Phil Constantino had gotten himself put in charge in New Bern. Mayor as well as Sheriff. New Bern was in a pretty bad way—worse than Jericho. They got turned over by some contractors from Ravenwood who cleaned them out of a load of food and fuel. Constantino got it into his head that Jericho was to blame for that, because we'd managed to scare them off a few days before. Or maybe he just wanted an excuse. Anyway, he started planning an invasion."

Heather's eyebrows shot up, but Jake went on talking, explaining how Constantino had made mortars and that Eric had found out and gone to Heather for help. Explained, too, why Eric was in New Bern—she murmured a quiet "Oh God", hugging herself more tightly, when he told her how April had died—before he went back to talking about the mortars. "You wanted to sabotage the production line. Blow up the stockpile." Jake smiled to himself, because it was so very Heather: to see what needed to be done and to act. Then his smile slipped as he remembered what came

next. "You got caught. Constantino ordered one of his deputies to take you out and execute you...."

He looked at her, thinking about how nearly they didn't have even the little time together that they'd had. Remembering how hard it had been to breathe when Eric had told him she was dead. How he'd carried his grief for her around like a stone in his chest, among all the other griefs, scarcely aware of how very much it had hurt—until that marvelous, miraculous moment when he'd seen her alive in the Sheriff's Office and the weight had lifted.

"Execute me?" She'd gone pale now.

He nodded. "You were lucky. The deputy refused to do it. Helped you escape. You got picked up by the Army. They were trying to restore order by then, finally getting to places like Nebraska and Kansas that had been cut off and had to take care of themselves for a while. Anyway, you told the Army we were in trouble and they came to intervene. Stopped the fighting." He gave a wry snort. "Just in time, too. We wouldn't have held out much longer."

"People died?" She hugged herself a little tighter.

"In the fighting?" Jake straightened and stretched his back, discovering he'd grown stiff while he talked. "Yes. And before then. And after."

"After?" She gave him a surprised look.

He nodded. "The Army guys who came to Jericho were Tomarchio's troops—" He stopped, realizing that was unfair to both Beck and the soldiers he'd brought with him. Beck had mostly just been trying to do his job, however misguidedly, and follow what he thought was his chain of command. "Well, they were under Tomarchio's control, after he set himself up as President. Which meant they brought Ravenwood. There were... incidents." He wasn't sure he was ready to talk about Bonnie yet: the sight of her body was still as vivid in his mind as the night he'd seen it. Pushing the memory away, he said hastily, "And before that, we didn't have enough food or fuel—that's why you were trying to build wind turbines—or medicine. The country was in a real mess. People got sick... froze to death."

He saw her shiver, though she didn't say anything. Instead, her expression turned thoughtful, her gaze fixed somewhere to one side of him but, he guessed, not seeing what she was looking at. He stayed silent, letting her think through what he'd said. It was a lot to take in, all at once like that. In a strange way, he would have been happy to sit there watching her forever: she was so beautiful to him that it was a pleasure just to look at her. Yet all the while he was aware of how he was poised on the edge of a cliff. A word the wrong way and all his hopes and dreams for a life with her would go crashing down to smash to pieces on the rock below.

At last she looked back at him. "Why did you say we took Dale with us to... to... uh, when we went to buy the governor?" He guessed she couldn't remember where he'd said the trading post was. She lifted one shoulder a little. "I mean, you and me and your dad I can understand, but why Dale? Assuming we're talking about the kid that works in Gracie's market...."

Jake took in a deep breath. "Oh God, yeah. Gracie." He scrubbed a hand through his hair. He'd almost forgotten Gracie's murder. It had happened so early on and so much had happened afterward. "She was murdered. At Thanksgiving. We think it was Mitch Cafferty, one of the guys who works for Jonah Prowse out at Quaker Freight. You know?" He raised his eyebrows and she nodded to show she knew who he meant. "Gracie was selling stuff that Jonah was trucking in, and then she wasn't going to any more. Mitch and some of the other guys didn't like the way Jonah was running things all round. We think Mitch killed Gracie and then tried to blame it on Jonah. Anyway, Dale's mom had died in the blast in Atlanta and Gracie sort of adopted him, and she'd

left the store to him in her will. So he came to Black Jack with us to try and trade for stuff to sell in the store."

Heather had been shaking her head slightly at him as he spoke, as if not quite believing him, though when he finished speaking, she didn't challenge what he'd said. Instead, she asked, "Did *anything* good happen?"

He huffed a laugh. "Not much. Oh, that IRS woman who audited Stanley's farm got stuck here and she and Stanley fell in love. Even got engaged. Which—" He shook his head. "—was possibly one of the less likely things that happened."

"So what else happened?" To his surprise, Heather came and sat back down at the other end of the bench from him, this time leaning forward a little, though her expression suggested she still wasn't ready to believe everything he might say. "What happened to Constantino after the Army came? And when the attacks happened? How did we find out?"

"In Jericho? You could see the mushroom cloud from Denver. So we knew something bad had happened." He sidestepped her question about Constantino. He couldn't hide that from her forever, either, but he reckoned she'd already had enough shocks for now. "We lost main power pretty early on, but we sent some guys out the next day to see if we could get news...."

He went on talking. She asked more questions and he answered. Sometimes he had to stop for a moment and think who she meant. Sometimes the things he said meant more to her than he'd thought they would and hurt her far more than he'd imagined.

Like when he told her about how some people had tried to avoid the radiation fallout by sheltering in the mine. "Everybody made it through okay. Oh, except there was a guy who had a heart attack. I think he was claustrophobic? Rennie, I think his name was." It was only when she put her hand to her mouth, closing her eyes and grimacing, that he remembered. "Oh God, he was a teacher, wasn't he?"

She nodded, not opening her eyes. "He teaches second grade." She spoke quietly, her hand still to her mouth, and Jake had to strain to hear her. " He has the classroom next to mine."

Jake spread his hands, apologetically, though she wasn't looking at him. "I'm sorry. If I'd remembered, I wouldn't have told you like that."

"It's okay." She took a deep breath and opened her eyes. "It's just a lot to take in. And I guess it's a lot for you to remember. And Mr Rennie's not really dead, is he?"

"No. No, he's not." He smiled reassuringly at her.

While he waited for her next question, he licked his lips, realizing his mouth was dry. He'd been talking for a couple of hours now, and he'd barely scratched the surface, but he'd go on answering her questions as long as she wanted to ask them. She must have noticed he was losing his voice a little, because she offered to make them some iced tea. He guessed she might need a little time to regroup herself.

When she came back out with the drinks, she asked him how they'd met in that other life. He told her about the bus—this time he was more careful about telling her about the driver who'd died; he'd never even learned his name—and her broken leg and Stacey. "That was how I knew," he added. "When the scaffolding collapsed. The universe keeps trying to... put itself back in the same patterns, I guess? So I knew Stacey would be in trouble again."

"And we're part of the pattern?" She quirked her eyebrows at him.

"I hope so." He so wanted to take her hands in his, to touch her again, but he stayed where he was at the other end of the bench, holding himself in check. Maybe she understood that, too, because she looked at him thoughtfully, her gaze running over him from head to toe and back again, before she gave a quick dip of her head.

They went on talking after that, long into the evening. At last, when it had been dark for more than an hour and he could see by the dim porch light that she was growing tired, he said, "It's late. I should go. Let you think about things."

She nodded and got to her feet, backing toward the door to let him past. He turned to face her, aware of the few feet of empty air between them, longing to bridge it, but staying where he was. "Thank you for listening to me. If there's anything else you want to ask..."

She nodded again silently and he swung away, aware of her watching him as he walked away down the path. Wondering if he'd ever walk up that path and knock on her door again.

oOo

Jake heard the familiar rattle of Charlotte's engine when the old truck was still some distance from the hangar. For a moment, everything seemed to stand still, frozen between one second and the next. Then he tamped down on the hope that was flaring up inside him. He knew Heather well enough to know she'd have the courage and courtesy to come tell him if she wanted to end things, not just leave him hanging. That he couldn't assume anything about her visit just yet.

Carefully putting down the tire he'd been about to switch in for one that had gone flat while the cropduster stood idle, he wiped off his hands and walked to the door.

Heather had drawn the truck up on the apron next to his hire car. She climbed out and, resting one hand on the open car door, put up the other to shade her eyes, squinting against the sun that was bouncing off the tarmac until her gaze found him where he stood in the dark doorway. "Hi." She sounded a little nervous. "I called by the house and your mom said I'd find you here."

He nodded, his throat too tight to speak. He took a step sideways and gestured, inviting her to join him in the shade of the building. With a nod of acknowledgment, she pushed the car door closed and walked toward him. The lump in his throat grew worse, making it hard to breathe, as he realized there was no hesitation in the way she moved in his direction and no unease in how she held herself when she stopped, close enough for him to reach out and touch her if he wanted. Hope leaped up in him again, burning even more brightly as he looked down at her and saw there was uncertainty in her face but none of the mistrust that had been there yesterday. Yet he made no move toward her, afraid he was reading too much in her expression.

"So..." She twisted her hands together. "What you told me yesterday still sounds pretty crazy, but..." She hesitated.

"But...?" he prompted, the word a croak.

She gave a soft chuckle. "Not crazy like old Oliver Adams and his aliens crazy."

Jake choked out a half-laugh. "Well, that's something..."

"Yes. Yes it is." Her expression turned a little more serious. "I reckon if you were going to make up some crazy conspiracy story, you..." She gave a small shrug. "It wouldn't be like that."

To his surprise, she held her hands out to him, shyly. Half-fearful, he reached out and took them,

holding them lightly, reveling in the feel of them in his own as she went on speaking. "You've been a little... odd sometimes. And a little intense. And I guess I understand a bit why now. But you've never made me feel I can't trust you. Not deep down. And I reckon that, you know, this is a small enough town that, when everyone was telling me to stay away from you because of this or that, they'd have mentioned if it was because you were a crazy axe-murdering fantasist..."

Jake huffed, imagining well enough what they had said. "Right."

She gave his hands a small squeeze. "So I guess we still have a lot to talk about... but I'd like to go on seeing you..." She trailed off, peering up at him with a worried expression, apparently unnerved by his lack of his response. Because all he could do was stare back down at her, not quite trusting that any of this was real, while he felt like his heart would burst in his chest. He saw her lick her lips, "You know, if you want..."

"I want," he managed at last, still barely able to breathe. He tugged her toward him, gently, and she came into his arms. Bending his head, he captured her lips with his, the kiss a little clumsy at first, before she began to return it, her mouth seeking his with a mixture of nervousness and eagerness. Pulling her closer, he went on kissing her. He knew they still had a long way to go before he'd truly won her back; for the moment, he had everything he could hope for.

oOo